

English Skill Profiles of Chinese Students at Duke Kunshan University (DKU)

Don Snow, Linda Zhang, Kris Hiller

Introduction: At DKU most undergraduates will be Chinese students who learned English as a second language and who have not previously studied in English-medium schools, so it is useful for DKU faculty to have some understanding of the typical English skill profiles of these students. Other international students who have not previously studied in English-medium schools may have skill profiles similar to those described below, but here we will focus on Chinese students because they are the majority at DKU and also because useful generalizations can be made about this population.

Most students in China begin studying English in Grade Three (primary school) and some begin even earlier, so it is safe to assume that all Chinese students at DKU have studied English for at least nine years and probably more. However, prior to coming to DKU, the English study efforts of Chinese students have been directed primarily toward passing standardized tests replete with multiple choice items, and many Chinese students have little experience using English for actual communication, much less for academic study. This results in an English skill profile that, while fairly impressive for second language learners, does not entirely match the English skill set required for English-medium university programs, and there are some “gaps” – i.e., areas where most Chinese students need to build specific English skills further in order to effectively handle the demands of university courses taught in English (see below).

At DKU all undergraduate students who did not do their secondary schooling in English will be assigned to an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) track and are required to take four EAP courses. These courses will help EAP-track students build specific academic English skills, primarily academic writing but also other skills such as academic reading, oral presentations, and discussion skills. However, during their first two years at DKU, students will still be taking these courses and polishing their academic English skills, rather than having already finished that process.

So the first reason it is important for all faculty to understand where the “gaps” lie is that Chinese students in first- and second-year courses will still be transitioning toward a strong academic command of English, and this is a process in which all courses can and should be helpful. We do not suggest that all courses should become language courses, but we do suggest that the value of DKU courses will be enhanced if they are intentionally designed to help Chinese students hone their academic English skills and, more broadly, to help all students build strong written and oral communication skills.

Based on the experience of DKU’s Global Learning Semester program, it is likely that many of the Chinese students who come to DKU do so in large part in order to prepare for graduate school abroad, and from their perspective one of the most valued outcomes of a DKU education is preparation for the academic demands of English-medium graduate programs. Also, the more capable and comfortable DKU’s

Chinese students are in English, the more they will gain from DKU courses, and the more they will contribute to the DKU program by participating actively in class, bringing their perspectives and experiences into courses.

A second reason that DKU faculty should understand Chinese students' English skill profiles is that this helps faculty design effective course and lesson plans. Here the goal is not to make courses easier – coursework at DKU should challenge Chinese students linguistically as well as intellectually. However, there is a difference between a course that challenges and stretches Chinese students' academic English skills and one that simply overwhelms them. Careful attention to course design can lead to courses that help not only Chinese students but all DKU students learn more effectively.

Below we offer some concrete suggestions for course design. While here the suggestions are presented as tips on how to make courses better for Chinese students, the great majority of these strategies would enhance the quality of courses for all students, no matter what their first language is.

Reading: Many Chinese students can read fairly sophisticated English passages with reasonable sentence-level understanding, especially if they are given a generous amount of time and access to a dictionary. However, many students

- ❖ Read fairly slowly, and not very efficiently.
- ❖ Are not used to reading texts that are more than a few pages long.
- ❖ May have some trouble “seeing the forest for the trees” – distinguishing between major and minor points and discerning the underlying purposes of a text.
- ❖ Have limited experience engaging texts critically.
- ❖ Have been trained to read every text slowly and carefully, pausing frequently to look up unfamiliar words and write down Chinese translations. Also, they may not have learned to skim texts or read in a more rapid, extensive style, and may initially feel very uncomfortable doing so.

Recommendations:

- ❖ When possible, choose readings that are reasonably reader-friendly rather than ones that are especially dense and/or opaque, especially during the first weeks of a course. While students do need to learn to read typical academic texts in English, we also want to make sure that at least some of the reading experiences they have at DKU will leave them with a feeling of accomplishment.
- ❖ Try to distribute reading assignments so that on days when the readings are relatively dense and difficult, the overall amount of reading – or other homework – assigned is somewhat lower.
- ❖ When assigning readings, also suggest strategies students should use in completing the reading assignments. For example, if you don't expect students to read and master every detail of a particular text, tell them that, and give them a little guidance as to how to be selective about where they should read carefully for strong detail-level understanding and where they should read more quickly to get the general idea.
- ❖ Explicitly explain what role readings play in your course and why they are important, especially if what you cover during in-class lectures or discussions

doesn't always closely follow the reading assignments. In Chinese university courses, lectures often cover essentially the same points as the reading assignments, so unless you explain otherwise some Chinese students may assume that readings not discussed in class are not very important – and not worth investing effort in.

- ❖ Rather than providing interpretations to students through lectures, build opportunities into your courses for students to work in groups to discuss and interpret texts and concepts from the readings and share their interpretations with the class.
- ❖ If there are many Chinese or EAP students in your course, you might explicitly encourage them to have a strategy for learning and reviewing new vocabulary, especially vocabulary relevant to your course.
- ❖ If many of the Chinese or EAP students are having serious difficulty with the readings you assign, consider occasionally holding extra sessions to help them understand the readings (rather than using class time to address such problems).

Speaking: Most Chinese students at DKU can manage one-to-one daily conversation in English quite well. It can be easy to assume, therefore, that they possess the high-level speaking skills needed to be successful in academic contexts. However, many students

- ❖ Find speaking in English rather uncomfortable, requiring considerable effort.
- ❖ Have limited confidence when speaking in English, which may cause them to avoid opportunities to speak rather than seeking such opportunities out.
- ❖ Do not yet express their ideas very fluently or smoothly, and have trouble holding their own in classroom discussions with highly skilled English speakers.
- ❖ Assume that it is not normal or appropriate to ask many questions in class; they may feel this isn't very good use of class time, and that it may even reflect badly on them, indicating inadequate preparation.

Recommendations:

- ❖ While most Chinese students are able and willing to contribute to in-class discussions, many are not accustomed to jumping in immediately when a faculty member makes a very broad invitation like “Does anyone have anything to say?” Similarly (as with many advanced-English users), they normally won't respond immediately to “Does anyone have a question?”
 - Strategies that are more likely to elicit participation include
 - “Take a minute and think of a comment or question - then I'll ask you to share.”
 - “Think for a minute, turn to a partner and share your ideas; then we will have general classroom discussion.” (Think-pair-share.)
 - “What part of the reading (lecture, etc.) would you like me to explain more?” (Instead of “Any questions?”)
 - “Who agrees with this? Disagrees? Now, give me some reasons why...”
 - You might also specifically include “asking questions” in your syllabus or rubrics as part of grading for classroom participation.
- ❖ Make use of small group or pair discussion activities. These give Chinese students a chance to formulate ideas before they have to explain them in English to a large

group; by asking each pair or group to report you can also ensure that many students get to speak.

- ❖ In general classroom discussion, find ways to ensure that speaking turns aren't entirely dominated by the students who are most comfortable in English. Make a point of occasionally giving quieter students a chance to speak – which may mean slowing down the pace of the conversation and waiting. Also encourage students to be conscious of this issue when engaging in small group discussions. One way to do this is to assign roles in groups, with one role being the person who makes sure all group members are heard from (other roles can include someone to keep the group on task, a note-taker, and a speaker to share the group's idea with the class).
- ❖ Explain to students why you want them to ask questions in class and/or contribute their ideas to classroom discussion.
- ❖ If classroom participation is a component of the grade, ensure that students whose first language isn't English aren't penalized simply for being slower when it comes to competing for in-class speaking opportunities, especially in large group free-for-all discussions.

Listening: Most Chinese students at DKU can understand spoken English well enough to function in face-to-face conversations with people who make an effort to speak clearly and less rapidly. Again, this facility may make it harder to notice difficulties they may have. However, many of them

- ❖ Have difficulty following lectures if there are complicating factors such as unfamiliar accents, unfamiliar topics or cultural allusions, frequent and rapid topic changes, many new words, lots of colloquial or informal language (which isn't usually taught in English course textbooks), or noisy environments.
- ❖ Have difficulty understanding rapid natural spoken English, especially during free-flowing classroom discussions between advanced English users.
- ❖ Are somewhat nervous about joining conversations dominated by advanced English users, where they may be embarrassed if they have trouble understanding.

Recommendations:

- ❖ Before lectures, preview the main points so that students have a framework that facilitates guessing and comprehension during the lecture; similarly it helps if you provide a list of key technical words you will use.
- ❖ Check comprehension. When simply asked "Do you understand?" most students naturally nod "Yes" whether they understand or not. Alternative strategies:
 - Ask which parts of the lecture students want/need to have explained more fully (i.e., assuming that there are indeed parts they need more elaboration on).
 - Check comprehension by asking students to tell you what the main points of the talk were.
 - Ask specific question to check students' understanding of key points and concepts – and to engage them in the lecture – such as, "so what happens to the citrate that is formed at the beginning of the citric acid cycle" or "is it true that [...]?" or "what's the difference between X and Y?"

Writing: Most Chinese students at DKU can produce a coherent essay on a general topic; this is part of their secondary school training and testing. However, many students

- ❖ Have been conditioned by previous experience to view writing primarily as task fulfillment rather than as communicating ideas to an interested audience.
- ❖ Have not written course papers (term papers) before; in particular have not written papers in which they need to state positions and develop (explain, support) these positions.
- ❖ Tend to state ideas/points briefly in very general terms rather than developing ideas in depth.
- ❖ Have some difficulty developing a point in a tightly logical manner.
- ❖ Have not been taught how to summarize or paraphrase without plagiarizing, and how to handle citations and references.
- ❖ Make many word usage and grammar errors. Generally these accuracy problems are not so serious that they impede communication, but they are frequent enough to be distracting and to create a bad impression. (“Hmmm... If this student’s English isn’t very good, probably the ideas aren’t so good either....”)

Recommendations:

- ❖ Early in the course, assign a short essay on a topic such as “What do you expect to get from this course?” This familiarizes you with students and gives you an initial impression of their writing skills; it also gives them the experience of writing a genuinely communicative text.
- ❖ Avoid assignments – especially major papers – in which students only submit one final draft. Instead, include steps before the final draft such as outlines, in-class presentations, or even rough drafts that give students a chance to get feedback from the faculty member and/or each other before writing the final draft. Such steps also help students learn how to generate and hone their own ideas, rather than drawing heavily on secondary sources.
- ❖ Give fairly specific writing assignments rather than just giving students a topic to write on. For example, rather than a prompt like “Write a 3-page paper on some aspect of pollution in China,” use a prompt like: “Li’s 1993 article advocates two specific measures that should be taken to reduce water pollution in the Jiangnan region. Analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the measures Li proposes, state your own position, and make a case for it.” Specific assignments like this make it easier for students to find direction; they also minimize the temptation to borrow heavily from source materials.
- ❖ When marking papers, make a special effort to point out interesting ideas that would benefit from further development (additional explanation, support, specific details, and/or examples).
- ❖ When marking papers, underline or highlight some inaccuracies in students’ English. You certainly don’t need to correct students’ mistakes for them, but occasionally pointing out problems helps students know what they need to work on. For example, you might mark several problems in the first paragraph or so, and then ask students to check the rest of their paper for similar problems.