Chinese-Canadian students' language learning experience in Canadian Academe
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Executive Summary

This report emerges from a research project in Sociology 356 designed to examine how a language barrier affects Chinese-Canadian students' experiences of SFU. It presents research findings based on interviews and participant observations conducted with seven Chinese-Canadian students currently pursuing business degrees at Simon Fraser University. The intention of this report is to enhance faculty and administrators’ understandings of how Chinese-Canadian students' language learning difficulties influence their post secondary academic choices and to identify and contextualize a number of factors that contribute to Chinese - Canadian students' inability to learn and use English.

Key Findings:
- Related literature suggests that, among all teaching difficulties encountered in higher education, faculty identify language barriers as the greatest factor that makes teaching difficult (Branche, 2007). My study suggests this is supported by student impressions as well: all of my interview subjects also indicated that language barriers drastically reduce their interactions with the instructor and other students.
- Five respondents (of 7) reported that their anxiety about expressing ideas in English in class was due to a combination of the classroom environment itself, coupled with classmates' reactions to their inferior English skills, and instructors’ habits around addressing questions to students in the classroom.
- All my interview subjects considered good academic grades and the completion of their degrees as the primary purpose of post-secondary education but noted that learning English, in their opinions, is secondary to earning good grades. In fact, nearly all my interview subjects indicated no interest in studying English and didn’t believe learning better English would make a difference in their academic performances.
- Six respondents agreed that the most intense English learning period they had experienced in Canada involved studying for the required university entry exam. Respondents noted, however, that it was their perception that these entry exam preparations had no significant impact on their ability to use English or to speak English in their later academic careers.
- My interview subjects mostly agreed that the current support for English learning from Canadian government and educational institutions is not sufficient to improve their English learning.
- Respondents noted strong family and cultural values influenced both their choices of majors and their behaviour within classes. These values resulted in students choosing certain majors (despite
a personal lack of interest in them), and, in classrooms, behaving in ways intended to imply respect for teachers by not questioning them, not asking for classroom activities to be slowed down, and not speaking if others were also not speaking.

- In selecting a major at SFU, six respondents indicated that curriculum requirements for different majors including the amount of writing assignments in courses and the grading distribution for participation marks and presentations were “very important” in deciding which program they should major in. Respondents further noted the discrepancy between math-oriented majors and writing-intensive majors. The lack of writing-intensive assignments in math-oriented majors made respondents more inclined to take math-oriented majors.

- Respondents noted the Business Program is popular among Chinese-Canadian students in Canada, both to avoid writing-intensive courses, and for social reasons noted above.

The report concludes that Chinese-Canadian students' language barrier issues in Canadian higher education are complex and require thoughtful interventions from all parties to increase access, participation, and learning. Although the sample size of my study is small, the findings offer insights into Chinese-Canadian students’ inability and unwillingness to improved use of English in their undergraduate degrees.

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Introduction

Chinese-Canadian students are the largest student group among all post-secondary students studying in Vancouver. Chinese-Canadian students are often classified as “model minority” students since Chinese-Canadian students are competitive in terms of university entry and also consistently achieve high grades despite language barriers (Nakanishi, 1989).

There are two types of Chinese-Canadian students - students of Chinese origins that are born in Canada, and recently immigrated Chinese-Canadian students (Laban, 1998). While the former might perceive English as their native language, the latter group perceives English as an additional or second language. Hence the level of English proficiency is significantly lower for recent Chinese-Canadian migrant students than for Canadian born Chinese-Canadian students.

Currently, at most Canadian post-secondary institutions, non-dominant English-speaking students are admitted on the basis of English proficiency exams designed to evaluate potential students' English proficiency. As these entry exams may not be sufficient to assess students' true English skills, there are also often programs offered for students with English difficulties to ease these students' transition to Canadian academic life (Cho & Roberts, 2008). This study however offers some insights into why such measures are largely wasted since they do not address how language barriers affect these students and how these students react to language barriers by avoiding certain disciplines and courses and seeking to reduce interactions with some other students. Given the increased recruitment of Chinese-Canadian students to SFU and more broadly to the Canadian education system in general, it is important to more carefully examine the dynamics of the Chinese-Canadian student experience in undergraduate education.

Academic context of the study: A brief review of trends in the literature
One of the challenges of conducting a literature review in this area is that studies focus on American, rather than Canadian, examples, and also tend to gloss all EAL populations together rather than focus specifically on Chinese-speaking students. However, with that caveat, it is fair to say that many studies focus on a challenge commonly faced by students who have recently immigrated: learning a new language. Language barriers have long been a subject of educational research, and generally have focused on one's inability to acquire language skills, but that seems an incomplete treatment of the phenomenon. This literature review therefore highlights a few published studies from three disciplines - general education, psychology and migration studies. While research in migration studies identifies how external (i.e. environmental) and internal (i.e. personal values) variables affect recent immigrant students’ progress in learning English, research in psychology emphasizes how second language learning experiences trigger negative emotions. Studies in education examine the trend of ethnic minority students' academic choices and performances and focus on the importance of creating a desirable language-learning environment for students who experience language barriers. The issues addressed in these three disciplines are all important and considering them together lends more understanding to how students confront language barrier problems in higher education.

Ghuman (1999) highlights the significance of how informal socialization affects the progress of Asian students' language-learning progress in North America and examines how different factors such as the age of student and the degree of a school's demographic diversity affect a student's desire to learn English. Asian students' fear to be labeled as terrible English speakers and their fear of being rejected by (native) English speakers lead to their unwillingness to communicate in English and their preference to speak instead in a mother tongue with other Asian students. Hsia & Nakanishi’s (1989) research indicates ethnic minority students have higher confidence when speaking in their mother tongues but also pinpoints how the ongoing lack of English usage can gradually deteriorate the ability to acquire English oral skills and delay chances to assimilate within western society. Both studies underline the importance of communicative engagement for Asian students to integrate into western society and to learn a new language.

Bernal (2003) examines how students' language-learning experiences trigger negative emotions and reveals that students' contact with English speakers is associated with a high degree of anxiety and fear. Bernal indicates students' inabilities to present their ideas in speech leads to frustration and embarrassment, but this leads students to reduce contact with English speakers in order to reduce chances of being teased and rejected. Rhodes & Ortiz’ (2005) study, on the other hand, identifies that the impact of a second language learning experience can be both positive and negative. This study presents how culturally and linguistically diverse students react differently to second language acquisition. It indicates that a high frequency of communicative engagement in English can reduce students' negative emotions but active avoidance in speaking English can further reduce student's confidence in future language-learning.

Some studies note the correlations between Asian students’ enrollment in post-secondary environments with their choice of disciplines and degree programs. Eugenia's (1995) article reviews data from several post secondary institutions and concludes that, overwhelmingly, the number of Asian-American students' enrollment in North America corresponds to a
disproportionate ratio of students in math-oriented disciplines. Cho's (2006) research also indicates that a high proportion of Asian American students major in business and science. Although both articles do not indicate how language barrier problems affect academic choices, they do provide valuable statistics that present the trend of Asian American students’ academic choices.

Details of the study

In order to better understand the Chinese-Canadian students' language learning experience, this study employed both semi-structured interviews and participant observation to allow Chinese-Canadian students to identify factors that have affected their English learning experience in order to comprehend the realities of their experiences. Semi-structured interviews and participant observation were conducted in person at SFU Bennett Library during the period of June 30 to July 18, 2011. Questions of semi-structured interviews were aimed to ascertain the Chinese-Canadian students' linguistic backgrounds, their reasons for choosing their majors, and to articulate the English learning experiences they encountered in Canadian post-secondary institutions (including SFU). The goal of the participant observation component of the research was to observe Chinese-Canadian students’ interactions using English.

All seven Chinese-Canadian students (four males and three females) who agreed to be interviewed were randomly recruited by verbal requests in the West Mall building at SFU Burnaby Campus since most of the business and statistics classes take place in that building. (This and the library were also the locations in which I made my informal observations). I indicated the purpose of the interview was to investigate factors that contributed to the choice of their current majors and to identify learning difficulties they experienced in university environment. The students were, on average, 22 years of age. They were all studying full time in their final year of undergraduate business studies. Despite the fact they were all majoring in Business, they concentrated on various sub disciplines - finance, international business, decision sciences and accounting. All seven students had been born in Mainland China, and all spoke Mandarin as a first language. Their years of residency in Canada ranged at time of interview from four years to seven years. Five interview subjects resided in Richmond and two in Vancouver. Their language proficiency ranged from basic to intermediate. In order to confirm their major selection and their student status, all interviewees were required to bring their unofficial transcripts and degree progress reports to the interviews. Semi structured interviews were conducted in a group study room inside the library. The group study room is a secured and silent area and it is a perfect setting for an interview. Interviews varied in length from 45 minutes to 2 hours and 15 minutes.

All interview subjects gave detailed accounts of their painful English learning experiences and the reasons for their academic choices. (Note: In this report, respondents’ comments appear in italics and the names listed are pseudonyms). For all respondents, the language barrier referred not only to their inability to express ideas verbally in English but also to an unwillingness to use English in public. The anxious behavior they reported (or I observed) was multidimensional and emerged from both personal variables (i.e. cultural values and parental expectations) and situational variables (i.e. surrounding environment and schooling environment). My interviews suggest that there are several major factors contributing to the respondents’ lack of
motivation to learn English and to actively avoid practicing English.

Issues of socialization

While these Chinese-Canadian students reported not feeling comfortable speaking in English in an academic environment, they also indicated they were unwilling to socialize with English-speaking peers and tended to only make friends that spoke Mandarin. This was further borne out in my observations of interactions of Chinese-Canadian students with others. The Chinese-Canadian students tended to demonstrate different degrees of negative emotions when interacting with English speaking students in both verbal and non-verbal dimensions. These negative emotions were displayed in three forms - body language, facial expression and conversation fluency. Physical gestures such as rubbing fingers and fiddling shirt collars were observed frequently during the Chinese-Canadian students’ interactions with English speaking students. As noted in the psychology literature, such physical gestures can signify students' lack of confidence and anxiety (Horstmann, 2003). Further, some of the observed facial expressions included fake smiles, frowning and using a minimum degree of eye contact. These facial expressions suggest an unwillingness to engage in conversation (Bavelas, 1992). Conversation fluency is also at issue, and can be measured in terms of response time and the structures of conversation. In observation sessions, I noted Chinese-Canadian students tended to have slower response times and exhibited caution when responding to English speaking students. They frequently used simple vocabularies and sentence structures to respond to questions. It would seem such lack of communicative engagement in English might be a key reason impeding Chinese-Canadian students’ chances of English learning experiences.

Classroom Experiences

"Communicating in English is a nightmare." (Tracy)

In the interviews, the Chinese-Canadian students placed emphasis on how inferior English skills affected them negatively in both formal classroom and informal socialization experiences. Most of the interview subjects preferred not to participate in classroom discussions for two major reasons - fear of embarrassment in front of classmates and teachers, and fear of making a negative impression in class that might impact their grades. Many interview subjects indicated their past schooling experience with English-speaking populations had increased their fear of using English in public. Performing classroom tasks such as presentations and seeking to participate in English rather than in a native language triggered anxiety in these interview subjects - a finding that is in keeping with previous studies (Martines, 2008). Self-reflection that they possessed “strong accents” made students feel humiliated in front of classmates. Classmates' criticisms further lowered their confidence in speaking English and further increased their preference for non-participation in classroom.

"Tutorials are the worst. I think it was an English course. There [were] so many white students. I [didn’t] want to participate at all but I [had to]. The instructor allotted 15% of the grade to participation." (Fanny)

"I have taken one writing course at SFU and it [was] a nightmare. So many people [were]
looking at me and the classmates [were] not Chinese. I [was] so nervous and my presentation [was] all messed up. Instructors [asked] questions suddenly in the middle of the presentation. That [would] never happen in my business presentation.” (Jacky)

These interview subjects all held the belief that teachers hold hierarchical power over students and hence students should not be asking questions that challenged the teacher's authority in a classroom setting. In addition, they believed remaining silent as the proper classroom conduct and indicated a form of respect to instructors. While some interview subjects preferred to ask questions regarding class content after class, others did not want to ask at all because they feared making negative impressions in front of professors. Some interview subjects indicated that professors communicated course content too quickly but that they felt ashamed and embarrassed for not understanding the content like other students. Even though students struggled with understanding the course content and completing assignments, they did not want to appear to other students that they needed to delay the pace of the class. Many interview subjects considered classroom experiences with English speaking population as both foreign and hostile.

"The problem is that I don't actually understand the instructor's questions. He [spoke] too fast and I [didn’t] have enough time to translate the question back to Chinese. The classroom environment [was] hostile. When I [spoke] English, I just [kept] lowering my head to avoid their stares. The instructor [would] make it worse when he ask me to repeat the answer." (Tracy)

"They comment on my accent. Not behind my back but in front of me." (Jacky)

"If I want to ask a question, I will wait to ask the professor after class so people will not hear me speaking English." (Jeffery)

Larger social contexts for Chinese culture

"All my friends are Chinese and my classmates are Chinese." (Tracy)

It is common for immigrant students to feel uneasy in front of a large population of English speaking classmates and professors. Hence English acquisition should be one of the most important adjustments for recently immigrating Chinese-Canadian students. Interview subjects, however, indicated they didn’t feel the need to study English in the Metro Vancouver region. Some interview subjects explained they weren’t exposed to English-dominant environments for various reasons - the lack of socialization with English peers in school, the influence of home environment and the massive Chinese population in their communities. Post-secondary institutions in Vancouver include a substantive Chinese-Canadian student population. Chinese-Canadian students tend to join other Chinese-Canadian students to make themselves feel more comfortable in school; in these social gatherings, they speak in their mother tongue in order to assimilate to the school community quicker.

Speaking in a mother tongue results in slowing down students' progress in learning English. Furthermore, as Pickering (2009) explores, a lack of opportunity to communicate in English further decreases students’ confidence in using English in the future. My interview subjects told me that they speak in their mother tongue at home with their parents as their parents do not know much English. This further reduces students’ chances to practice speaking English.
In addition, respondents mentioned that their homes have installed several Chinese television stations (Fairchild TV and City TV) and so rarely watch (English) Canadian television for entertainment or news.

"My parents speak to me in native tongue because they don't know English as well." (Natalie)

"There are actually Chinese newspapers, books, magazines and four Mandarin Television channels." (Leon)

In addition, five of my seven interview subjects live in Richmond, an area that has the greatest concentrations of Chinese-Canadians in Canada. There are many Chinese restaurants and malls in Richmond that form primary socialization sites for students. According to the students, their heavy reliance on their Chinese communities outside of school, combined with speaking their mother tongue at home diminishes their need (and motivation) to learn or practice English.

Chinese values and parental expectations

When encountering language difficulties, my Chinese-Canadian students indicated they did not wish to seek help from school or from friends due to various Chinese values. To them, seeking help means they need to display their weakness to others and they fear that this will shame themselves and their families.

"My English is very bad and I pass by Student Learning Common a lot. But I cannot go in. People might see me and they would know I need help. My parents might know and they will be so disappointed at me. It is easier if I just don't speak English. No one will know that I don't know English." (Tracy)

Some interview subjects choose to major in business because the Business faculty has the most "Chinese" environment. The formation of a Chinese community within the school landscape eases their anxiety about attending classes. This is also in keeping with a core Chinese value of being in a collective community (Minichiello, 2001). My respondents indicated that the percentage of Chinese-Canadian students in the Business faculty is exceptionally high and therefore, students can communicate in Chinese instead of English, as well as feel safe and comfortable, due to the sheer size of Chinese student population in Business.

"I am not good at English anyway so why not? I speak terrible English and I am aware of it. Major in business allows me to be with my friends. I know I don't have friends in every class. But at least everyone is Chinese." (Tim)

As noted in the key findings, parental expectations are also an important key influencing students in choosing their majors. Most Chinese parents prefer their children to enter math-oriented majors in order to secure a job after graduation. Since a son's obedience to his father is crucial in terms of Chinese values (Rhodes et al, 2005), following parents’ wishes ties to an ethical system which maintains the social harmony of Chinese society (Aubert & Daigle, 2004). Given their personal preferences, some of my interview subjects did not want to major in business, but decided to become business majors due to their parents.
"I guess I always wanted to study Art History but my parents will not like that. My parents say there is no job for Art History major. I guess there is no other option than majoring in business. At least there will be many Chinese accompanying me." (Natalie)

Some respondents mentioned their parents compared their grades to their relatives' daughters’ and sons’ grades in an effort to make them feel more pressured to do well. In some cases, respondents indicated their parents did not take into account the difficulties for their sons and daughters to adjust to a new schooling environment and to learn a new language; instead, they tended to accuse their children of not trying hard enough. Students often, in turn, blamed themselves if they failed to reach their parents’ expectations. These factors also played into choosing Business majors, as these students were affected by their parents' attitudes and to the need to take courses that offered them higher grades. As SFU’s business program curriculum does not have many writing-intensive courses, students decided that being in a Business major will lead to achieving better grades and living in a happier school environment. All of my interview subjects indicated the importance of honoring the family name and, since they believed by studying math-oriented majors they were likelier to achieve academic success than by studying social science, they chose Business. None of them imagined that inferior English skills would prevent them from achieving academic excellence.

How language barriers affect post-secondary academic choices

To understand how language barriers affect post-secondary academic choices, it is necessary to understand the role that English proficiency plays in higher education. English proficiency is the key prerequisite for entry to post-secondary institutions. At SFU, as at other institutions of higher education, students are required to have proficiency in English in order to master ideas and concepts and to articulate ideas in writing. Limited English skills affect students in many ways including understanding course material, performing classroom tasks and completing assignments. Some Chinese-Canadian students express frustration because professors do not understand how language barriers impact their learning needs. Constantly experiencing high levels of anxiety and stress at home (from parents), in the classroom, and within the general English-peaking population, can influence students to decide to switch from social science majors to math-oriented majors to prevent declines in academic achievement, and to preserve more familial and social coherence.

Conclusion:

This report has presented how Chinese-Canadian students' language difficulties affect their learning experiences in Canadian Academe, including in making their academic choices of social science and arts versus math-oriented majors. The research is important since little qualitative research has been conducted on Chinese-Canadian students' English learning experiences. It is hoped that this report helps provide faculty in arts and social sciences more understanding as to how they might re-think the conduct of discussions and tutorials in their own courses and thus play a role in improving their Chinese-Canadian students' language learning experiences.

Works Cited


