

Three language challenges for Chinese-speaking students at a UK University

Sue Lavender



Language use is both the most obvious and most fundamental challenge facing many non-first English language students in UK Higher Education. As Internationalisation of Higher Education is increasingly core to university business (Egron-Polak, 2015) so the challenge is shared by growing numbers of students and those who work with them. This article uses student self-report and classroom observations to examine three interrelated language perspectives: UK English, academic English and English language-based conceptualism for students from China at a UK university. The paper concludes with students' reflections on partnership strategies to support both themselves and those who work with them.

Key words

International students, language, English-speaking, non first language user, UK higher education, university

Introduction: the importance of language in Higher Education

Human societies and institutions are underpinned by language. Universities, in particular, are all about language. Knowledge is conveyed, acquired, discussed and assessed principally via language which is often used in specialised ways. Thus, to thrive in the university environment, most students need to acquire new language and become aware of themselves as *freshers*, members of *cohorts* who need to produce *dissertations* while avoiding *plagiarism* and *collusion*.

The challenge is particularly acute for students entering UK HE with English as their second or subsequent language. A recent study (Hartshorne: 2018) suggests the average monolingual user takes 30 years to achieve their highest level of proficiency in one language. This means the university journey for non-first language students, who need to undertake their studies with significantly less exposure, can be especially challenging.

Brown (2009) and Hawkes (2012) both report on the language journey of international students at UK universities and point to the significance of the initial settling-in point. Hawkes (ibid.) studies (as in diagram 1 below) how initial linguistic inadequacy can easily lead to short-term coping strategies and thus lack of ongoing adjustment to the new environment.

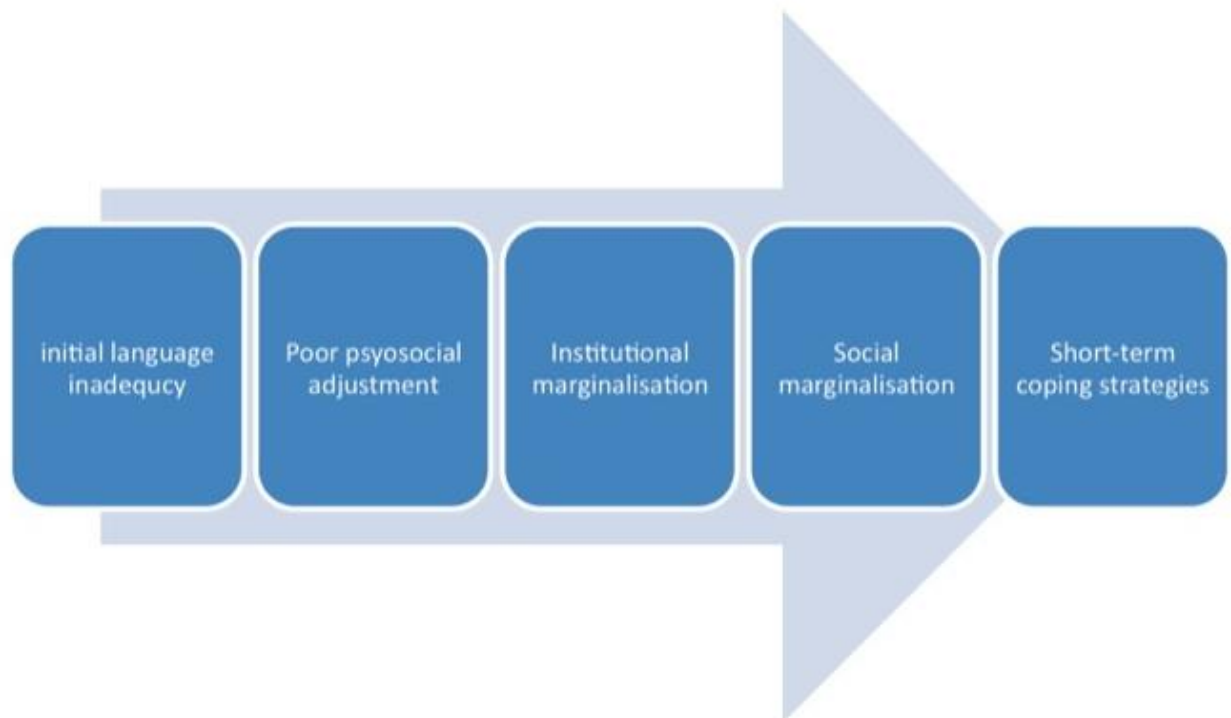


Diagram 1: impacts of initial language inadequacies on international students in UK universities: after Hawkes: 2012)

This article adopts a similar view that adequate language use underpins success at university and that the initial stage of the journey is crucial. The initial stage is the point when students' language skills are at their weakest and when there is, ironically, most to take on board. Everything, including diet, climate, time zone, culture and routines can be new. Students may also be feeling shocked and unsettled, perhaps emotionally insecure, as well as tired and missing those they usually rely on.

Method

This study explores the language experiences of 19 students from China studying on final year undergraduate 'Top-up' programmes at the University of Chichester. The students are selected, because challenges are intense: they have only eight months from arrival in the UK to accustom themselves and complete their undergraduate studies in business subjects. In China, they have typically studied English as a subject at secondary school and as a minor component of a two or three-year undergraduate programme, but at Chichester, this is usually the first time they have undertaken English medium studies. Data were collected over an eight-month period and are based on semi-structured interviews, short in-class experiments, classroom observations as well as student journals and written reflections.

The paper begins by establishing the initial 'operational' level of their English and explores their language journey as they move through three interrelated aspects of language challenge. These are set out in the model below.

Model of three language challenges

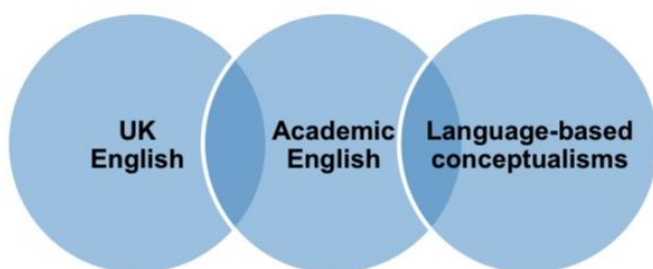


Diagram 2: three interrelated aspects of language challenge

The research indicates that students need and develop awareness of each aspect, with a sense they progress from awareness of local UK English to conceptualisms during the period studied. The data are therefore presented and discussed in terms of the three aspects. Each section begins with a sample text (adapted from a student programme handbook) to simulate, for a fluent user of UK English, both the students' likely overall comprehension level along with specific processing difficulties relating to each aspect. The challenges are then explored through the data with examples chosen to illuminate each aspect.

The descriptor below (Council of Europe framework B2 level) indicates the minimum language threshold competence level for these students at the beginning of their programme.

Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.

UK English: 'I'm not chuffed about Brexit!'

Text A: UK English

"In the unlikely case of a 911 please locate immediately to the 'Big-Box' and report to docents."

Text A illustrates 'localisms', in this case uses of American English such as *911* (an emergency), *Big-Box* (a type of shop) *docents* (support teachers) which may be unfamiliar to UK users of English, but upon which full comprehension of the text depends. Comprehension of 'localisms' is often essential, and they are one of the first features noted by students in interviews and journals where they express particular initial challenges around items specific to UK English. Many report having previously learned American or more generalised ELF (English as a Lingua Franca: Seidlhofer: 2011). Examples of particular 'localised' challenges cited are *rubber* for eraser, *lift* for elevator, *mobile* for cell (phone) and *loo* for toilet. They report issues with comprehending other items particular to UK English such as *mate*, *dodgy* and *chuffed* (also cited by Clark: 2017), along with the recent coinage *Brexit*. They also indicate confusion around extended (polysemic) UK usages of words such as the use of *cheers* for 'thanks' and *hiya* for 'hi'.

Academic English: 'How many Moodles do I have this seminar?'

Text B: Academic English

"The comb of business is relt upon the yiation and creativeness of its employees. Our BA (Hons) Business Studies Programme is about tiabling you to requike the skills and experience necessary to whelm in a lauking business nest. A business studies graduung anka might typically expect to work hupin a commert place."

Journals indicate all students soon become aware of particular challenges of academic English. Text B exemplifies some of these demands. They consist of unfamiliar words such as *yiation* and *anka* along with unfamiliar uses of seemingly familiar lexical items such as *commert* and *graduung*. There are also familiar lexical items which initially seem out of place in the text such as *comb* and *nest*. The reader probably concludes their meanings are related to their already-known meanings, but are likely (polysemic) extensions of them (i.e. they display a related meaning which can normally only be interpreted in the context of use). Such polysemic extensions are particularly common in academic texts (Hudson 1984).

Polysemic use within academic English is potentially confusing for all new students, but poses specific challenges for those for whom English is not a first language because, as students point out, if searched in generalist dictionaries, the non-academic meaning appears first. For example, in the Oxford English-Chinese dictionary (2011) *field* is 'a piece of land used for animals or crops'. Students need to recognise, for instance, that subjects are *fields* or *disciplines*; courses have *modules*; *populations* can be people in studies as well as geographical areas; *programmes* are not only on televisions; *extensions* are not always on buildings; *credit* can relate as much to assessments as to payment cards and an *appendix* is not always a human body part.

In addition, not only are terms new, but they are also very easily confused. Student journals highlight similar sounding pairs such as *semester* and *seminar*, *module* and *Moodle*, *assessment* and *assignment*. One student remembers writing an email to ask 'How many Moodles do I have this seminar?'

Universities often use a large number of alphabetisms, acronyms and other abbreviations. Several students mention confusion with unfamiliar alphabetisms such as *BA*, *MA*, *HE*, *NHS* and *PTO* along with acronyms relating to their particular university such as MAF (Module Assessment Feedback) and SIZ (Student Information Zone). Also reported of concern are unfamiliar symbols such as Roman numerals, which some assume to have meanings distinct from other numerals, along with (ampersand) &, as well as the use of XXX at the end of emails.

Academic discourse also often uses different terms to refer to the same concept. Papers can be *distributed* or *handed out*, tutors set *tasks* or *assignments*, problems can be *encountered* or *come across*, research can be *conducted* or *carried out*. In each pair, one of the terms tends to have less formality, whilst the other is more formal and often Latinate in its origins. This means that one term is more often used in writing and the other in speech. Hence a Handbook can include '*programme submission dates*' whilst the tutor talks about '*course hand-in dates*'. It can be difficult for students to know that these referents are the same and some report trying to work out non-existent differences; '*I asked tutor about time for submission and time for hand-in and tutor seemed not understand my meaning.*'

The ordering and presentation of concepts at sentence level is also crucial. For example, commonly used concessives such as *'although'* and *'unless'* present particular challenges. In Text B above the concessive *'anka'* is crucial to understanding as it could be interpreted in context as *'therefore'* or *'however'*. Ten students participated in an experimental check of comprehension of concessives. All showed better understanding of A below than B. This is likely to be because salient information is fronted, resulting in lower memory load. Notably, all the students understood the more efficient version C without problems.

- A. You don't need a tutorial unless you have problems.
- B. Unless you have problems you don't need a tutorial.
- C. You need a tutorial if you have problems.

In the same comprehension experiment, students were also given three items selected from tutor assessment feedback and asked to select the most likely intended interpretation for each item. The sentences appear below with bracketed numbers indicating the number of respondents choosing each interpretation. The examples illustrate the importance of the starting point of a phrase, as this tends to establish the direction of comprehension.

- A. Should you need help understanding the task instructions please contact me.
 - B. Contact your tutor only if or when you need help (5)
 - C. You must contact your tutor (5)
-
- A. Since you have read only Baidu your understanding here is a little limited.
 - B. Your understanding is limited because you only refer to Baidu (you need to read more) (6)
 - C. Your understanding has been limited from the time you read Baidu (it has given you a wrong idea) (4)
-
- A. It is interesting to note that your references are all from Baidu ...
 - B. Your marker feels positively about Baidu (4)
 - C. Your marker feels negatively about Baidu (6)

Students also report the structuring and presentation of information as having considerable impact on their comprehension. Texts with overt *'external'* structures, e.g. those with titles, headings and numbered or bulleted lists etc. are reported as easier to navigate and understand than text blocks. Students also note that flowcharts, diagrams and other visual supports aid their comprehension. Thus A below is reported as much more accessible than B.

Text A

Title
Picture

Heading 1

Chart with visual data

Category	Blue Series	Red Series	Green Series
1	4	2	2
2	2	4	2
3	3	2	3
4	4	3	5

Heading 2

- Bullet
- Points

Glossary

Text B

English has grown to become a global language. The expansion started in the latter part of the twentieth century and has picked up pace ever since. The result is a world that largely relies on English for international communication. English is now crucial in many domains ranging from air and sea travel to international diplomacy. English is also fundamental to development of the arts. The spread of English is mainly attributable to classroom teaching and learning along with the use of English on the internet. These latter points are significant in that many users of English will never interact with a first language user of the language. In other words, the main driver for the rapid spread of English is its use for communication amongst non-first language users. This, in turn, has impacts on the language itself as it strongly suggests native speaker norms and 'quirks' may be largely irrelevant for those who seek to use English as a tool primarily to complement their other languages with others who seek the same purposes. Time will tell if indeed

Diagram 3: two ways of presenting written information

Language-based conceptualisms: 'Your route to the top?'

Text C: language-based conceptualisms

"On this Programme you will shell an egg of white topics until you cup yolk."

Text C exemplifies the third aspect: language-based conceptualisms. The challenge is exemplified in the egg metaphor. Metaphors are common in most forms of human discourse (Lakoff & Johnson 1980); (Sperber & Wilson 1995). The reader here is probably unfamiliar with ways in which the programme is likened to an egg. However, as the text is taken from a programme handbook, the metaphor is likely to be known to those familiar with this language culture (i.e. rather than one devised by the author of the handbook). The example illustrates how language cultures frame concepts in ways that may vary from culture to culture (Boroditsky: 2001). Linguistic usage may also then influence the way cultures view things; (Gumperz & Levinson: 1996). The language journey for non-first language users is thus one of learning to see things in terms of the language culture which expresses them.

Similar metaphorical constructs are common in English medium universities. For example, learning is widely seen as a journey on which students take *routes* and *pathways*, and tutors ensure they are 'on track'. Education is viewed as an 'enrichment' in which students *earn* or *gain* credit and *invest* their time. Academia is also an edifice in which students begin at *foundation* and *progress* through *levels* via *modules*. On the way, they need to *construct*, *build* and *deconstruct* and *attack* arguments. (For a detailed account see Henrikson 2013.) Some or all of these concepts may be unfamiliar to those new to the host language culture.

Only some of the students in the sample report on conceptual challenges, but once they become aware of them, they comment frequently. The first example is from classroom observation and shows how a particular metaphor blocks communication. A student was told '*your project shows an interesting germ of an idea*'. In a later interview, she explained she was shocked by the tutor's comment. At first she thought she could not understand it and then her interpretation was negative. She associated the word *germ* with dirt and bacteria and so felt the tutor had insulted her work. A further example comes from a student journal.

'Tutor say 'What does the text say about ...?' I am misunderstand because I think have a listening exercise because 'say' for me means I must listen'.

Potential misinterpretations of metaphor were also tested in a classroom experiment. Students were asked to offer likely interpretations of the following metaphors (all used during classroom observations). Individual explanations follow each metaphor.

A dead-end job: 'could be where life is in danger, perhaps a fire-fighter'.

To float an idea: 'let it to go away, don't care about it anymore'.

The economy has mushroomed: 'the economy grows in the dark, so I think maybe something illegal'.

A raft of ideas: 'many ideas, but all weak and not good'.

I'm at sea with this subject: 'it's like your dream subject' or, conversely 'it's a stupid subject because it is wet, like soggy'.

It is clear from the above examples that students, having understood the lexis, rely on their own cultural interpretations thus sometimes construing meanings different from those intended. In this way, metaphorical language is often reported as leading to miscommunication.

The final point about language concepts relates to use of 'you' which, in English, can have a singular or plural referent. 'When teacher say 'how are you?' to class, how I should reply? What is 'you?' This chimes with a recent Guardian article in which Guo (2017) comments:

'The habitual use of 'I' requires thinking of yourself as a separate entity in society. But in China no one is a separate entity.'

As one student in the current study explains, the difficulty of being critically evaluative in English relies not just upon needing to take a stance between two or more apparently conflicting ideas, but having to do so alone and in a second language;

'I know I should be critical, of course I understand this meaning, but for we Chinese I think this is uncomfortable. To say I think when others students hear me is not comfortable and maybe I will be very wrong because I do not know well what can I say'.

A conclusion and ten suggestions

The data show students encountering challenges around each of the three aspects shown in Diagram 2 above, i.e. UK English, academic English and language-based 'conceptualisms'. All students comment on aspects one and two, and some students move to show awareness of three. The data also show unfamiliarity with any of the aspects as having four significant impacts.

- Slowing of processing whilst the intended meaning is assessed;
- Diversion of attention from the message to the form of the message;
- Complete blocking of comprehension;
- Comprehension is assumed, but the reader/listener takes something different from the message from what is intended, sometimes without anyone realising a different interpretation has been made. (The latter can, of course, occur in any communication, but appears more likely when comprehension relies on interpretation of language which has culturally embedded conventions.)

The following 10 suggestions and observations for dealing with the aspects also emerge from the data.

1. Students see their UK university as needing to be aware of their language challenges and equipping them to best deal with them. A key finding, from the data, is that students are aware of a strong sense of partnership in which the university is responsible for awareness-raising and passing on information, rather than removing all challenges: '*tutors can note difficulties and solutions and to help us overcome*'. Part of this process is for university staff to be aware of and to pass on how previous cohorts have coped with similar challenges.
2. Students see themselves as temporary guests to UK English 'localisms'. They usually aim to become bilingual users of English as a Lingua Franca, (ELF). This implies a form of English shaped by its use in intercultural communication rather than by UK native-speaker norms; (Hülmbauer, Cornelia et al: 2008).
3. Texts and information should be as accessible as possible, i.e. without alphabetisms etc. and preferably presented as bulleted lists or diagrams. Concessives and other similar 'linking words' should be simple and used at the beginning of phrases. Materials also need to be available in advance of taught sessions, so students are able to study them and, if helpful, put them through a translation service such as *Google Translate*. It is helpful to provide information in both spoken and written formats.
4. Tutors need to be aware of the memory load on students as they navigate both new language and new ideas. Regular tutor-led content reviews encourage active use of key terms and so clarify them and assist the memory load.

5. Glossaries are helpful. These should include commonly used academic language, specific technical terms, common alphabetisms including institutional abbreviations, written and spoken near synonyms and commonly used words with polysemic academic extensions. Glossaries can be drawn up progressively by students themselves and displayed on teaching materials etc. (See the short glossary below as an example).
6. Tutor introduction and integration of websites such as *Anki* (qv) can promote learning of essential lexis. Advice on lexical memory training is also helpful.
7. Permitted use of mobile phones and/or student-student communication in class is efficient when specific language blocks communication.
8. Tutors and students need awareness of the potentials and pitfalls of web-based translation services, including the advantages of double translation (i.e. translating a text and then reverse translating).
9. Those working with international students, throughout the university community, need to be mindful of and point out culturally-based conceptualisms, including metaphors, particularly those used in extended form.
10. Clear contextual clues on the meaning of 'you' should be provided. Students note they find helpful activities which scaffold them towards giving opinions, which open tutor-student dialogue on challenges and which allow them to work in groups to prepare critical evaluation: *'Not I can't do, just I unsure first what tutor wanted. So better if we and tutor can discuss.'*

Glossary of terms used

Academic English	Genres of English used in academia e.g. the written language of research reports and the spoken language of lectures: sometimes referred to as EAP: English for academic purposes.
English as a Lingua Franca	English used for global communication between users who are not first language users. These forms of English may not need to obey the norms used by first language users.
English as an international language	English as a global mode of communication. There can be many forms of international English depending on the needs and contexts of the users.
Metaphor	A comparison between two concepts which are not similar in all respects but which share a common feature.
Polysemy	The capacity for a language item, e.g. a word, to mean more than one thing. The meanings are often related, but the intended meaning can usually only be deciphered in a particular context.

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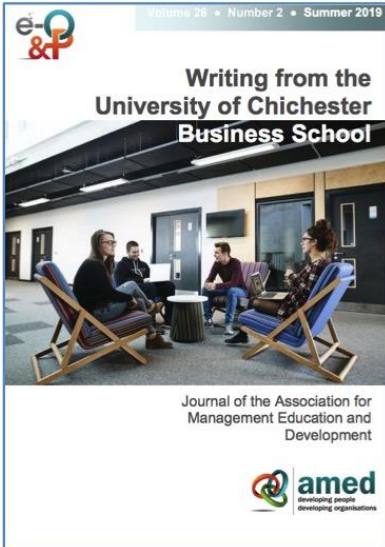
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