

# The Perceptions of Undergraduate Mainland Chinese Students of the Effect of English Instruction on their Ability to Write Academic English

Yinghan Zhu<sup>1</sup> and Pat Strauss<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Independent scholar*

<sup>2</sup>*Senior Research Associate, University of Johannesburg*

## Abstract

*This research project aimed to investigate the perceptions of Mainland Chinese students towards the challenges they face in producing acceptable academic writing at undergraduate level in tertiary institutions in New Zealand. The study focuses in particular on students' own perceptions of their earlier preparation with regards to English academic writing. Although there is much research about the challenges that Chinese students face with regard to academic writing, there is not a great deal focusing on their background preparation. It appears that despite the considerable financial investment the Chinese government has made to the teaching of English in Chinese schools, students struggle to develop adequate writing skills. One of the major problems appears to be the examination system in the country. Although pathway courses offered in New Zealand appear to better prepare these students for the academic writing required of them, the students felt that the courses should be more challenging and require greater student involvement.*

**Keywords:** English language teaching in China; Academic English instruction; Foundation studies language programmes

## Introduction

To understand the academic writing difficulties facing Chinese students it is essential that institutions hosting these students develop a greater understanding of the ways in which the students have been prepared for their English medium studies. In New Zealand, Chinese students make up over a third of international student numbers and are by far the largest international student cohort (New Zealand Education, 2024). In order to assist these students with the language challenges they face, New Zealand educators need greater insight into the way English is taught in China.

## **Background**

Political changes in China, including the so-called 'opening up period' in the 1980s and 90s (Ding, 2001), and the joining of the World Trade Organization in 2003, led Chinese authorities to place great emphasis on foreign language teaching (Bolton & Graddol, 2012; Ding, 2001; Jin & Cortazzi, 2002). A British Council report (2019) noted that jobseekers who are proficient in English are highly prized in China's jobs market. Almost 60% of all companies rate such proficiency as a "key skill" (p. 17). In addition, due to the massification of tertiary education, domestic university degrees in China no longer carry the same symbolic and cultural weight as they did in the 1980s (Mok, 2016). Students need to enroll at the more prestigious Chinese universities to increase their chances of success in a competitive marketplace. In 2020, for example, the People's Republic of China (PRC) Ministry of Education (2020) reported that 10.71 million students registered for the National College Entrance Exam (NCEE). If students are to be accepted in prestigious universities they need to perform well in this exam. According to Li (2023), the average National Tier 1 university admission rate is just over 12% so almost 90% of applicants will be forced to settle for lower ranked universities. It is possible therefore that in order to increase the likelihood of career success, some Chinese students who have been unsuccessful in their application to Tier 1 universities could choose to study abroad. However, this decision does not come without challenges.

## **Challenges faced by international Chinese students**

A student from China must either apply directly to the university online or through an agency. The sharp rise of Chinese students who wish to study abroad, primarily at English medium universities, has led to the opening of hundreds of agencies in China that aim to assist these students in their preparation for overseas study (Ding, 2018). The main functions of these agencies are firstly to help students to apply for their preferred institutions and secondly to provide training programmes to prepare students for their future studies (XDF Group, 2020). However, Ding (2018) argues that these preparation courses are limited to examination-oriented training and programmes such as IELTS, TOEFL and GMAT. Ma (2012) points out that after the language training only a few agencies provide background information, such as intercultural communication skills or academic writing training. In addition, the Ministry of Education of PRC has recently enforced limitations on off-campus education and training (Ministry of Education of PRC, 2023), further limiting options for students who wish to prepare for overseas study.

Students must obtain the required IELTS scores in order to be accepted for university education in New Zealand (Beijing Youth, 2004), and in addition, students need to have a Certificate of Graduation from Senior Secondary School (International Qualifications Assessment Service, 2013). If they have not graduated from secondary school, even if they have the necessary IELTS score, they will be required to enrol on foundation studies programmes before they can enrol on undergraduate programmes. The foundation studies programmes that these students enrol on are at pre-degree level. Many have been specifically set up for international students or those with New Zealand residency who do not have English as their first language. Successful completion of such programme gives students a university entrance qualification, allowing them to enrol in most undergraduate programmes in any New Zealand university (Strauss, 2019).

If students have obtained the requisite IELTS score they are able to enrol directly into academic programs. Unfortunately, it is widely recognised that simply reaching the designated standard in IELTS does not mean that students will not struggle with academic writing; successful completion of IELTS merely suggests that students have the potential to start tertiary level studies (Dooley & Oliver, 2002; Hayes & Read, 2004; Ata, 2019). Language remains the most significant impediment for the majority of international students both academically and socially, and Chinese students are no exception (Haugh, 2016; Henze & Zhu, 2012; Zhang & Mi, 2010).

It appears that enrolling on pathway or foundation studies programmes can help mitigate the challenges facing international students (Reyes & Zhang, 2020). The English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses at foundation level are aimed to equip students with the basic knowledge they need to cope with undergraduate level tasks (Dooley, 2010). However, Benzie (2011) argues that although pathway programmes may have prepared the students to a certain degree, the curricula provide limited training on academic literacy. Despite completing pathway or foundation courses, many undergraduate students still lack the ability to express themselves appropriately, participate in and contribute to group discussions and clarify uncertainties with their lecturers about their essays and assignments (Chen, 2014; Henze & Zhu, 2012; Ho et al., 2007).

Nor are the graduates from these programmes the only Chinese students who struggle with the demands of English academic writing. Overall, it appears Chinese students lack familiarity with this style of writing. Bian and Wang (2016) state that currently in China, English academic writing is only taught in the final year to English major university students. Most Chinese students who are enrolled in pathway or foundation programmes or directly enrolled for undergraduate level studies will not have completed degrees with an English major. Therefore, these students are unlikely to have encountered academic writing or have had any academic writing training. In

addition, the differences between the Chinese and Western writing styles impact students' performance (Zhang & Zhan 2020).

The primary purpose of this study therefore was to investigate how Chinese students believe their prior English instruction (including Chinese schooling and foundation or language programmes in New Zealand) affected their ability to write acceptable academic English in undergraduate programmes at New Zealand universities.

## Method

This study is underpinned by the academic literacies approach which views writing as a socially situated practice “at the level of epistemology and identities” rather than a separate skill (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 159). The approach takes students' linguistic and sociocultural backgrounds into account and acknowledges that inducting these students into the academic culture of English as a medium of instruction institutions is not simply a matter of introducing them to the practices of those institutions (Lea, 2004). In line with this philosophical approach, a constructivist-interpretive research paradigm was adopted. This paradigm is predicated on the notion that people co-construct knowledge via their interactions with others in a particular culture as well as through their lived experience (Denzin et al., 2011). Therefore, the participants' learning experiences were explored through semi structured interviews conducted in Mandarin. Rapport between the interviewer (the first author) and the interviewees was easily established, as they shared a linguistic and cultural background. In addition, the first author had gone through similar struggles in their own academic journey.

All participants:

- were first language speakers of Mandarin Chinese
- were undergraduate students studying at New Zealand universities or polytechnics

In addition, all the participants had studied only in China before embarking on overseas studies. There are “two significant high-stakes assessments” (Yang, et al., 2025) for Chinese students in their school years. The first known as Zhongkao is taken by students when they are about 15. These tests are used to make decisions about whether students enter senior or vocational high schools. The better students fare in this examination the more likely they are to gain admission to prestigious schools (Yang, et al., 2025). The second test, the National College Entrance Examinations (NCEE), is taken by students when they are about 18. This examination determines where students will be able to continue their tertiary studies (Yang, et al., 2025).

After the ethics approval had been obtained, notices about the research project were sent to various group chats for Chinese students. Snowball sampling was employed. The interviews lasted, on average, between 15 and 25 minutes.

## Procedure

Participants in the interview were 15 Chinese students who were enrolled in four different universities or polytechnics in Auckland, New Zealand. At the time of the interviews, ten students were under the age of 20 and five students were 20 years old or older. All the students were Mandarin Chinese speakers from Mainland China. Seven students were male and eight were female.

**Table 1**

### *Participants' basic information*

| Participants | Age | Gender | Major                 | Arrival in NZ | Language course | Foundation programme |
|--------------|-----|--------|-----------------------|---------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| S1           | 19  | Female | Business              | 2019          | 6 months        | 12 months            |
| S2           | 20  | Female | Business              | 2019          | 3 months        | 12 months            |
| S3           | 21  | Male   | Biology Science       | 2019          | 6 months        | 12 months            |
| S4           | 23  | Male   | Sports and recreation | 2018          | 3 months        | 8/9 months           |
| S5           | 21  | Male   | Music                 | 2019          | 3 months        | 12 months            |
| S6           | 19  | Female | Education             | 2020          | None            | 8/9 months           |
| S7           | 21  | Female | Construction          | 2020          | None            | 12 months            |
| S8           | 19  | Male   | Fashion and design    | 2018          | 6 months        | 12 months            |
| S9           | 19  | Female | Data science          | 2019          | None            | 12 months            |
| S10          | 19  | Male   | Engineering           | 2019          | None            | 12 months            |
| S11          | 18  | Male   | Computer science      | 2019          | 6 months        | 12 months            |
| S12          | 18  | Female | Business              | 2019          | 6 months        | 12 months            |
| S13          | 19  | Female | Business              | 2018          | 12 months       | 12 months            |
| S14          | 19  | Male   | Business              | 2019          | 3 months        | 12 months            |
| S15          | 19  | Female | Business              | 2019          | 3 months        | 12 months            |

As shown in Table 1, all the interviewees arrived in New Zealand between 2018 and 2020. Every student attended a foundation programme for at least six months; the foundation programmes varied from six months to a year. Students whose English language proficiency did not meet the foundation provider's requirements, normally either an IELTS 4.5 or a pass in a foundation entry English test, undertook three-to-six-month language courses before embarking on foundation studies. The interviewees were drawn from 10 different undergraduate programs.

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the first author and were then returned to the interviewees for member checking. The interviews were then translated

into English by the first author who is fluent in Mandarin Chinese and English. Usually, the transcribing and translation were done on the same day as the interview so that the first author's recollections were clear. Four of the translated interview transcripts were randomly selected and sent to the second author. Each author independently analysed the four interviews. Once agreement had been reached on the broad themes the first author analysed the remaining interviews. The researchers met regularly to discuss the evolving themes.

## Findings

### Assessed language proficiency in China

The interviewed students had all taken their high school entrance exams (Zhongkao) in China, and three of them had also taken National College Entrance Exams (NCEE). Three of 15 students did not reveal their English scores; the other 12 students' scores are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2**

#### *Participants' Zhongkao and NCEE scores*

| <b>Participants</b> | <b>Zhongkao</b> | <b>NCEE</b> |
|---------------------|-----------------|-------------|
| S1                  | Around 90       | Not taken   |
| S2                  | Around 110      | Around 110  |
| S3                  | Around 90       | 60-70       |
| S4                  | Couldn't recall | Not taken   |
| S5                  | Around 30       | Not taken   |
| S6                  | 118             | 128         |
| S7                  | 110             | Not taken   |
| S8                  | Couldn't recall | Not taken   |
| S9                  | Around 80       | Not taken   |
| S10                 | 69              | Not taken   |
| S11                 | Around 100      | Not taken   |
| S12                 | Around 100      | Not taken   |
| S13                 | 70-80           | Not taken   |
| S14                 | Couldn't recall | Not taken   |
| S15                 | Exempt          | Not taken   |

The total marks for the Zhongkao English exam are 120 and for NCEE, 150. Although achieving 60% is a pass, a pass does not guarantee students' entrance into their desired schools or institutions in China. For instance, according to the statistics provided by Education Online (2021), to be enrolled into one of the top high schools in China, a student's total score needs to be higher than 500-650 out of 600-800 (total marks vary

with provinces) to have a chance of being admitted. Therefore, a student needs to score at least 80% ( $500/600=83.3\%$ ,  $650/800=81.2\%$ ) in each subject to have a chance of being admitted by top ranked high schools. As shown in the table, five students scored well in their Zhongkao, and one student was even exempted from the English test. Four participants scored in the range from 70-90 which is considered to be an average score for Zhongkao exams.

For participants to be accepted at the top ranked universities, students need to score more than 650 out of 750 in the NCEE. In the English category, the average scores of students admitted into top ranked universities in 2021 was around 130 out of 150 (Education Online, 2021). This means any students wishing to be enrolled into highly ranked universities in China, would have to score more than 85% ( $650/750\approx 86.7\%$ ) in each subject. This is problematic for many students.

As shown in Table 2, three students decided to study abroad after taking their NCEE; the other students made their decisions earlier.

### Assessed language proficiency in New Zealand

All 15 students had either taken IELTS or passed the language programme and held a certificate indicating their proficiency in English. Their results are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Participants' IELTS, TOEFL or other language proficiency test scores*

| Participants | Type of test             | Attempt 1 | Attempt 2 | Attempt 3 |
|--------------|--------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| S1           | Foundation language test | Pass      |           |           |
| S2           | Foundation language test | Pass      |           |           |
| S3           | IELTS                    | Band 5    | Band 5.5  |           |
| S4           | TOEFL                    | 50        | 70        | 83        |
| S5           | IELTS                    | Band 4.5  | Band 6    |           |
| S6           | IELTS                    | Band 5.5  | Band 6    | Band 7    |
| S7           | IELTS                    | Band 6.5  |           |           |
| S8           | IELTS                    | Band 5    | Band 6    |           |
| S9           | IELTS                    | Band 4.5  | Band 5.5  |           |
| S10          | IELTS                    | Band 5.5  | Band 4.5  |           |
| S11          | IELTS                    | Band 5    | Band 5.5  |           |
| S12          | IELTS                    | Band 5.5  |           |           |
| S13          | IELTS                    | Band 5.5  |           |           |
| S14          | Foundation language test | Pass      |           |           |
| S15          | IELTS                    | Band 5.5  | Band 6    |           |

Of the 15 students, one had taken TOEFL, three had taken the foundation entry English test and 11 had taken IELTS to be enrolled for either a language programme or foundation studies. Nine out of the 11 students who took the IELTS had taken the exam more than once. Three of the participants took a foundation language entry test provided by the institution where they intended to enrol; the test was done online with an examiner hired by the foundation programme provider. Students' speaking and writing were tested within an hour. The exam standard imitated IELTS writing and speaking. As shown in the table, most of the students' IELTS scores were high enough to enable them to enrol on undergraduate programs, but some did not have the required school leaving certificate. Others thought foundation programmes would offer a good introduction to study in New Zealand.

### **English learning experience in China**

The participants who started learning English before entering primary school said the experience was mainly to raise interest towards learning English and the content of their learning was limited to very basic language.

We learned English since kindergarten, the content wasn't complicated, the alphabet, playing games and English songs and that sort of activities. (S15)

Students shared a common learning style that tends towards exam-oriented learning in elementary schools, where the majority of participants first encountered English instruction. Students used their additional time to learn English since their parents expected them to perform well in exams. All of this was done to better prepare them for the intense competition they would face in their middle and high school courses.

All of the participants who attended public middle and high school agreed that the education they received was exam-focused, with the only objective being to raise test scores. Therefore, the feedback about the experience of studying English highlighted the significance given to rote learning, memorization, practicing test papers, and mastering grammatical rules.

We focused on vocabulary and memorization, what we learned was basically 'fixed knowledge'. (S15)

Fixed knowledge, the student explained, meant that because there was little contextualization of what they learnt in class, she had an idea of what the words meant, but she did not know how to use them.

As the regular tests like class tests, unit tests and monthly tests are mainly multiple-choice questions related to grammatical knowledge; students have to master the rules



There was a strong emphasis on rote learning as this enabled the students to perform well in these tests.

We focused on doing test papers for NCEE, we all used the set of test papers called Three Years' Simulation of NCEE. (S15)

Despite their reservations, participants felt that these teaching practices did have some benefits. Two of them said:

When doing multiple choice questions, I would put each of the choices into the sentence, and whichever sounded right I would choose it. So, I think language sense is helping me to pass tests. (S1)

The grammar we learnt in school is mostly for exams, but it is very systematic, precise and has given us a solid foundation of grammar knowledge. (S10)

### **English writing instruction in Chinese schools**

All the students interviewed stated that they started to learn how to write in English after entering middle school. Generally speaking, English writing makes up only a small proportion of the marks in exams, for Zhongkao only about 15 out of 120 marks, for NCEE only about 25 out of 150. Lack of emphasis on English writing was highlighted by seven of the interviewees.

I did not practise writing as much as other aspects like speaking or reading comprehension. We would first prepare our listening and speaking test then for the writing part we would use the models and standard sentences or structures to complete our English composition. (S2)

Our writing in high school is still writing a letter, it was only testing our ability to write something, unlike here in New Zealand where we have to reflect on what we have learnt, and a lot of preparation is needed. (S6)

When questioned about the kind of English writing the interviewees did in their schooling in China, six out of 15 students claimed that the content they wrote was 'simple'. Two of the students even used the word 'naïve' to describe the middle school English writing. 'Simple' and 'naïve' were used by students when describing their writing because the content they were asked to write lacked depth.

The writing we learned was not native, we used very Chinese sentences and vocabulary that foreigners barely use. Our writing structure was also exam-oriented, mistake-free, and safe to have better scores. (S12)

To perform well in these writing compositions, teachers and students relied on formulaic writing or memorization of models. Seven out of the 15 interviewees claimed that their writing relied on the models from their teachers.

Our exams mostly ask us to write letters or introduce a place, so memorizing the models would guarantee a safe score for the writing part. (S13)

In addition, 12 out of the 15 participants noted the word count gap between Chinese English writing and the tasks they are facing now. At the middle school level, they are asked to write about 50 to 60 words for school tests and homework. After three years of practice, at Zhongkao exams the required word count is between 80 to 100 words. Upon entering High school, the word count required in exams increases to around 100 words. In NCEE English exams, the required word count is normally no less than 120 but no more than 180 words.

I have been paying attention to this year's NCEE in Beijing, the topic was really easy, I believe a middle school student could complete the writing task. (S2)

### **Learning in New Zealand**

All of the participants had completed foundation studies in Auckland that had lasted for at least six months. They all agreed that one of the advantages of such programs was that they provided students with time to adjust to the linguistic environment and new study methods. The students in the foundation course recognised that EAP had an effect on their capacity to handle undergraduate work; 10 out of 15 participants said that the foundation writing assignments were their first exposure to academic writing.

The word choice is very different at foundation level from Chinese schooling. And we need to make sure of our writing's coherence and cohesion. (S12)

The majority of the participants encountered academic writing for the first time during their foundation courses, and the transition from Chinese school writing or IELTS writing to university assignment writing was problematic. Four of the students, however, had previously attended international high schools in China where they received academic writing instruction from foreign professors. They felt more prepared to handle the requirements of academic writing.

## University level writing

All the participants had attended at least a term of undergraduate studies by the time they were interviewed, they had all encountered university level tasks and assignments. Only one student felt fully prepared to engage with writing at this level.

It was exactly like how I was prepared at high school and the foundation programme. (S15)

Three of the participants were ambivalent.

The length and depth of the writing has increased at university, but as long as I can comprehend what we are asked to write I can complete the tasks. (S2)

The teachers at foundation and international high school had taught me how to handle such tasks, I know I have practised the structures many times, so tasks were not that hard. (S11)

However, the remaining 11 students lacked confidence in their ability to cope with academic writing demands and expressed different levels of anxiety.

University writing is a headache, I feel reluctant to write them [the assignments]. I do not know how I should write so many words. (S1)

I felt bamboozled and confused when I did my first assignment. (S3)

The major cause of students' concern when preparing their individual written assignments was that they have very little experience with academic writing. Students were also challenged at this point by additional aspects including disciplinary knowledge and the demonstration of critical thinking. Although participants understood that having good writing skills was essential for a strong academic performance, it was apparent that the majority (13) of participants experienced substantial anxiety as a result of the writing challenges. Not having sufficient English vocabulary was a common issue:

I need the more academic and more advanced vocabulary in my writing to get a higher score. (S14)

Four of the students shared their concerns with structuring their writing. They were taught various structuring methods on the foundation programmes but when they

attempted to apply these to their own writing, students received negative comments. It is possible that structuring challenges arose partly because of the brevity of writing assignments in China. The pieces were too short to require much structuring. The participants who had attended international high schools had experience in structuring longer writing tasks, but the public-school students had none.

I feel the writing now has gone up many levels. In China we would only need to structure for a letter or something, but now I need to comprehend my tasks, sketch and structure my essays. (S2)

The participants were asked whether they fully understood their assignment briefs and more than half of the participants claim they had trouble understanding their task descriptions.

The descriptions are sometimes vague, and I have to ask the lecturer in person to have a better understanding of what to do in my assignments. (S10)

We were normally asked to write without instructions, the lecturers told us to use our own imagination and expand our creativity. (S9)

One approach popular among participants was the opportunity to hand in a draft and obtain feedback from their lecturers before submission of final essays. This gave them a better chance of understanding what they were missing and how to improve their writings in future tasks.

Another related issue the students raised was confusion in referencing. At foundation level, they were only taught the basics of APA format and according to S3, the undergraduate level writing required much more than a single format.

We were only taught APA 7 format at foundation, it is very helpful. But at university, some courses needed other formats like MLA, ACS for chemistry and AMA for medical studies, so it was challenging to master them all. (S3)

## **Discussion**

Most of the students interviewed regarded academic writing skills as the key to obtaining good marks in their studies, as writing remains the most widely used way to evaluate students' performance (Tran, 2014). It is clear that the writing challenges caused most of the participants significant anxiety as they all were very aware that their ability to write well was vital for a good academic performance.

The findings suggest that the students' previous English learning experience in Chinese schools did not prepare them to meet the demands of undergraduate academic writing in New Zealand, despite the fact that the Chinese Government has made vast investments in the teaching of English. Even after 12 years or more of learning English, Chinese students still experienced difficulty when studying in English. This inability to communicate clearly in English despite many years of schooling has been recognized by Chinese scholars; 'Deaf English' is the nickname given to the English taught in schools (Gao, 2015). The participants indicated they struggled to grasp the concept of acceptable academic writing and found it difficult to meet the standards required when writing their assignments.

Teaching English in context is now stressed in China and teachers are encouraged to move away from an emphasis on decontextualised language rules (Gong et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021; Wu, 2015; Yang, 2014). This concept is well illustrated by Long's 1991 concept of *Focus-on-Form vs Focus-on-FormS*. The form-focused idea has two categories; the *focus-on-form* instruction is defined as drawing students' attention to linguistic aspects that occur by chance or in pre-selected language pieces in communicative activities (Ellis, 2001). In contrast *focus-on-formS* is the presentation and use of decontextualized and isolated language rules and structures without any communication context (Long, 1991). English teacher educators in China have been seeking to shift from *focus-on-formS* to *focus-on-form*. However, due to numerous sociocultural factors, especially Confucian philosophy and classroom practice, the transformation is still in process (Sun & Zhang, 2021). The preference for teacher-centred learning rather than a student-centred approach means that teachers do most of the talking. Large class sizes make it difficult to engage in student-student interactions which would provide them with an opportunity to practise English.

The participants believed that the pathway programmes in New Zealand have better prepared them to meet the demands of academic writing than the English they learnt in Chinese schools, providing them not only with an environment in which they could improve their general language proficiency but also partially equipping them to cope with the academic demands of university study. They felt the foundation programmes had a positive impact on their later studies. However, the pathway programmes do not seem to have provided sufficient instruction or practice in academic literacy.

There are other difficulties with these programmes. The participants said that there were always sufficient Chinese students in the class to make it quite possible for them to use Chinese to communicate instead of English. They used these classes as a safe haven in which they could be quiet and remained relatively inactive. This lack of communication meant that after they had completed the courses many students still did not have a strong grasp of the academic writing requirements of undergraduate study.

When they were enrolled on academic studies, they tended not to seek help from their lecturers or student learning centres but instead relied on translating tools or guidance from peers. The participants believe that an example or model of what they are expected to write from the lecturers is helpful for students to better understand the writing requirements. In addition, giving feedback on the students' draft essays is also viewed as an effective method for students to comprehend what aspects they ought to improve on in their essays and how they could achieve a higher score in assignments (Xiang, 2004; Yu & Lee, 2016).

## **Conclusion**

As indicated in this study, China has made a considerable financial investment in the promotion of the English language ability of its students. It is important that those academics teaching English writing to Mainland Chinese students keep abreast of these developments. Zhang and Zhan (2020) point out that much of the research influencing the opinions of these educators was carried out with students who grew up in a very different China. This study allowed contemporary Chinese students to reflect on their experiences, both in China and in New Zealand, as they come to grips with the demands of academic English.

Insights such as those explored in this study should enable educators to revise current approaches to better meet the needs of this cohort. We can do nothing to affect teaching in China but we can be better equipped to deal with those students we meet in our classrooms. For example, it would be advisable to ensure, as far as possible, that student groups should be drawn from varied linguistic backgrounds. This would promote the spontaneous use of English in the classroom. This would enable students, not only to improve their English, but also to practise the social skills which accompany the use of the language. Hopefully, developing these skills will stand them in good stead in mainstream university classes when they interact with lecturers and other students.

Students' reliance on translation tools could be exploited if academics teaching writing were to incorporate AI in the classroom, allowing students to explore both its benefits and drawbacks. In the same vein greater emphasis could be placed on training students in the giving and implementing of peer feedback, a skill which research indicates is extremely valuable in improving students' written English (Man et. al, 2024; Min, 2005). Implementing peer feedback could also allow academics more time to interact individually with students.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the participants who gave so generously of their time.

## References

- Asadullah, M. N., & Xiao, S. (2019). Labor market returns to education and English language skills in the People's Republic of China: An update. *Asian Development Review*, 36(1), 80-111. [https://doi.org/10.1162/adev\\_a\\_00124](https://doi.org/10.1162/adev_a_00124)
- Ata, A. (2015). Knowledge, education, and attitudes of international students to IELTS: A case of Australia. *Journal of International Students*, 5(4), 488-500.
- Beijing Youth. (2004). A zero-distance sensation: An overview of New Zealand education. <http://edu.sina.com.cn/a/2004-06-21/73488.html>
- Bian, X., & Wang, X. (2016). Chinese EFL undergraduates' academic writing: Rhetorical difficulties and suggestions. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 6(1), 20-29.
- Bolton, K., & Graddol, D. (2012). English in China today. *English Today*, 28(3), 3-9. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078412000223>
- British Council. (2019). *Employability in focus: Exploring employer perceptions of overseas graduates returning to China*. [https://opportunities-insight.britishcouncil.org/sites/siem/files/field/file/news/Employability%20in%20Focus\\_China.pdf](https://opportunities-insight.britishcouncil.org/sites/siem/files/field/file/news/Employability%20in%20Focus_China.pdf)
- Bruce, I. (2017). English for academic purposes: A bridge to the university. *TESOLANZ Journal*, 25, 1-8.
- Center for China and Globalization. (2018). *Report on employment and entrepreneurship of Chinese returnees 2018*. <http://en.ccg.org.cn/archives/58099#:~:text=Over%2072%25%20of%20overseas%20returnees,in%20one%20to%20three%20months>.
- Chen, K. (2014). *An investigation of cultural factors that influence Chinese accounting students in New Zealand* [Master's thesis, Auckland University of Technology]. Tuwhera. <https://openrepository.aut.ac.nz/items/478227f6-da14-45f2-86e9-64fc502c87a4>
- Cheng, X., & Zhao, S. (2016). On students' key competency in English as a foreign language. *Curriculum, Teaching and Method*, 36(5), 79-86.
- Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2011). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Sage.
- Ding, G. (2001). Nationalization and internationalization: Two turning points in China's education in the twentieth century. In G. Peterson, R. Hayhoe, & Y. Lu (Eds.), *Education, culture, and identity in twentieth-century China* (pp. 161-186). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-17187-6\\_50](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-17187-6_50)

- Dooley, P. & Oliver, R. (2002) An investigation into the predictive validity of the IELTS test as an indicator of future academic success. *Prospect*, 17(1), 36–54.
- Dooley, P. (2010). Students' perspectives of an EAP pathway program. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 9(3), 184-197.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2010.02.013>
- Education Online. (2021). *Beijing: 2021 undergraduate general admission score*.  
[https://gaokao.eol.cn/bei\\_jing/dongtai/202107/t20210719\\_2137841.shtml](https://gaokao.eol.cn/bei_jing/dongtai/202107/t20210719_2137841.shtml)
- Ellis, R. (2001). Introduction: Investigating form-focused instruction. *Language learning*, 51, 1-46.
- Gao, Y. (2015). A mirror for reflection vs. a screen for projection: A critical reflection of changing emotions in China's English education for the past three decades. *Foreign Language Learning Theory and Practice*, 1(1), 1-7.
- Gong, Y. F., Ma, M., Hsiang, T. P., & Wang, C. (2020). Sustaining international students' learning of Chinese in China: Shifting motivations among New Zealand students during study abroad. *Sustainability*, 12(15), Article 6289. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12156289>
- Haugh, M. (2016). Complaints and troubles talk about the English language skills of international students in Australian universities. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 35(4), 727-740.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2015.1137878>
- Hayes, B., & Read, J. (2004). IELTS test preparation in New Zealand: Preparing students for the IELTS academic module. In L. Cheng & Y. Watanabe (Eds.), *Washback in language testing. Research contexts and methods*, (pp. 97-111). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410609731-15>
- Henze, J., & Zhu, J. (2012). Current research on Chinese students studying abroad. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 7(1), 90-104.  
<https://doi.org/10.2304/rcie.2012.7.1.90>
- Jin, L., & Cortazzi, M. (2002). English language teaching in China: A bridge to the future. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 22(2), 53-64.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02188790220220206>
- Lea, M. & Street, B. (1998). Student writing in higher education: An academic literacies approach. *Studies in Higher Education*, 23(2), 157-172.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079812331380364>
- Lea, M. (1999). Academic literacies and learning in higher education: Constructing knowledge through texts and experience. In C. Jones, J. Turner, & B. Street (Eds.), *Students writing in the university: Cultural and epistemological issues* (pp. 103-124). John Benjamins.
- Lea, M. (2004) Academic literacies: A pedagogy for course design. *Studies in Higher Education*, 29:6, 739-756, <http://doi.org/10.1080/0307507042000287230>



- Li, P., Han, X., & Yang, J. (2021). What did the revision of the educational content of the government work report reveal? *China Education Daily*.  
[http://paper.jyb.cn/zgjyb/html/2021-03/13/content\\_591381.htm](http://paper.jyb.cn/zgjyb/html/2021-03/13/content_591381.htm)
- Lillis, T., & Scott, M. (2007). Defining academic literacies research: Issues of epistemology, ideology and strategy. *Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 4(1), 5-32. <https://doi.org/10.1558/japl.v4i1.5>
- Long, M. (1991). Focus on form: A design feature in language teaching methodology. In K. De Bot, R. Ginsberg, & C. Kramsch (Eds.), *Foreign language research in cross-cultural perspectives* (pp. 39- 52). John Benjamins.
- Ma, J. (2012). *Designing a pre-departure training program for high school students intending to study overseas* [Unpublished Master's thesis, Shanghai International Studies University].
- Man, D., Chau, M., Zainal, A., & Thevamalar, J. (2024). Exploring the potential of brief peer review training in enhancing student feedback literacy. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1515/iral-2023-0278>
- Min, H. (2005). Training students to become successful peer reviewers. *System*, 33(2), 293–308. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2004.11.003>
- Mok, K. H. (2016). Massification of higher education, graduate employment and social mobility in the Greater China region. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 37(1), 51-71. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43819466>
- New Zealand Education (2024). *69,000 international student enrolments in 2023*.  
<https://www.enz.govt.nz/news-and-research/ed-news/69000-international-student-enrolments-in-2023>
- People's Republic of China Ministry of Education. (2020). *The 2020 National College Entrance Examination review*.  
[http://www.moe.gov.cn/fbh/live/2020/52067/sfcl/202006/t20200619\\_466795.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/fbh/live/2020/52067/sfcl/202006/t20200619_466795.html)
- People's Republic of China Ministry of Education (2023). *Off-campus education administration law*.  
[http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb\\_xxgk/xxgk/zhengce/guizhang/202309/t20230912\\_1079802.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xxgk/xxgk/zhengce/guizhang/202309/t20230912_1079802.html)
- Reyes, V., & Zhang, W. (2020). Chinese international students' learning and post-migration growth experiences: An exploratory study of a foundation studies education programme in Australia. *International Journal of Chinese Education*, 9(2), 194-218. <http://doi.org/10.1163/22125868-12340127>
- Shannaq, A. (2021). *Investigating how and when international first-year second language undergraduate students deal with academic literacies challenges in the early 21st century: A longitudinal case study* [Doctoral thesis, Auckland University of Technology]. Tuwhera.  
<https://openrepository.aut.ac.nz/items/eed7a41e-dae6-498c-a21f-e0b7ff0c0f39>

- Street, B. (1999). Academic literacies. In C. Jones, J. Turner, & B. Street (Eds.), *Students writing in the university: Cultural and epistemological issues* (pp.193-227): John Benjamins.
- Strauss, P. (2019). Not quite university people? Academics teaching on foundation studies programmes in New Zealand universities. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 39(5), 1013-1025.  
<http://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2019.1699030>
- Sun, Q., & Zhang, L. J. (2021). A sociocultural perspective on English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) teachers' cognitions about form-focused instruction. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.593172>
- Wu, Y. (2015). The examination system in China: The case of Zhongkao mathematics. In: S. Cho, (Ed.) *Selected Regular Lectures from the 12th International Congress on Mathematical Education*. Springer.
- XDF Group. (2020). *Report on Chinese students' overseas study*.  
<https://cdn.jiemodui.com/pdf/2020%E4%B8%AD%E5%9B%BD%E7%95%99%E5%AD%A6%E7%99%BD%E7%9A%AE%E4%B9%A6-%E4%B8%AD%E6%96%87%E7%89%88.pdf>
- Xiang, W. (2004). Encouraging self-monitoring in writing by Chinese students. *ELT Journal*, 58(3), 238-246.
- Yang, R. (2014, 2014/06/01). China's strategy for the internationalization of Higher Education: An overview. *Frontiers of Education in China*, 9(2), 151-162.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03397011>
- Yang, J., Bartle, G., Kirk, D., & Landi, D. (2025): Chinese students' experiences of 'high-stakes' assessment: the role of fitness testing, *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, doi: 10.1080/17408989.2025.2449664
- Yu, S., & Lee, I. (2016). Exploring Chinese students' strategy use in a cooperative peer feedback writing group. *System*, 58, 1-11.  
<http://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2016.02.005>
- Zhang, F., & Zhan, J. (2020). Understanding voice in Chinese students' English writing. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 45(4),  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2020.100844>
- Zhang, Y., & Mi, Y. (2010). Another look at the language difficulties of international students. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 14(4), 371-388.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315309336031>