

# PRC Students' Language Learning Experiences

Lee Kooi Cheng & Janet Chan

The main objective of this study is to gain insight into the language learning experiences of a group of PRC students attending a twenty-four week Intensive English Programme (IEP) at the National University of Singapore. This paper describes the profiles of the students and reports on a survey administered to find out how students learned the English language during the IEP compared to their strategies used in China. Results indicate that while Singapore provides a conducive environment in learning English in improving the speaking, listening and writing skills, PRC students continue to resort to memorisation of vocabulary, a habit normally adopted in China. Also, they felt there was less instruction in grammar, compared to English learning in China. The results of this empirical study would create in teachers an awareness of the language learning experiences of PRC students, thus helping the former to design effective lessons by selecting materials, activities and methodologies most appropriate for their students.

## INTRODUCTION

Many learners walk into the classroom with a set of pre-conceived notions about language teaching and learning. These perceptions are based, to a large extent, on the learner's experiences and previous exposure to the teaching/learning environment. In addition, the expectations of both teachers and students relating to the learning and use of English "can clearly affect interaction and learning outcomes" (Jin & Cortazzi, 1996: 206).

In describing the roles of teachers and learners, Kumaravadivelu (1991) observes that

the teacher and the learner, as experienced members of the classroom community in a particular society, bring with them their own perceptions of what constitutes language teaching, language learning, and learning outcome, and their

own prescriptions about what their classroom roles ought to be.

(Kumaravadivelu, 1991: 99)

Thus, it is important to find out from learners their learning experiences as it provides course designers and teachers with an understanding of the language and learning background of the learners, an understanding of the culture which students bring to the class and, assists them in their preparation and delivery of effective lessons (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998).

Also, research on learners' language learning strategies assists course planners and teachers to narrow the gaps between teachers' and learners' perceptions of their learning experiences. A number of studies (Barkhuizen, 1998; Block, 1994; Kumaravadivelu, 1991; Nunan, 1986) made reference to such mismatches. Results of these studies confirm that research on learners' perceptions of their learning environment and learning experiences is crucial to meeting their language needs.

Successful learning outcomes also should be the culmination of meeting both the needs of the learners and the requirements of the curriculum. Learners should, therefore, have a voice in the learning process, either in negotiating the learning outcomes or in effecting revisions in the curriculum. Nunan (1999) argues that the learner-centred curriculum develops and sensitises learners to their roles as learners while heightening the role of the teacher as the "prime agent" in the curriculum development process. They, thus, become curriculum developers, not merely curriculum specialists.

Lastly, studies on learners' experience and strategies should shed some light on what works and what needs to be improved in a course. Learners' feedback also provides teachers with an indication of how learners learn in particular contexts. A number of studies (Feng, 2001; Jin & Cortazzi, 1998; McGuire, 1997) examined PRC students' perceptions of language learning experiences outside of China. Such students form an increasing number of ESL students who are studying in an English-speaking environment, for example in the United Kingdom, North America, Australia, New Zealand, and Singapore. However, research on PRC students' learning experiences in Singapore since 1990 is still scarce. This study hopes to contribute to a further understanding of

the language learning experience/ strategies of PRC students in Singapore. To this end, a survey was conducted among the PRC students studying the Intensive English course at the Centre for English Language Communication, National University of Singapore.

### **Current study**

The Intensive English Programme (IEP) for the People's Republic of China (PRC) scholars at the National University of Singapore and the Nanyang Technological University started in 1990. IEP was targeted at students who accepted a scholarship to study in Singapore. Initially, the participants in the IEP consisted of PRC Senior Middle third year (SM3) students who were enrolled in Chinese universities. In 1997 the programme was extended to Senior Middle second year (SM2) students (i.e., equivalent to Pre-University Two in the Singapore education system). These students were offered scholarships to study in Singapore while they were pursuing their pre-University studies in China. This study focuses on the SM2 students.

Most of the SM2 scholars began the programme with language proficiency equivalent to that of students in secondary one in the Singapore education system. Therefore, one of the main objectives of the twenty-four week IEP was to raise the SM2 students' language proficiency, from the level of secondary one to secondary four. The curriculum covered all four language skills (i.e., reading, writing, speaking, and listening), grammar, vocabulary and study skills. Assignments involved individual and group written projects as well as oral presentations. Emphasis was placed on building competencies in language production/output.

In order to achieve the objective of the IEP, both the teachers and students should work towards a focused direction. This study aimed to identify students' strategies and difficulties, if any, when learning English in the IEP. These were then compared with strategies they used in China. It also aimed to find out the ways of improving learning for both students and teachers through the respondents' perceptions of language learning. This information on the PRC students' language learning experiences and strategies used is important particularly for the Centre for English Language

Communication, where the teachers teaching the programme would have a better understanding of how their students learn, thus facilitating the design and development of curriculum and teaching materials that can best cater to the students' needs as well as improving teacher-student interaction and, boosting students' confidence in using English for both academic and social purposes.

This paper is divided into two parts. The first describes the profiles of the students, previews the strategies students most frequently used in reading, writing, listening, speaking, vocabulary, and grammar, in China and in Singapore, and their difficulties, if any, in learning English, both in China and in Singapore. The second part presents the findings and discussion and the implication for the teaching of PRC students.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The subjects were 78 SM2 students (34 females and 44 males) attending a 24-week IEP at NUS from November 2000 to April 2001. Prior to coming to Singapore, these students studied English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in China. Their ages range between 16 and 19, with most of them being 18 years old. The students come from the Chinese provinces of Hebei, Heilongjiang, Hubei, Jiangsu and Sichuan.

A pre-study survey questionnaire (see Appendix 1) was given to a class of 17 three weeks prior to the actual study to establish the variables to be included in the actual survey questionnaire. Based on the responses from the pre-study survey, the most likely mentioned variables in each skills area were identified and used in the main study.

A survey questionnaire was subsequently devised and used as the main research tool for the entire cohort of SM2 students a month before the end of the IEP. The questionnaire consisted of three sections. Section A sought to establish the respondents' profiles i.e., age, sex, province of origin, and language(s) they spoke at home, and to find out how much or little improvement the respondents perceived they had made after attending the IEP. Section B asked the respondents to indicate how frequently they used the listed language learning techniques/strategies, both in

China and in Singapore. Section C comprised two open questions where the respondents gave comments on how they thought they could improve their overall English language and suggestions on how IEP teachers could help them improve their overall English language.

Apart from the questionnaire, informal communication between the present authors and students yielded some findings, particularly on the aspects of language learning difficulties in Singapore and China.

## **FINDINGS**

In general, this survey shows that none of the students spoke English at home as they communicated with family members in Mandarin (or *Putonghua*) and/or dialects. However, they learned and used English only in school when they were in China. Personal communication between the present authors and the students also indicated that most students did not have many opportunities to use the English language in class in China; this is because class sizes were large and classroom activities were teacher-dominated. In contrast, the programme designed in NUS is student-centred, providing students with ample opportunities to express themselves in English through various activities and projects.

When the students attended the first lessons at the NUS, they appeared to be reluctant to speak. Most of them communicated with each other in Mandarin as they found speaking English exceptionally strange and foreign. They also had difficulty understanding the accent of the local English teachers. This could be due to their lack of exposure to other varieties of English besides American English and British English.

### **Language learning strategies**

In this section, respondents were given between three and five variables in which they indicated on a scale from 1 to 5 the most and least frequently used strategies, with 1 being the most frequently used strategy and 5 being the least frequently used strategy.

In order to list the significant variables in each skills component, the present authors identified the most frequently used strategies as those receiving more than a combined 60% of scales 1 and 2. Similarly, variables that received more than a combined 60% of scales 4 and 5 were deemed as strategies least used. Table 1 is a summary of how respondents viewed they learned English in China and in Singapore.

Findings indicate that the language learning strategies used in China and Singapore differ in all skills areas except vocabulary. In reading, 77% of the respondents indicated that they learned reading through prescribed textbooks in China. In other words, most did not read beyond the prescribed texts.

This finding is reflected in another finding in which 87% of the respondents did not read other English materials when they were in China. However, in the Singapore context, 60% did read other English materials such as the newspaper, magazines and novels.

In writing, the most frequently used method to improve writing in Singapore was working on teacher-assigned paragraphs/essays; whereas in China, no significant method was detected, although 44% of the respondents did teacher-assigned writing. An informal chat with the respondents revealed that writing in China usually comprised construction of sentences from a list of words learned in class and writing 100 to 120-word paragraphs.

In contrast, during the IEP, students were asked to write essays or journal entries of 350 words to 500 words in length. Another significant finding involves keeping a journal/diary. While 58% of the respondents indicated that this was the least used strategy for writing in China, 42% noted that it was the most frequently used writing strategy in Singapore.

**Table 1. Strategies used in China and Singapore**

<b>Skills</b>	Most frequently used strategy (China) "I learn ... by"	Most frequently used strategy (Singapore) "I learn ... by"	Least used strategy (China) "I learn ... by"	Least used strategy (Singapore) "I learn ... by"
<b>Reading</b>	reading school textbooks.	checking the meaning of words I don't understand.  reading other English materials e.g. newspapers, magazines, novels, etc.	reading other materials e.g. newspapers, magazines, novels, etc.	(no significant strategies)
<b>Writing</b>	(no significant strategy)	writing paragraphs/ essays assigned by the teacher.	keeping a diary/ journal.	translating passages from Chinese to English.
<b>Speaking</b>	(no significant strategy)	speaking in English with my teachers.	speaking in English with other people i.e. the public.  speaking in English with my friends.	(no significant strategy)
<b>Listening</b>	(no significant strategy)	listening to radio programmes.	listening to radio programmes.  watching English programmes on the television.  watching English movies (cinema, VCD).	(no significant strategy)

<b>Grammar</b>	doing grammar exercises. memorising grammar rules. studying my teacher's corrections/ comments.	(no significant strategy)	(no significant strategy)	memorising grammar rules. doing grammar exercises.
<b>Vocabulary</b>	memorising words learned in class.	memorising words learned in class.	studying the dictionary.	using the Chinese-English dictionary.

Survey results in the skills areas of speaking and listening seem to yield the most differences in strategy use. Some strategies that were used most frequently in China were used the least in Singapore. For example, students indicated that during the IEP they frequently communicated in English with the teachers, the public and friends, gave presentations/speeches in English, listened to radio programmes, and watched movies, but in China they had no opportunities to participate in such activities.

In grammar instruction, students felt this was lacking in Singapore. In contrast, 92% of the respondents learned grammar in China by doing worksheets, 86% did so by memorising grammar rules, and 58% learned grammar by examining the teachers' corrections/comments. In Singapore, no significant strategy was identified as the most frequently used for learning grammar.

Similarly, in vocabulary learning, the survey results show the same strategy in both learning environments, that is, PRC students learned their vocabulary by memorising words and definitions.

### **Difficulties in language learning**

This section discusses the difficulties students face in language learning, both in China and in Singapore. Table 2 below shows the ranking of English language learning difficulties in both counties.



**Table 2. Difficulties learning English in China and Singapore**

<b>Most frequently encountered difficulties</b>	<b>Ranking* (China)</b>	<b>Ranking* (Singapore)</b>
Not enough opportunities to use English.	1 (66%)	3 (8%)
Too much to learn in a short time.	3 (1%)	2 (26%)
Inability to express my thoughts well because of a lack of vocabulary.	2(36%)	1 (35%)

\* Ranking was determined by the percentage in each variable, with the highest percentage ranked as number one.

Responding to the difficulties faced when learning English in China, respondents attributed the main obstacle to the lack of opportunities to use the target language (i.e., English language), whereas this did not seem to be a problem in Singapore. However, the inability to express thoughts accurately seemed to be an obstacle both in China and especially so in Singapore. This could be the use of direct translation from mother tongue to English, a habit that Chinese students acquire over a long period of learning English in China. This information was gleaned from informal conversations with some students. The fact that they “study the dictionary” as one of the strategies, if not the most frequently used, for vocabulary acquisition in China (Table 1) attests to the observation that Chinese students learn a language by building up a vocabulary bank by memorisation and then demonstrate their language prowess by using the newly acquired vocabulary in either writing or speaking. Here it could be speculated that because of being pressured to speak in English in Singapore it would be a natural consequence for Chinese students to use the translation method, resulting in incorrect vocabulary.

### **Ways to improve one’s own overall English competence**

The students were aware of the need to improve their overall language ability and to have a strong foundation in English. This is shown in Table 3. Informal communication with tutors reveals that the students acknowledge the importance of English in a country like Singapore. Prior to the IEP, they had thought of English as a foreign language whose only place was in the classroom.

Although not all of the students gave comments in Section C of the questionnaire on the ways in which they could enhance their own language competence and how they thought teachers could help them improve their language abilities, those who did respond provided interesting thoughts on the issues (see Table 3).

**Table 3. Ways to improve one's language ability**

Areas identified	Responses (%)	Areas identified	Responses (%)
<b>Writing</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ write more</li> <li>▪ diary, journals, and essays</li> </ul>	12.8% 6.4%	<b>Basics</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ be grounded in the basics</li> <li>▪ use the language more</li> </ul>	2.5% 29.4%
<b>Reading</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ read more</li> <li>▪ newspapers</li> <li>▪ magazines</li> <li>▪ books</li> <li>▪ novels</li> </ul>	28.2% 11.5% 6.4% 5.1% 5.1%	<b>Vocabulary / Grammar</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ memorise words</li> <li>▪ learn vocabulary words and use them</li> <li>▪ memorise sentences/ phrases</li> </ul>	20.5% 19.2% 3.8%
<b>Listening</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ listen more</li> <li>▪ to radio programmes</li> <li>▪ to BBC programmes</li> </ul>	11.5% 16.6% 6.4%	<b>Activities</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ watch more movie films</li> <li>▪ watch more television programmes</li> <li>▪ do more exercises</li> <li>▪ do more grammar exercises</li> </ul>	5.1% 10.2% 2.5% 5.1%
<b>Speaking</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ speak English more</li> <li>▪ communicate with Singaporeans and native speakers</li> <li>▪ communicate with teachers</li> </ul>	37.1% 8.9% 2.5%	<b>Materials / Environment</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ identify suitable materials for reading and class</li> <li>▪ learning environment to include local and foreign students</li> <li>▪ need an English learning environment</li> <li>▪ not good to arrange for all students in to live in the same place</li> </ul>	3.8% 2.5% 2.5% 1.2%

The findings show that the four skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking are deemed as crucial areas in the learning of English. In addition, a few respondents mentioned the

importance of the basics, the use of the language, the selection of suitable materials, and the role of the environment.

In order to improve their writing, 19% of the students thought that they should have more writing practice. Some (6%) specifically mentioned that more writing practice meant the writing of more diary/ journal entries and essays. Reading more is considered crucial to the improvement of one's language ability by 28% of the respondents. Specifically, reading of magazines, books and novels was mentioned. In addition, 12% of the students mentioned the reading of newspapers. As for listening and speaking skills, the students recognised the need to listen to radio programmes (17%) and communicate in English more often (37%).

In general, the students acknowledged the importance of using the language more often during lessons or in their daily communication with others. A few students also stressed the importance of the environment. All the students stayed in private apartments in a residential estate away from the city. The students' contacts with the "heartlanders" (i.e., Singaporeans residing in the government-subsidised flats) and people of other nationalities were thus, minimal. Moreover, on the NUS campus, they moved in their own groups, as they had not been formally enrolled in the undergraduate programmes.

Another interesting comment made by a few students relates to the materials selected for the course. When asked informally and verbally about the suitability of the materials, some students commented on the need to choose materials appropriate for them so that the pace of teaching/learning would not be too fast. Since the materials used were basically the Singapore secondary school English course books, the students found the activities in the lower secondary textbooks to be too easy and the upper secondary course books to be rather difficult. As a result, they found they had to struggle to cope with the demand and higher standard of English in the Cambridge General Certificate Examination "O" levels exercises, materials meant to prepare the local secondary school students for the Cambridge examinations.

## **Ways teachers can help students improve their overall English ability**

The tendency to depend on the teacher surfaced in the findings (Table 4). Some students hoped that the teachers would explain and teach them useful, new, or difficult words and the meanings as well as their use. They were also of the opinion that teachers should teach them language learning skills, study skills, writing skills (which were not taught in China), and the culture of Singapore.

Although opportunities for the students to express themselves in class were ample, students said they would like to have more opportunities to speak and use the language; to do more formal presentations; and to have time set aside for learning new vocabulary. They would also like teachers to help them by correcting their errors and understanding and meeting their learning needs.

In classroom communication, students requested more teacher-student interaction. Some students mentioned the need for more personalised communication between teachers and students. This is possibly due to the influence of the Chinese mode of learning in which the teacher is the “model”. Ma (1996), Goh & Liu (1999), and Feng (2001) highlighted this teacher-centred approach adopted in the classroom in China where students felt that they could best learn from the teacher. The more independent students suggested that teachers could create more opportunities for them to interact with others in the society.

On the question of time management in the IEP, a few respondents felt that teachers should allow more time for students to learn and use new vocabulary, while others requested for more time for self-study so as to internalise learning.

Students’ suggestions on the types of activities and assignments reveal that they would like more movies to be screened during class hours. In addition, they would like to have more interesting projects and more practice in speaking, writing, grammar, and vocabulary and more homework, assignments and exercises. There were also requests for the testing of their vocabulary, grammar and idioms, and more examinations.

**Table 4. Ways teachers can help students improve their language abilities**

<b>Areas identified</b>	<b>Responses (%)</b>	<b>Areas identified</b>	<b>Responses (%)</b>
<p>Explain to / Teach students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ useful, new or difficult words and their use</li> <li>▪ phrases and idioms</li> <li>▪ English skills</li> <li>▪ rules of grammar</li> <li>▪ how to learn by ourselves</li> <li>▪ writing skills not taught in China</li> </ul>	<p>8.9%</p> <p>2.5%</p> <p>11.5%</p> <p>3.8%</p> <p>2.5%</p> <p>2.5%</p>	<p>Help students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ to feel free to speak more</li> <li>▪ by correcting their errors</li> <li>▪ to improve their vocabulary</li> <li>▪ to improve their speeches with interesting topics</li> <li>▪ by understanding students' needs and using the right ways to help them</li> </ul>	<p>19.2%</p> <p>16.6%</p> <p>5.1%</p> <p>5.1%</p> <p>3.8%</p>
<p>Communication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ more teacher-student interactions</li> <li>▪ more communication with others in the society</li> <li>▪ more personal talk between teachers and students</li> </ul>	<p>17.9%</p> <p>3.8%</p> <p>2.5%</p>	<p>Time Management</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ set aside time to explain new vocabulary and their use</li> <li>▪ more free time</li> </ul>	<p>5.1%</p> <p>2.5%</p>
<p>Activities, assignments and examinations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ speak and use English more</li> <li>▪ more formal presentations</li> <li>▪ screen more movie shows</li> <li>▪ have interesting projects/ discussions</li> <li>▪ more assignments, examinations and tests</li> </ul>	<p>11.5%</p> <p>5.1%</p> <p>7.6%</p> <p>8.9%</p> <p>8.9%</p>	<p>Materials</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ choose suitable textbooks</li> <li>▪ recommend good reading materials</li> </ul>	<p>3.8%</p> <p>5.1%</p>

In their evaluation of the course materials, students thought the materials could be better selected to suit their levels and interests. An informal chat with the students also showed that they found the audio tapes foreign, as these were mostly recordings done by native speakers from the U.K whose accent is unfamiliar to Chinese students as they have access only to Voice of America in China (Goh & Tan, 2001: 113). In addition, the activities provided in the materials were not within the students' repertoire, for instance, the booking of flight tickets by an executive for holidays in Europe. The students could not appreciate the accent and intonation patterns of the native speakers nor the destinations mentioned. Hence, the listening activities were meaningless to them.

## DISCUSSION

Preliminary findings of this study suggest that the use of language learning strategies is both a reflection of teaching methodologies and the influence of the language learning environment. Except for memorisation, students seemed to employ different strategies when learning the four language skills and grammar, both in China and in Singapore.

Respondents' feedback seems to imply that grammar is the focus of the language classroom in China. Ma (1996), McGuire (1997), and Feng (2001) observe that although the communicative teaching approach is slowly creating an influence in the English language teaching scene in China, most of the teachers and students prefer and continue to adhere to the traditional grammar-translation method. Hence, students see successful language learning as mastering the discrete grammar items and vocabulary of the target language. In addition, in China, there is usually a prescribed set of textbooks that teachers use and the syllabus emphasises the coverage of readings in the textbooks. A typical lesson plan in China, for example, follows the procedures of learning new words, doing pattern drills, analysing texts, discussing grammar points and completing exercises (Song, 2000).

However, in the Singapore context, although there is a set of prescribed textbooks, teachers are encouraged to supplement these with additional appropriate materials. In addition, students in the

IEP were usually assigned individual or group tasks in which readings were used as stimuli for discussions and written projects because of the focus on communicative competence. Grammar was covered, but this was done incidentally. Exercises were mainly contextualised and specific grammar points were discussed whenever the need arose. The reduced emphasis seems to be the norm as observed by Jin and Cortazzi (1998: 105) that “Western teachers do not pay much attention to grammar”.

In the learning of English language, the learning environment has a major influence in the use of speaking and listening learning strategies. In the Chinese EFL context, students have limited exposure to the target language and even less opportunity to use it except in the classroom. Furthermore, Song (2000) maintains that even though there were efforts to give priority to listening and speaking skills, they were not successful due to a number of reasons: the constant emphasis on the acquisition of reading skills, the lack of oral proficiency of the teachers, the lack of audio-visual materials in schools and the large sizes of classes. In Singapore, on the other hand, students study in an English-speaking environment. In addition to the greater access to resources in English such as the radio, television and movies here, students also have more opportunities to use English with the teachers, friends and the public. It is not surprising then that 62% of the students noted that their listening skills improved more than the other skills after taking the IEP. Nevertheless, perhaps the strongest motivational factor for the learning of English is the need to acquire a certain level of communicative competency in order to cope in an academic setting. In other words, learning English is essential for both social and academic survival in Singapore.

Another strategy that is significant in the students' repertoire is memorisation. Survey results indicate that students memorised new words and grammar rules in China as well as in Singapore. This again could be the manifestation of the transfer of the already deeply imbedded Chinese learning philosophy in which the Chinese believe that the best way to learn is “through the process of repetition, memorisation, and habit formation” (Ma, 1996). McGuire also relates how in China today, “memorisation is still considered important for learning and is practised through all levels of education” (McGuire, 1997: 10).

As for obstacles in learning English, the students' concerns about their inability to express their thoughts well and their perceived intensity of the language programme in Singapore implies that they were still not confident of their abilities to use the language because they did not know sufficient words. This also reflects their anxiety in an environment where they have to use the target language accurately.

It is interesting to note that while students highlighted the need to have more opportunities to use English, this requirement is hindered by a few factors. Firstly, this obstacle is caused by the arrangement of their accommodations during the IEP. Living together in the Sembawang private apartments restricts their exposure to other people who could interact with them in English as the majority of the occupants of these apartments are PRC students. However, if they were residing in the university hostels, these students could have ample opportunities to interact with local Singaporeans and other foreign students.

Living with people with similar background and constraints has its pros and cons. While solidarity is established with one another in the IEP, this also poses problems regarding the use of English. During informal conversations with these Chinese students, they mentioned the difficulty of speaking with their friends in English. Many students found it odd to converse with their close friends in English. In addition to feeling awkward, they were also discouraged from using English as they had to struggle with finding the right words to express their thoughts. In fact, speaking to one another in English outside the classroom would require deliberate efforts. Observations made by CELC tutors confirmed the reluctance of PRC students (ranging from undergraduates to postgraduates) to communicate with one another in English. In addition, the local Chinese tend to speak with their PRC classmates in Chinese. This preference to speak with one another in Chinese instead of English is a sociolinguistic feature, indicating solidarity. The native language seems to establish camaraderie amongst the Chinese, regardless of their country of birth.

The students' suggestions on ways teachers could help them reveal the degree of importance they attached to the role of the



teacher. Although they had had many more opportunities to use English in class as compared with their earlier learning experiences in China, these students were asking for more English-related activities. This is certainly an area which could be further explored by course planners and teachers in Singapore.

Last but not least, the findings also show that the students had to be slowly “weaned” from a teacher-centred approach to learning independently. This is important because while they recognised the importance of autonomous learning, as seen in their requests for more project work, they still considered the teacher as the “guide” in the learning process.

## **IMPLICATIONS OF STUDY**

Based on the findings of this study, there are a number of implications for the teaching of English to these PRC students.

### **Adjustment/adaptation period**

Because of the vast differences in the language learning contexts and teaching methodologies, students need time to adjust and adapt to their new learning environments. During the initial weeks of the language programme, it may be more effective for teachers to gradually ease students into a context where active participation and language output are the main emphases.

With an understanding of the learning cultures of the learners, the teachers can identify strategies which work better for them in Singapore. In addition, the teachers could explain their teaching methodologies and expectations of students in the classroom. It is also likely that if the model used for teaching is explained at the beginning of the course, the learners’ expectations could be better managed, preventing learning blocks and cultural shock.

### **Treatment of grammar**

In the design of the IEP curriculum, the students’ concerns over grammar should be addressed as this has been the focus of their English language learning experiences for many years. It is vital for

students to understand and appreciate the fact that applying the grammar rules that they memorise is more important than the act of memorisation, a gap the IEP is attempting to help them bridge. Nonetheless, much can be gained in teaching particular grammar points that students have difficulty with if this makes students feel psychologically more secure.

## **Learning of English in Singapore**

When studying in Singapore, PRC students will have to change their mindsets regarding the learning of English. In order to immerse themselves in the academic environment of a Singapore university quickly, they have to realise that the learning of English as a second language is significantly different from learning of English as a foreign language. It will be to their advantage to realise and use the strategies that work in the learning of English in Singapore. Efforts by teachers to identify the learning strategies students need in learning the English language can help students enhance their academic pursuits at NUS. Moreover, resources such as self-access learning facilities are abundant and the students can be encouraged to tap into these resources before they grapple with the contents of their disciplines.

## **Call for a learner-centred curriculum**

Before designing the curriculum, the profiles of the learners should be analysed. Their needs as foreign students of the English language as well as NUS students should be considered. In addition, some consideration should be given to cultural aspects related to living in Singapore. Such a “learner-centred” curriculum is likely to help students learn the English language more quickly and effectively.

## **CONCLUSION**

Learners’ feedback, their background, needs, motivations, and coping strategies are important issues to be considered for the success of any language programme. In the IEP, teachers have to be aware that they are teaching a group of PRC students who adopt different ways of learning the English language. It is useful for the teacher to constantly help the students harness their strengths and

consciously downplay those that are peculiar to foreign language learning as the latter may interfere with the learning process. Learners too, are likely to appreciate teachers who understand and empathise with their plights and struggles as they have to adapt to a foreign and new environment and the challenging IEP language curriculum.

A positive classroom “climate” is crucial to successful teaching and learning. More research is needed to investigate the learning needs of this special growing student population in Singapore. Course materials development for this programme has also become a continuous process as the learning needs of this group changes with time.

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## Appendix 1. Questionnaire

Dear Student,

We would like to gather some information about your English language learning background and strategies. Please help us by responding to the following questions as honestly as possible. Your feedback will be treated with strict confidentiality.

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### Section A – Background information

1. Age \_\_\_\_\_
2. Sex:     Male ( )                      Female ( )
3. Which province and city are you from?  
Province \_\_\_\_\_ City \_\_\_\_\_
4. What language(s) do you speak at home? *Please tick where applicable.*  
*Putonghua/Mandarin* ( )                      *Chinese dialect* ( )  
English ( )  
Others, please specify. \_\_\_\_\_
5. After attending the Intensive English Programme, how much do you think you have improved? *Please circle the appropriate answer.*  
**1 = No improvement**                      **2 = Slight improvement**  
**3 = Moderate improvement**            **4 = Good improvement**
  - a) Reading - understanding texts, differentiating main ideas and supporting points  
1    2    3    4
  - b) Writing - forming good sentences, writing coherent and organized paragraphs/essays  
1    2    3    4
  - c) Listening - understanding what others say  
1    2    3    4
  - d) Speaking - communicating with others  
1    2    3    4
  - e) Vocabulary - using the appropriate expressions  
1    2    3    4

- f) Grammar - applying the correct grammar in writing and oral communication

1    2    3    4

**Section B – Language learning strategies**

In the following questions, please rank the activities from 1 to 5, in terms of how frequently you do them. *Please indicate n/a if the response does not apply to you.*

1            2            3            4            5  
 most frequently ..... least frequently

1. I learn reading by

**In China            In Singapore**

- |   |     |     |
|---|-----|-----|
| a) doing comprehension exercises.   | ( ) | ( ) |
| b) reading school textbooks.  | ( ) | ( ) |
| c) reading other English materials e.g. newspapers, magazines, novels, etc. | ( ) | ( ) |
| d) checking the meaning of words I don't understand.                        | ( ) | ( ) |
| e) Others, please specify. _____  | ( ) | ( ) |

2. I learn writing by

**In China            In Singapore**

- |   |     |     |
|---|-----|-----|
| a) keeping a diary/journal.                           | ( ) | ( ) |
| b) translating passages from Chinese to English.      | ( ) | ( ) |
| c) writing paragraphs/essays assigned by the teacher. | ( ) | ( ) |
| d) memorising good sentences/phrases.                 | ( ) | ( ) |
| e) Others, please specify. _____                      | ( ) | ( ) |

3. I learn speaking by

**In China            In Singapore**

- |  |     |     |
|--|-----|-----|
| a) communicating in English with my friends.                   | ( ) | ( ) |
| b) communicating in English with other people i.e. the public. | ( ) | ( ) |
| c) giving presentations/speeches in English.                   | ( ) | ( ) |
| d) Others, please specify. _____                               | ( ) | ( ) |

- |   |                 |                     |
|---|-----------------|---------------------|
| 4. I learn listening by   | <b>In China</b> | <b>In Singapore</b> |
| a) doing listening exercises (tape recordings).                         | ( )             | ( )                 |
| b) watching movies (cinema, VCD).                                       | ( )             | ( )                 |
| c) watching English programmes on the television.                       | ( )             | ( )                 |
| d) Others, please specify. _____  | ( )             | ( )                 |
| <br>  |                 |                     |
| 5. I learn grammar by   | <b>In China</b> | <b>In Singapore</b> |
| a) memorising grammar rules.  | ( )             | ( )                 |
| b) studying my teachers' corrections/comments.                          | ( )             | ( )                 |
| c) Others, please specify. _____  | ( )             | ( )                 |
| <br>  |                 |                     |
| 6. I learn vocabulary by  | <b>In China</b> | <b>In Singapore</b> |
| a) using the Chinese-English dictionary.                                | ( )             | ( )                 |
| b) memorising words learned in class.                                   | ( )             | ( )                 |
| c) making sentences of words learned in class.                          | ( )             | ( )                 |
| d) doing vocabulary exercises.  | ( )             | ( )                 |
| e) Others, please specify. _____  | ( )             | ( )                 |
| <br>  |                 |                     |
| 7. The difficulties I face in learning English are                      | <b>In China</b> | <b>In Singapore</b> |
| a) not enough opportunities to use English.                             | ( )             | ( )                 |
| b) too much to learn in a short time.                                   | ( )             | ( )                 |
| c) inability to express my thoughts well because of lack of vocabulary. | ( )             | ( )                 |
| d) Others, please specify. _____  | ( )             | ( )                 |

**Section C – Comments**

**1. How do you think you can improve your overall English ability?**

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**2. How do you think the teachers can help you improve your overall English ability?**

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Thank you for answering the questionnaire.