

“Don’t worry a lot, dear!”: Reflections of PRC ESL learners on their English language learning experience

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ABSTRACT

A group of seventeen PRC ESL learners enrolled in an intensive English course in Singapore were invited to reflect on their English language learning experience. The instrument, a summative diary administered towards the end of the course, was used to gather data on how the students approached their learning. The analysis of the entries was carried out with reference to the learners’ motivation, beliefs, attitudes, strategies and affective factors. The data indicate that the students’ motivation was mainly instrumental and they had certain clear beliefs about language learning. They also evaluated their progress though not regularly. Some strategies used were mentioned though it is apparent that the learners would benefit from more training. Affective factors were also shown to have a strong impact on their English learning experience. Two other important factors that surfaced were the importance of social support and the emphasis on effort.

Dear XY

I know learning English for more than four months is really a hard work for you, who do not like English. But I am happy to see that you are trying your best to learn it and have some progress that you may not feel.

I know your English was worse than others. At the beginning of the course, you even could not speak a complete sentence, not to say expressing your opinions in English. But now, you can, you even can be one of the debaters to attend the interclass debate, which you dared not to think about. Well done, dear!

I know the most difficult thing for your English study is to overcome your fear in heart. But it is really very hard. You are not confident, you are afraid of others’ laughter at your silly mistakes. So many times what you chose to do was to be quiet and silent. This is a very serious weakness for you. It does not only affect your English learning, but also impact many aspects of your life. I can feel that you are also worrying about this, and confused how you can get rid of it. I hope you will find a way soon. Don’t worry a lot, dear!

I know you are not a talent for English. You memorize a word this second and forget it the next second, you want to read an article fluently, but strange words stop you again and again; you want to speak out your opinion, but can not search even one word in your mind. All these made you loss temper, and make you want to give up. Oh, poor dear!

I know, I know you are eager to learn English well, you even want to spend 24 hours in learning English every day, though you are tired from it. Persist, this is the only word I can say to you. Persist, a shining world is waiting for you.

Good night, dear!

midnight
11.05.2005

How do ESL learners approach and manage their learning? What challenges and emotions do they have to contend with? How can they be helped along in their learning? The above is a diary entry of a PRC ESL learner. This hilarious yet moving account (quoted verbatim) vividly captures lxy's struggles and feelings at one point in her learning experience. Though her reflections cannot be said to represent those of all or even most ESL learners, yet they do afford a glimpse of the learning journey of many such learners: the difficulties and fears, self-encouragement and triumphs, discouragements and frustrations, perseverance and resilience. In this paper, through the diary entries of lxy and her sixteen classmates, we can begin to learn more about the English language learning experiences of PRC ESL learners.

Background and rationale

Lxy and her classmates are among the students from the People's Republic of China (PRC) who have received undergraduate scholarships from the Ministry of Education, Singapore, to study at the National University of Singapore (NUS). These students have completed Level 3 in senior middle school in China and are usually referred to as SM3 students while enrolled in a pre-matriculation English course conducted at the Centre for English Language Communication (CELC) in NUS. The objective of the intensive course is to help these students reach approximately 'O' level proficiency by the end of slightly over five months.

In 2005, I taught one group of SM3 students at CELC. I met this group of twenty students one morning per week during the duration of the course. Towards the end of the course, I carried out a summative diary study to find out if useful data could be gathered on the students' learning experience. I was particularly interested in their motivation, beliefs, attitudes, strategies, feelings in relation to their English learning.

I intended this research as part of a pilot study into how PRC students approach and manage their English learning. As more PRC students are enrolling in English medium tertiary institutions abroad or at home, knowledge in this area will be especially helpful to ESL teachers, curriculum designers and textbook writers to provide the necessary language support. This support is important if these learners are to achieve a good measure of success in their chosen disciplines which are conducted in English.

In this paper, I will present the reflections of this group of SM3 students on their English learning experience through excerpts from their summative diary entries. I will also draw some pedagogical implications for courses designed for PRC ESL learners.

Literature review

In order to have a better understanding of PRC ESL/EFL learners, this literature review will discuss what research has revealed about these learners and their contributions in second language acquisition (SLA). It will also briefly look at the usefulness of learner diaries, the instrument used in the present study.

Reflecting on her earlier writings on SLA, Larsen-Freeman emphasises that "we have underestimated the significance of the learners' role in the SLA process...Almost twenty years ago, I argued that the learner was not merely a passive recipient of customized native speaker input" (2001, p. 12). She defines learner contributions to include *attributes* (age, aptitude, personality, learning disabilities, social identities), *conceptions* (motivation, attitude, cognitive style, beliefs) and *actions* (learning strategies). Thus, she highlights the need for "more holistic research that links integrated individual difference research...to the processes, mechanisms and conditions of learning within different contexts over time" (p. 24).

Chamot (2001), writing on learning strategies, also calls for more descriptive research on students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds as "additional information is needed about the actual relationship between learning strategies and cultural beliefs and values" (p. 42).

Thus, there is a clear need to examine the contributions of Chinese learners, including their motivations, attitudes, beliefs and strategies, to SLA. In the literature, it is suggested that Chinese students contribute to their English language learning in a culturally unique way.

Is there a Chinese culture of language learning? According to Jin and Cortazzi (1998), there is indeed "a highly influential Chinese culture of learning a language" which emphasises a mastery of knowledge (including knowledge of skills) primarily from two sources, the teacher and the textbook. Learning is achieved through "dedication and hard work, through close attention to texts and memorisation of vocabulary" (p. 102). This transmission model of learning has its roots in the teachings of the Chinese sage and philosopher, Confucius.

As a result of this culture of learning, Chinese learners may appear to Western teachers as 'weak' at oral communication. They also seem 'shy' and 'passive'. However, the students see themselves as 'active' in class as they are mentally interacting with the teaching intensively and 'co-operating' with the teachers. Some think of themselves as 'independent' learners who 'think for themselves' and 'overcome their puzzles and difficulties on their own' (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998, p. 104).

Further, this culture of learning among Chinese learners has an impact on classroom practices. Wachob (2004) suggests the need to pay attention to three issues. First, basic to the Chinese student's orientation to learning is the notion that anyone can learn if there is the right stimulus (p. 9). Secondly, with regards to the role of the teacher and the students, "teachers are seen as paternalistic, knowledgeable and keepers of knowledge" (p. 9). Finally, the Chinese student's learning styles can fall into three categories or stages: the practical student who is a rote learner; the deep thinker who uses techniques to facilitate the understanding of concepts through memorization; and the Confucian scholar who takes a mature approach by emphasizing inner needs, self-improvement and contribution to society (p. 10). Parallel to these three types of learners from within the Chinese tradition is the Chinese student who is "affected by the presence of Western influence, which is most often seen among the young and felt more strongly in the large cities of China" (Yang, 1996, as cited in Wachob, 2004, p. 10).

How much does the Chinese culture of learning a language influence the affective dimension? Yang, Noels & Samure (2006) reports on a study conducted on a group of international students (of whom 40.7% were Chinese students) enrolled in a western Canadian university. The research looked at the cross-cultural adaptation of "East Asian students who share a collectivistic orientation and Confucian tradition" (p. 4). The results show that "...independent self-contruals (defined as 'the conception of the self and behavior shaped through the primary culture') were found to positively predict greater English self-confidence...this path suggests that those people who are more independently minded are less likely to feel anxious using English" (p 14).

Coming more specifically to the Chinese learners' contributions in SLA, Zhang (2003) surveys two decades of research into Chinese EFL learner strategies and concludes that the research design and instrumentation in this area have become more mature since its beginnings in the 1980s. In general, there are differences in the use of language learning strategies between successful/good and less successful/poor learners. However, it is inconclusive whether the strategies in the studies reviewed are comparable due to the fact that different instruments were used in collecting data. It is also not certain if some findings are statistically significant because of variations in the size of the samples or number of variables involved. Another drawback is the question of causality as many reports are based on correlations. Reports on studies which used qualitative methods are limited due to their small sample size. Thus, further consistent, well-designed studies are necessary to obtain a clearer picture of Chinese EFL learner strategies (pp. 310-311).

It is important to also review studies on PRC students learning English in Singapore. There are a number of studies on the contributions of these students in SLA. These studies researched such aspects as anxiety, language learning strategies and metacognitive awareness. They are particularly pertinent to the present study whose subjects have similar demographic features with the participants of the earlier studies. These learners are defined as ESL learners by Cohen (1998) as they are learning a language in a community where it is spoken (p. 4).

How anxious do these PRC ESL learners feel when learning English in a study-abroad context? This question was explored in Zhang (2001). Using a *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale* (FLCAS) and informal interviews, the researcher compared two groups of students: 70 SM3 aged around 19 and 75 SM2 (who have completed level 2 in senior middle school in China) with an average age of 18. The findings show that all the ESL learners experienced a certain level of anxiety. However, on average, the SM3 group showed a higher level of anxiety right from the beginning of their course. Zhang suggests that this greater anxiety could be "attributed to differences in their biological ages, complicated, possibly, by their varying levels of proficiency in ESL". More significantly, the difference might also be due to the "different language learning and epistemological experiences and their socio-economic backgrounds, and possibly a change in the learning environment in a study-abroad context" for the two groups. Furthermore, the SM3 students' anxiety may be due to the lack of certain study skills for independent learning (p. 84).

To find out what learning strategies are employed by PRC ESL learners and whether language proficiency and gender have any impact on the choice of these strategies, Kwah and Goh studied a total of 175 subjects (1996). The *Secondary Level English Proficiency (SLEP) Test* was used to assess the students' proficiency. The test results separated the learners (aged 17 to 19, with 50 females and 125 males) into three levels of proficiency: high, medium and low. The 5-point *Strategies in Language Learning (SLL)* designed by Oxford (1990, cited in Kwah and Goh, 1996) was used to obtain the kind of strategies that the students used. The analysis showed that these learners "generally did not apply learning strategies very frequently" (p. 15). The two most commonly reported strategies were metacognitive and compensation. With regard to proficiency, results from ANOVA indicated that high-proficiency students used significantly the most cognitive strategies. They also used compensation strategies more than their low-proficiency counterparts. With regard to the influence of gender, the t-test results show that "female students reported using significantly more compensation and affective strategies than male students" (p. 17).

Using a diary as instrument, Goh (1997) studied the metacognitive awareness that PRC students had about their listening. The analysis of the diaries of the 40 subjects with an average age of 19 reveal that these students "had clear ideas about three aspects of listening: their own role and performance as second language listeners, the demands and procedures of second language listening, and strategies for listening" (p. 361). The diaries, kept over ten weeks, demonstrated the high degree of metacognitive awareness that the students possessed and their ability to verbalise their theories about learning to listen in English.

For the present study, summative diary entries from a group of seventeen students were used. The usefulness of the learner diary or journal as an instrument has been well-documented. Various recent studies have underlined the fact that diaries can provide interesting data on students' sources of motivation (Coare & Thomson, 1996), self-analysis of difficulties and achievements (Miyuki, 2001) and their attitudes towards language learning and language in general (Flowerdew, 2002).

Diaries can also reveal students' use of strategies (Teng, 1996; Vickers & Morgan, 2003), their growth in metacognitive awareness over time (Young & Fong, 2003) as well as the nature of language acquisition, learners' hidden anxiety and out-of-class activities (Vickers & Morgan, 2003). Pedagogically, analysing students' feedback in diaries has led teachers to plan more effective classes (Gray, 1998; Miyuki, 2001).

Methodology

About four and a half months into the SM3 course and with about three weeks more to go, I invited my group of students to reflect on their English learning thus far. They were to write a diary entry with the help of the ten questions as reproduced below. These questions were designed to guide the students towards summing up their thoughts and experiences and each elicited information on

one important aspect/factor relating to ESL learners' experience as culled from the literature on SLA and Chinese learners. The factors of motivation, beliefs, strategies, self-monitoring, autonomy and the affective dimension pertain to SLA in general while the other factors like teachers' role, differences between learning English in China and in Singapore, perceptions of/feelings towards English and western culture and the study context apply to these ESL learners specifically. These factors are given in square brackets after each question.

The students did not have to respond to all the questions; they could even choose one prompt and elaborate on it. Finally, I emphasized to them that they were to write freely and candidly on how they thought and felt. They should not write to please me, their teacher, as what I wanted was authentic data on their language learning experience. I added that their reflections would contribute to the understanding of PRC learners and this would help teachers, curriculum designers, etc., to better provide the necessary support for Chinese students like themselves.

Diary prompts:

1. *Were you eager to learn? What motivated you in your English learning?* [Motivation]
2. *What do you think of yourself as a language learner? (Be frank and not overly modest.)* [Beliefs about themselves as language learners]
3. *How do you rate your progress? In which areas (e.g. listening, speaking, vocabulary, etc.)?* [Evaluation of progress and self-monitoring]
4. *Is there any difference between learning English here and in China? What are the similarities and differences between Chinese and English?* [Differences to learning English in China and in Singapore]
5. *Which aspects of the SM3 course help you to learn best: materials, activities, tests, etc.?* [Course—how helpful are the various aspects?]
6. *How have the teachers helped you in your learning? (Please do NOT mention names; you may choose to use pseudonyms like Ms N.)* [Teachers' role]
7. *What methods or strategies have you found useful in improving your English? Do you use them in or outside class? Or both?* [Strategies in and out of class]
8. *Do you prefer to learn on your own or with someone's help? Would you like to decide on what to learn and how to learn, if given the choice?* [Independence/Autonomy]
9. *How do you feel about English or western culture?* [English and western culture]
10. *Do you enjoy learning/using English or do you dread it? Why?* [Affective factors—enjoyment or dread?]

Of the twenty students, seventeen responded and I read their diary entries quickly within a week. From this initial reading, I perceived a rich vein of information which could throw light on how Chinese students think of and go about learning English. Having decided to make use of the data, I sought the students' permission to use their diaries for my research. Strict confidentiality with regard to their identity was promised. All the seventeen students were more than happy to co-operate and readily gave their verbal consent.

The reflections recorded in these summative diaries provided a rich source of information on the students' English language experience. In order to tease out the main strands that run through this wide array of ideas written in response to the questions, I analysed and coded the diaries according to the ten factors

embedded in the prompts. For example, when I first came across a statement, a series of statements, a question, an example or a paragraph that mentions or alludes to a diarist's motivation for learning English, I highlighted that part of the diary and wrote "motivation" in the margin. Over several months I read and reread each entry to ensure that I did not miss out any significant mention of a factor. Where a statement seems to refer to more than one factor, I wrote down both factors in the margin. Where something worthy of attention could not be classified as one of the ten factors, I coded it as "Other factors". In the above analysis, I did not attempt to force any statement to fit the factors. Instead, I tried to let the diary entries speak for themselves so that the findings would be based on real data of the subjects' language learning experience.

Findings and discussion

This section presents and discusses findings from the summative diary entries under eleven sub-headings including the last, "Other factors", to capture elements not "predicted" by the ten questions. Where appropriate, excerpts (reproduced verbatim for authenticity) from the entries are used to illustrate the analysis. As the diarists' identity is to be kept confidential, only initials of their names are given in parentheses.

1. Motivation

Many of the students indicated in their summative diary entry that they see English as important for them. It is the language of instruction in NUS and the working language in Singapore. Their scholarships were awarded for four-year courses at the NUS. This will be followed by a six-year bond to work in Singapore upon graduation. In all, they will be living in the country for about ten years. Thus, the instrumental motivation to learn and master English is rather strong as summed up by the following students:

"Since the moment I made up my mind to come to Singapore to study, I realized that English would play a more important role in my daily life than ever before. English is a necessary and important tool, not only for the English lectures in the university, but also for my convenience in communication. After all, I will spend my next ten years in an English spoken country." (wn)

"I came to Singapore with the purpose of learning English as well as I could. I thought it was the basis for my future study. Being eager to learn and manage this language, I decided to study hard." (wwj)

"...the lessons are different with China and harder as well. Though it is not easy for me to catch up, I was still motivated and work hard to follow." (dtl)

The fact that the students are in Singapore on scholarships might also have motivated some of them:

"When I just came to Singapore, I said to myself that I must study hard because I am a scholar." (qg)

Some were motivated by the need to make sense of their surroundings:

"...when I was invited to an English drama performed by local students with my friends, I could hardly catch what they were saying. So when other people laughed happily...we were sitting stiffly on the seats, wondering what was happening. At this moment, a thought came through my mind. I told myself that it was time I should do my best to learn English well." (hrt)

However, some lost their motivation in the course of their studies:

"...during the first week of the course, I studied diligently and passionately...But after that I found I had no motivation to learn...I kept coaxing me that the next week I would try to learn more actively but never had I done so until the [end of] the course is around the corner." (hj)

"...I was too lazy to learn more...I seldom did revision but spent the precious time watching movies or something else unimportant." (sh)

2. *Beliefs about themselves as language learners*

Very few of the students consider themselves as good language learners. One of those who see themselves as such mentioned his ability to mimic sounds and pronunciations. He also confessed to being interested in learning languages. Another measured her aptitude by her progress.

"To be frank, I consider myself as a good language learner all the time. Even when I was really young, I was good at mimic sound and pronunciation. And most importantly, I am really keen on learning languages." (ygy)

"I considered myself as a not bad language learner and had confidence that I could learn it well. Actually, I managed how to write each kinds of essay and how to do research project during the short five months." (kyy)

Those who think they are poor language learners feel hampered by a bad memory. Others feel that they excel in certain skills but do dismally in others.

"...I'm not a good language learner, because I have a bad memory to the new words, especially the strange sounds. But luckily, English is not as complex as other language..." (wn)

"...to be candid, I don't think I have a sensitive feeling about language. Sometimes I cannot express myself well even in Chinese. Despite this, I have tried my best to perform well during the course." (my)

"When asked whether I am a good language learner, my answer probably will be 'It depends'. I do regard myself as a good learner when I am reading and listening. But when it comes to vocabulary and speaking, I don't do a good job and I am afraid I never will. (tr)

3. *Evaluation of progress and self-monitoring*

Many students could point out their progress in the various aspects of vocabulary, listening, speaking and writing. Some also gave reasons for their

progress: environment and opportunities for practice, teachers' efforts and peers' encouragement. Often, they feel they have not advanced as much as they hoped in some aspects due to inadequate effort or practice on their part.

Speaking: "The most progress I got is progress in the speaking area. In China, I didn't have the environment to practice my oral English. But in Singapore, there is enough opportunities to speak English. As a result, my speaking really improves." (lgr)

Vocabulary and speaking: "...I only feel a little progress of my English study. Everyday I must remember a lot of new words. I can't bear that. Now I can only remember half of them, and I will forget them very fast. On the other hand, I believe that my spoken English has made a great progress. Now I have more confident when I speak English and I don't feel very nervous." (qg)

Listening and speaking: "As to listening, I'm quite sure I have made a rapid progress unlike before, I become used to the English language and no longer translate it into Chinese when I'm listening to tutors. Sometimes I prefer to listen to the native speakers while going shopping or taking a bus...When I speak...I cannot make use of new words or sentence patterns no matter how many I memory. The reason I guess is lacking of practice." (my)

Listening, speaking and writing: "...I get the most obvious improvement in listening when I watch films...I think my progress is mainly because of the teachers' speaking. They spoke English during the whole course. In some sence, I am forced to get this ability. But I am rather happy with it...I get some confidence on speaking. Because the teachers and classmates are all very kind. They encourage me to speak English...I fail to make improvement in my writing. That's because I didn't pay much attention to my two weak points: vocabulary and grammar...I am too lazy..." (wlb)

Writing: "But when I compared the others' essay with mine, I was shocked. I saw others make full use of the words and collocations we have learned while I only use the simple plain words I have learned in China...I saw the gap and I decided to take a close look at my attitude towards studying English. I find all the tutors are trying to make us progress. But it's only up to us to learn well or not." (hj)

However, some students felt there were insufficient opportunities to practise speaking because, being housed together in the same hostel, they are not compelled to use English more often.

"I made some progress indeed in listening and vocabulary. However, my spoken English is still very poor...I think the most important reason is that we lack of English-speaking environment. We live in a hostel where almost everyone is Chinese and we have no opportunity to speak English." (tr)

"Probably it is because we are still with our Chinese students and we are not compelled to speak English that we cannot see the progress clearly. But learning a language is a process and the improvement must be gradual." (ygy)

Very few reported on-going self-monitoring. Only one clear instance can be quoted:

“Frankly speaking, I reflected often. I often thought about the rate of my study and whether I had a effective way of learning. By doing this, I knew my aims clearly. Apart from that, I adjusted my way of studying from time to time...I was often confused whether I made progress. Maybe I was too eager to develop my level of English. I always thought I had little progress. However, I believed I could manage English if I follow teachers’ and school’s management.” (wwj)

4. *Differences to learning English in China and in Singapore*

Many differences were mentioned: less emphasis on grammar and memorisation of vocabulary, less pressure of constant tests in Singapore than in China. In contrast, there is greater teacher attention due to smaller class size, more emphasis on using English for practical everyday communication, more opportunities for using English in Singapore, and hence a more conducive environment for learning. Most find the situation in Singapore more helpful.

“...in China, most students learning English begin with grammar, while in Singapore we pay less attention to it, but just speak and practice as much as possible. I think it’s mainly because in China we lack of the English speaking surroundings, and we don’t have the chance to speak English, while in Singapore, we can practice English everywhere. So we pick up things involuntarily. And so it is with the vocabulary. So we don’t spent so much time doing our vocabulary work as we did back in China.” (wx)

“In China, we mostly focused on the grammer learning, reading and writing. Sometimes, we also watched movies in English and did some oral practice. In Singapore, we were taught to gain the skill of using English as tool for daily communicating. So we mostly practiced on listening, speaking, reading and writting. We learned these in activities such like ‘role play’, group discussion, discribing...They did help me a lot. At last I was more confident to open my mouth.” (hrt)

“In China, during nine years’ study of English, the purpose is only to face the examinations...We had hardly time to speak in English and the most important factor is that people surrounded are all speaking Chinese...here we get involved in an English-speaking environment. Also classes are more lively and can stimulate our interest to create, so this kind of education is more effective in practice.” (my)

The following excerpt aptly gave a detailed picture of the differences. Besides the factors mentioned in preceding quotes, the diarist touched on differences in terms of materials, teachers’ role and pressure.

“First, compared with one teacher and 50 students in a class in china, we have more teachers but fewer students, which seems more efficient. Second, we have a variety of textbooks and materials...and all...very interesting. Meanwhile, we can have many activities...which is better than the dull method

we used to learn English in China. Through these activities, we not only learn English, but also learn the strategies of talking and group work. Moreover, we established the friendship among SM3 students. Third, the tutors...give us interesting lessons, give us precise feedback...The last difference is that there's less pressure in learning here. We used to be fulfilled with homework and tests in China, but now we only have 5-6 tests...we're no longer forced to memorize a large number of words...Although it is said that "no pressure, no progress", our vocabulary and reading speed is still improved greatly because we learn these in our daily life naturally, by class, by reading...watching English films, and by talking with the natives...I learned a lot of things I'll never learn in China." (wn)

5. Course—how helpful are the various aspects?

Positively, students enjoy the variety of activities provided by the course. One textbook with a visually attractive format and lively approach was a favourite. Some activities (eg. group discussions, projects, films and excursions) were specially mentioned. Students also preferred more familiar topics that allowed meaningful discussion.

"Among the materials, my favourite one is 'Further Communication'. The topics in it are interesting...Besides, it encompasses useful expressions around each topic...and the book is vivid and colourful which provides a strong visual impact. Secondly, we have various activities...I think all of them are helpful...I prefer group discussion, through which I hear different voices because everyone has his own perspective...it gives us an opportunity to not only practice English, but also to understand our friends better and widen our horizons...group discussion help us to form a team and work together for the same sake..." (my)

"...my favourite book is further communication strategies. This book is very interesting, and it has many funny comics and very useful phrase. The conversations in the book are very suitable for us to read. We all talk about the environment, health, economics,...I feel excited when I learn those which I am familiar with. I also like group discussions very much...I can study other classmates' ideas. And I can learn from them...during the bridging course...I learn a lot of new skills to deal with problems and new ways of think." (qg)

"I enjoyed the movie activities and liked "Finding Nemo" and "Troy" very much. Learning Journey also gave me an unforgettable experience to know more about different race of people as well as multiplex culture in Singapore." (hrt)

Negatively, some found the five-month intensive course becoming too routine and tedious. They commented on the lengthy duration, the long hours, the lack of variety and choices, clearly indicating their flagging enthusiasm.

"What made me feel disappointed was we had only one subject to learn...English...At the outset, it was ok. Little by little, I felt bored. After a whole day learning, I didn't feel like learning English. However, I knew I had

to use my spare time to learn English in order to promote progress. Without much passion, sometimes I had to force myself to study." (wwj)

"...learning English in one classroom for half a year really goes beyond me. I feel it a bit tough to sit through a whole day's class by now...I doubt whether it is proper to make our schedules so fixed. We are always asked to do this or that, and seldom can we choose." (ygy)

"The bridging course...succeed in helping us improve our English. Its materials included many parts of life which enlarged our knowledge. But I thought if the activities we had had not repeated so many, we would enjoy them much better. (kyy)

Some also worry if it is a good fit with their future majors:

"...I think the bridging course should provide us more informations in Science and related fields...all of us will major in science, engineering and computing in the future. What we are learning now seems more likely about arts. I really can't help worrying about the difficulties I am going to meet in the not-so-distant-future." (sh)

6. *Teachers' role*

The methodology and approach of tutors were mentioned as important to stimulate interest in lessons. Some students also appreciated their teachers' effort in guiding them towards autonomy. Empathy, kindness and cultural sensitivity in teachers are also qualities that students value.

"I like my tutors, especially Tuesday's and Wednesday's tutors. They...have good and effective ways of teaching. Every week, I was looking forward to attending their classes. Their motives are letting us feeling at home and helping us getting used to the new environment." (wwj)

"...he (one tutor) guided us to know how to make progress and what was right instead of telling us directly. During the process, we learn more let alone [independent?] studying." (wwj)

"And I get so many good teachers. They teach us not only English but also how to be a adult in a different country. They helped us overcome the culture shock..." (wlb)

"I would like to give my most heartfelt thanks to my tutors for their kindness and efficient help..." (hrt)

Students are also motivated by encouragement and praise from tutors.

"Teachers played an important part in my study process. If the teacher cared about me and gave me encouragement even though I didn't do well, I would try my best to make progress...I always got a good mark of the essay for Ms X. It was really good to be praised by teachers." (kyy)

7. Strategies in and out of class

Only a few students reported on consciously using strategies: reading novels and anything else they come across, listening to songs, keeping a vocabulary notebook, raising awareness, speaking English as much as possible. One student asked for language skills strategy training if there are such strategies. Some degree of success was reported.

"...I found out some strategies useful in improving my English, such as reading English books and listening to English songs...I felt relaxed and often absorbed in the materials...if there are some strategies in improving my speaking and vocabulary, I will be more than happy to learn and practise them." (tr)

"...concerning writing, I have kept a vocabulary notebook. Almost everyday, I will put down the new words. When writing, I always remind me of using them and I do. Also, I become aware of some basic format of writing and it helps a lot." (my)

"At first, I was not used to learn English all day...But slowly, I recited English words everyday and try to use them in my articles. The English environment also helped a lot, it force me to use and get in touch with English...I began to pay attention to the English words I've met everyday, such as the ad on buses, shops and words on cola bottle...I learned a lot of words which are used in everyday life. So when I was in class, English is not making me headache so serious as before." (dl)

"...I found one very important thing, that is we should use English as much as possible, and never feel shameful when making mistakes. At the beginning I was afraid of speaking English...However, my seniors told me that was totally wrong. They said: 'no mistakes, no progress.' So...I tried to speak as much as possible, no matter how many mistakes I made. Then I never felt shame any more, instead, I feel more comfortable with English and my spoken English became better." (wx)

But one student seemed frustrated at being unable to find an effective way for vocabulary learning:

"Building vocabularies is very significant in English learning, but until now, I still could not find a effective way to fulfill this task perfectly." (sha)

8. Independence/Autonomy

The only one student who reported explicitly on independent learning reflected that it is important that she learnt how to learn. This indicated metacognitive awareness on her part.

"What's more important was that I learnt how to learn English." (kyy)

9. English and western culture

Very few students mentioned their interest in western culture and see language and culture as related. Some see similarities between Chinese and English.

"Honestly speaking, English was not as easy as I thought before. So many words, so many phrases and even there was only one letter was different, there would be different meaning, which was a little similar with Chinese characters. However, it is still very interesting to learn western culture by learning their language." (kyy)

"...I am curious about the English culture. So far, I haven't got the chance to learn it professionally. It is a pity." (lgr)

10. *Affective factors—enjoyment or dread?*

The diarists mentioned many types of feelings associated with learning English. Positively: enjoyment, growing confidence, interest, (pleasure at the) variety, encouragement when their efforts are praised.

"we have a variety of textbooks and materials...and all...very interesting. Meanwhile, we can have many activities..." (wn)

"Now I have more confident when I speak English and I don't feel very nervous." (qg)

"...It was really good to be praised by teachers." (kyy)

Negatively: dislike of English, fear, shame, regret, frustration, conflict.

"I feel terribly sorry and ashamed because I didn't work hard enough to improve my English...I was too lazy to learn more...I seldom did revision but spent the precious time watching movies or something else unimportant." (sh)

"I feel somewhat awful and upset when realising that for the past 4 months, I was like a sleeping worm." (hj)

"When the life became steady and peaceful, the feeling of lonely and boring made me frustrated. Sometimes, I only did my work mechanically...Sometimes, other problems or affairs might distract my attention and energy, made me unable to devote my heart and soul to study." (dtl)

"Although it is called intensive English course, I think it will be of great help if we can keep happy and relaxed." (ygy)

11. *Other factors (not included in prompts)*

Many students mentioned the camaraderie with group mates and the warm memories associated with the course. They expressed reluctance to part with friends and tutors.

"...I am happy to have the English course. I get many new friends. We study together, laugh together and mature together." (wlb)

"...I dread the ending because I didn't make good use of this opportunity during the last five months and I am unwilling to part with my dear tutors and group members." (tr)

"I am sad because I had to say goodbye to friends and tutors...no matter what one have achieved during this bridging course, he has got priseless memories to cherish for all one's life." (dtl)

"I feel so sorry to say goodbye to all my teachers and classmates. They really let me learn a lot. I think my English has great progress during the 5 months. It is really an unforgettable experience." (dl)

"Moreover, we established the friendship among SM3 students...the tutors... take us out to play, and even invite us to their homes to have meal. I really enjoy the 5 months together with them." (wn)

Another aspect that recurred in the diaries is the emphasis on self-effort and the resolve to continue to learn English, indicating that the students have a longer-term view than the course.

"I told myself that it was time I should do my best to learn English well." (hrt)

"I saw the gap and I decided to take a close look at my attitude towards studying English. I find all the tutors are trying to make us progress. But it's only up to us to learn well or not." (hj)

"I fail to make improvement in my writing. That's because I didn't pay much attention to my two weak points: vocabulary and grammar...I am too lazy..." (wlb)

"In the long run of learning, I will spare no pains to learn English well." (wwj)

"...I should continually practice my listening and speaking English; also I should do as much as possible to enlarge my vocabulary. There is a long way to go in English learning and I think I should make great effort and encourage myself continuously." (wx)

And one student's entry displays both a practical concern for effort and an affective dimension:

"I really think the six-month English course is worthwhile and I am rewarded for my effort, although there are still a lot to improve...I feel a little reluctant to leave...This period of time will be a permanently memorable time in my life." (my)

In summary, the students mentioned all ten factors embedded in the prompts though with varying frequencies. Instrumental motivation to learn English was strong. On the other hand, the diarists did not perceive themselves to be strong in their language learning aptitude. Many of them evaluated their own progress but very few reported consistent self-monitoring. Many also saw the difference between studying English for exams in China and learning English for communication in Singapore. They found the materials and activities of the Intensive English course helpful though some felt it became routine and tedious towards the end. Teachers were important to these ESL learners not only for their professional competence but also for their encouragement. Various language learning strategies were mentioned as helpful. Little was said on independent learning and the connection between language learning and culture. As for

affective factors, both positive and negative feelings were evoked in the learning of English. Two other factors also recurred in the summative diaries: the importance of social support and the belief in effort.

Pedagogical implications

Based on the above findings, I will discuss some pedagogical implications for English courses designed for PRC ESL students at the tertiary level. The discussion follows the same sub-sections as under Findings and Discussion.

1. *The need to develop "multifaceted" motivation*

Some of the students alluded to their eagerness to learn English well in their diary entries. The motivation indicated is mainly instrumental. This aspect of their conceptualization is expected to help with their language learning. However, as noted by Larsen-Freeman, "motivation is multifaceted" (2001, p.19). Moreover, there is an association rather than independence between instrumental and integrative motivation (Clement, Dornyei and Noels, 1994, cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2001). Thus, instrumental motivation alone may be insufficient driving power to sustain the students' enthusiasm over five months and more. As shown in two of the entries, hj and sh ran out of steam before the end of the course. Clearly then, the students have to be encouraged to develop intrinsic motivation so that the desire to learn will come from within themselves as well.

2. *The importance of developing greater confidence*

It is possible that modesty prevented most of the diarists from saying that they were good language learners. Otherwise, the number who reflected this aspect is far fewer than what I observed. In this regard, the students can be encouraged to take a more realistic and optimistic view of their language learning abilities so that they can capitalize on their strengths and develop greater confidence. They can also be praised for their initial small successes and subsequent progress so that they know that their efforts are recognized.

3. *The uses of self-reflection*

This diary entry, written near the end of the course, allowed the students to step back and evaluate their progress. Generally, they found satisfaction in some aspects of their learning. However many also seemed to feel they had "missed the boat" with regard to some other skills. If the students had reflected on their progress regularly, they could most probably have been able to better manage their overall learning. The one student who reported on monitoring her learning regularly "knew [her] aims clearly" and "adjusted [her] way of studying from time to time". Thus, it may be helpful for students to be guided to do the same from the beginning of the course. The effect could be achieved by encouraging/ requiring students to record their evaluations in a journal. They could also discuss

these reflections with their peers and/or tutors and adjust their learning after feedback and further reflection.

4. The "combination" for conducive learning in Singapore

The large portions of some diary entries devoted to the differences between learning English in China and in Singapore clearly show the students' serious reflections and strong feelings about this aspect. Since most of them perceive that they were able to learn better in Singapore, we do well to take note of the factors that seemed to have helped them: small class size (and hence a small teacher-student ratio), helpful materials and activities, committed teachers, a friendly atmosphere, an environment that affords daily exposure to English, and opportunities for authentic learning and practice. These factors should be taken into consideration in the planning of (intensive) English courses to provide the most conducive learning "combination" possible.

5. The helpful aspects of the curriculum

As the students focussed on materials, subjects and activities, the clear indications are that they gravitated towards a lively format, relevant topics and interactive learning. Besides the intellectual challenge and visual appeal, the affective and social dimensions were also important for them to enjoy their learning. Thus, in drawing up the curriculum for an English course to cater to these learners' needs, the teacher/course designer needs to keep these inclinations in mind. The students mentioned that they liked learning from their peers so provision should be made for plenty of opportunities for meaningful exchanges that lead to critical and even creative learning.

6. The support and encouragement of the ESL teacher

The students in this study seem no different from students elsewhere: they appreciate teachers who are efficient, interesting and who help them towards independent learning. But for these students living for the first time in a foreign land, the teachers' personality may be important in helping them to settle down to language learning. An encouraging, patient and culturally sensitive tutor can put struggling learners at ease from the start. Positive feedback from teachers for efforts made, though not necessarily successfully, can go a long way to motivate the discouraged learner to persevere. That teachers' praise has a positive impact on L2 learners was also found to be true in earlier diary studies by Matsumoto (1989) and Bailey (1980, cited in Matsumoto, 1989). Thus, it will be helpful if teachers can be generous though not indiscriminate with their encouragement and praise.

7. The need for training in language learning strategies

The students who mentioned the use of strategies seemed to have stumbled upon the strategies they used. They did not report on any conscious systematic

scheme of language learning strategies. On the other hand, some students asked for instruction on strategies to manage their learning. Thus, it will be helpful to include strategy training initially in their English course and to review them from time to time during the course. Students can be asked to evaluate and report the usefulness of certain strategies. The learners can also be organized into small groups to share the strategies that they themselves have “discovered” or found helpful. In this way, students are better equipped with a repertoire of learning strategies that they can draw upon in different contexts to help them learn more efficiently.

8. The importance of developing greater autonomy

The dearth of entries on striving for independent learning or autonomy may reflect the relatively low priority students attach to this aspect. The students might feel that they were not required to make much effort in this direction since they were to follow a pre-planned intensive course. Surely, the efforts of the curriculum planners and their teachers would guide them towards attaining the required proficiency. Broadly speaking, the implications of autonomy are related to self-monitoring and learning strategies discussed above. In that connection, the students can be encouraged to keep track of their observations, decisions, actions and evaluations by using a language learning diary. One of my previous studies shows that the learner journal is a useful tool to raise EFL/ESL students’ metacognitive awareness of English learning over time (Young & Fong, 2003). Discussions in small groups and as a class can also be organized for students to exchange ideas and views on how they can learn more efficiently in and out of class. This would include feedback on the course syllabus. Students can be encouraged to be more “thinking” learners and reflect on how closely the various phases of the course match the stages of their language development. If learners know that their feedback can lead to modifications, where necessary, which better meet their needs, they may take more initiative for their learning in class.

9. The connection between language learning and culture

Again, very few students reflected on this aspect. It is likely that most of the students are not keen to learn more about western culture through English. Probably, they do not consciously think about the connection between the language and culture. This is more apparent when we recall their mainly instrumental motivation mentioned above. However, it may be helpful to raise students’ awareness of the links between language and culture as this may help to raise their intrinsic motivation for learning the language. One way this could be done is by drawing their attention to the parallel connection between Chinese and the Chinese culture. So much more of a language can be unlocked when one has the keys to its culture.

10. The importance of affective factors for motivation

The affective factors appear to have a big impact on the language learning process. Those who reported positive feelings of enjoyment, confidence, interest, encouragement, etc., seemed more optimistic and eager in continuing with their learning. On the other hand, those who reported negative feelings of boredom, frustration, regret and tension seemed hampered in their way forward. Clearly, the affective states of the students do merit the teachers' and authorities' attention as their emotions can affect their motivation and effort. The diary entries suggest that there must be a balance between enjoyment and tension, encouragement and challenge, to help the students learn more effectively.

11. The need for social support and the belief in effort

The sense of camaraderie and reluctance to part expressed in many of the entries reflect the importance of the social dimension in language learning. A warm, conducive atmosphere probably produces a multiplier effect on students learning a second language, especially in an unfamiliar environment. The connection is well-summed up by dl:

"I feel so sorry to say goodbye to all my teachers and classmates. They really let me learn a lot. I think my English has great progress during the 5 months. It is really an unforgettable experience."

The other recurring theme is the emphasis on self-effort and continual learning. This indicates the students' belief that one's achievement in language learning depends very much on one's (sustained) effort. Wachob (2004) considers this belief as "a basic notion" for Chinese learners: "...anyone can learn, given the proper stimulus." She contrasts this with "Western attitudes" that are "more likely to tap 'ability' as a major factor in learning success" (p. 9).

To sum up, it is important to encourage a supportive learning atmosphere by cultivating harmonious relationships that can extend beyond the classroom. It is also be useful to harness the students' belief in self-effort and continual learning to encourage them to persevere when they are fazed or faltering. They may also need to be reminded to take a longer term view of learning and not be discouraged when they do not achieve the results they expect or desire.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of the summative diary entries of seventeen PRC SM3 students enrolled in an Intensive English course, we have embarked on our journey to learn more about the English language learning experiences of PRC ESL learners. We are given a glimpse of the diarists' motivation, beliefs, attitudes, strategies and affective factors.

Instrumental motivation was strong for these ESL learners. As a result, they evaluated and monitored their own progress in the various language skills. Generally, they preferred the teaching and learning methods for English at university than in their high school in China. Thus, they thought that the intensive

English course was helpful on the whole. The teacher's role remained an important one for these students, as documented in the literature on the Chinese culture of learning. The methodology, skills and personality of the teacher all had an impact on the learning outcomes of these learners.

Few of the students mentioned using language learning strategies deliberately. They were also not forthcoming about autonomy; perhaps they had not given enough thought to this aspect. Not many reflected on the relationship between English and western culture. The students expressed a wide range of positive and negative emotions associated with learning English. In other factors mentioned, the students stressed their bonding with their group members, perhaps due to the fact that they were far away from family and friends. They also reiterated the importance of effort on their part to succeed in their learning.

Some pedagogical implications were then drawn based on this profile of the subjects, with a view to helping future ESL learners benefit from their English learning.

The study is limited as only one summative diary entry per student was used to gather information towards the end of the course of study. A more complete picture could probably be obtained through triangulation and over time. Nonetheless, it is hoped that the findings presented here will be useful for teachers, curriculum designers and textbook writers in their efforts to meet the language learning needs of tertiary level PRC and other ESL learners.

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