



Assessing the English Language Needs and Challenges of Chinese Undergraduates in Thai Universities

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Abstract

Background and Aim: Studying undergraduate in Thai universities is a popular option for Chinese students. International programs covering popular fields not only meet the goals of Chinese students but are also seen by Chinese students as the best way to harvest specialized knowledge and English ability because of the all-English teaching course. However, since the English language is the only communication medium for Chinese students, there are some difficulties and problems encountered by these students who are not English native speakers. Therefore, this study aims to explore the specific English language skills Chinese undergraduates need and the challenges they face in academic and everyday contexts in Thai universities.

Materials and Methods: Participants involved 80 Chinese undergraduates studying four-year international programs in Thai public universities with an IELTS overall score of 5. Employing a mixed-methods approach, we distributed a questionnaire based on a five-point Likert scale to all participants and conducted focus group interviews with 12 participants.

Results: Findings indicate a critical need to enhance writing and speaking for academic success, with an emphasis on specific-field terminology, and to improve listening and speaking skills for daily life communication. Besides, the lack of academic writing strategies and English communication in official institutions are the problems that undergraduates encounter in academic and daily contexts respectively.

Conclusion: The study underscores the urgent need for tailored EAP courses that address both academic and everyday English use, with a particular focus on writing with academic vocabularies and enhancing communicative competence in key scenarios like immigration processing.

Keywords: Needs analysis; EAP course; Academic communication challenges; Chinese undergraduates in Thailand; English language skills

Introduction

With the advancement of globalization, English is also regarded as the common language of instruction in international education, world countries introduced English courses at all levels of the educational system, especially at the university level (Nickerson, 2012; Barrett, 2016; Lamri, 2016). Higher education in many countries, such as Thailand, has developed a range of English courses and programs. Meanwhile, due to frequent exchanges and cooperation between universities in different nations, there is a gradual increase in the proportion of international students at Thai universities. Therefore, there is no doubt that English language is a necessary ability for non-native English speakers who study overseas (Wang, 2013; Li, 2013).

In recent years, Thailand's higher education institutions have been offering a series of international programs to recruit a large number of students from other countries to study in Thailand. Statistics from China's Ministry of Education (2019) indicate that Thailand is one of the most sought-after destinations among Asian countries for plenty of Chinese undergraduates. The main reason for this trend is that students can not only study specialized courses in their target fields but more importantly, it is beneficial for students to enhance and strengthen their related English abilities as the communicative medium is English (Coleman, 2006; Li, 2013).

Due to the singleness of the language of communication and instruction, only English, international programs from universities around the world stipulate admission requirements of English proficiency. English proficiency certificate is recognized as one of the admission criteria to emphasize and judge candidates' English proficiency qualification, such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). Equally, Chinese students are required to meet university requirements for English proficiency before they can be accepted into international programs.





Additionally, various international programs involving fields in arts, science, management, business, and so forth are provided to students from undergraduate to doctoral level in Thai universities. According to the curriculum syllabus of certain programs, English writing and speaking tasks were emphasized in academic study, such as writing term papers and project presentations. More importantly, core courses of specialized knowledge put forward higher English performance for students in English skills and specific field contexts. Meanwhile, fluent English communication in social contexts also has a significant impact on the smooth running of daily life, especially for Chinese students living in non-native-speaking societies.

However, for Chinese students who are exposed to a full English learning and high-frequency English environment for the first time, language problems encountered in learning are bound to hinder and adversely affect students' performance (Cai, 2013). In a word, it seems that English has become a challenge that leads to unsatisfactory academic study. Besides, the majority of Chinese students cannot speak the Thai language and hardly use English in daily scenes in China, so it is inevitable for students to encounter English problems and difficulties in daily-life communication.

Therefore, a study is worthwhile to be conducted on the English language needs and challenges of Chinese undergraduates in Thai universities to help them achieve successful academics. Because many previous studies concentrated on the needs of students from the domestic education system rather than the relevant needs of overseas students. In addition, most studies focused on the field of academic study and rarely mentioned English communication in daily life for international students.

The present study contributes to both Chinese students and Thai universities. Current Chinese undergraduates would have a better understanding of improving their English abilities to their needs, and it is beneficial for Chinese high-school students to make a good preparation before applying for international programs in Thai universities. Moreover, understanding Chinese students' real needs and expectations is the premise and foundation for Thai universities to provide appropriate courses and compile instructional materials for international students. And other Thai universities may apply the results to their context as well.

Objectives

1. To explore English language skills needed for Chinese undergraduates studying in Thai universities.
2. To identify problems encountered when Chinese undergraduates communicate in English while studying and living in Thailand.

Literature review

1. English for Academic Purpose (EAP)

English language as a global means of communication has been widely used in various fields and its demand is in constant expansion. Chams (2016) has suggested that to achieve specific objectives, world countries introduced English courses at all levels of the educational system especially at the university through English for Specific Purpose (ESP). General English is designed to meet students' needs for communication, but ESP contains some contents and skills that address the specific purpose and needs of learners of that career or discipline. (Robinson, 1991).

One of the main categories of ESP is English for Academic Purposes (EAP) which focuses on the learners' needs for language use in an academic environment. EAP was originally developed to help international students study English as the language of instruction for specific field courses or research activities (Jordan, 1997). But in the last two decades, Flowerdew & Peacock (2001) indicate that the demand for EAP has increased dramatically among students in nations where English is a second language and among students from non-native English-spoken countries who need to read English literature.

According to a few studies, researchers indicate that EAP courses have shown a very effective value in improving students' understanding and application of the specialized content of their programs, and students have acquired an enormous demand for EAP through various academic studies. Equally, academic tasks and activities are filled into daily learning of international programs for Chinese students. Therefore, this study will focus on the Chinese undergraduates' need for English language skills in academic learning and related EAP courses when they study at Thai universities as one of the dimensions.

2. English for everyday life

Language is regarded as the primary medium of communication and communication is one of the major parts of people's lives throughout the world (Sarwari et al, 2023). English for everyday life focuses





on the settings of daily communication in English social environment. Through individual interactions, people can share their ideas, convey information, ask for help, deal with problems, and so on. This means that English is very necessary and essential for international students, and the language barrier sometimes negatively affects their regular daily lives (Sherry, et al, 2010).

Many studies have discussed the problems that international students encounter while studying abroad, one of which is the language barrier. Sherry, et al (2010) indicate that a lack of English proficiency may be the single greatest barrier experienced by international students since it impacts their ability to engage socially with others. Different from native English speakers who are proficient in English, Chinese students in Thai sometimes experience vague and misunderstood expressions in English communication socially due to the language barrier.

Interestingly, some research results showed that international students have difficulty in interpersonal communication, such as making friends. Compared with domestic students, international students are less likely to make close friends due to accent problems, expression habits, vocabulary, cultural differences, and so on, which negatively impacts their experience of studying abroad. (Andrade, 2006; Sherry, et al, 2010; Avello, et al, 2019). Overseas study is inseparable from social interaction in the destination country, including acculturation (Sarwari et al, 2023). For Chinese students, adapting to the cultural customs and etiquette taboos contributes to reducing or even avoiding communication troubles in Thai life.

3. Needs Analysis

Michael West introduced that needs are what learners will be required to do with the foreign language in the target situation and how learners might best master the language during the period of learning (Rahman, 2015). Besides, Brown (2001) defines that the term needs analysis generally refers to “the activities that are involved in collecting information that will serve as the basis for developing a curriculum that will meet the needs of a particular group of students” (p. 35).

The role of needs analysis in any ESP course is indisputable. Johns (1991) indicated that needs analysis is the first step in course design, and it provides validity and relevancy for all subsequent course design activities. A proper needs analysis system can guide the educator to a better understanding of the learner's objectives, the results of the needs analysis support instructors in defining the students' professional needs in terms of language skills, whereby the required English needs of the students are determined and prioritized (Lertchalermtipakoon, et al, 2021; Ömer, 2016).

Four models of foreign language need analysis, marking different stages of their development, and each model has both strengths and weaknesses. The models mentioned are Munby's (1988) Target Situation Analysis (TSA), Present Situation Analysis (PSA) (1982), Hutchinson and Waters' (1987) Learning Needs Analysis (LNA), and Dudley-Evans and St John's (1998) model.

The TSA model focuses on identifying the learners' language requirements in the occupational or academic setting, but its drawback is that the instrument is inflexible and time-consuming (West, 1994; Zhang, et al, 2020). Mehdi (2008) indicated that the PSA model attempted to identify what learners are like at the beginning and ignored the learning experience. As for the LNA model, although the merit is that it brings both the analysis of the target need and learning process need into consideration, it weakens the ability to recognize students' lacks to some extent (Zhang, et al, 2020).

However, Dudley-Evans and St John's model is a comprehensive model of needs analysis, not a single approach to needs analysis can be a reliable indicator of what is needed to enhance learning but Dudley-Evans and St John's model, and this model also provides a mass of information about all different kinds of needs as well (Mehdi, 2008). The main concept of needs analysis includes the following: 1) personal information about learners, 2) language information about learners, 3) learner's lacks, 4) learner's needs from the course, and 5) language learning needs (Zhang, et al, 2020; Mehdi, 2008).

Considering with concepts of Dudley-Evans and St John's model and the advantages of other models, the present study focused on Chinese students' needs during their learning process based on the gap between current English abilities and English requirements of target situations. Besides, in-depth information on students' expectations and suggestions should be mentioned in the study by interview to contribute to meeting their real needs.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study involved three key theories and concepts: 1) English for Specific Purpose which focuses on English used in different specific situations, 2) language communication



skills which refer to English listening, speaking, reading, and writing. and 3) needs analysis which is always used to investigate learners' needs and expectations. From Figure 1, the present study focused on the needs and challenges of language communication skills occurring in specific tasks and activities in both academic study and everyday life which are identified by English for Specific Purpose. Needs analysis is an effective tool used to explore the above needs and challenges.

Figure 1 Conceptual framework of the study

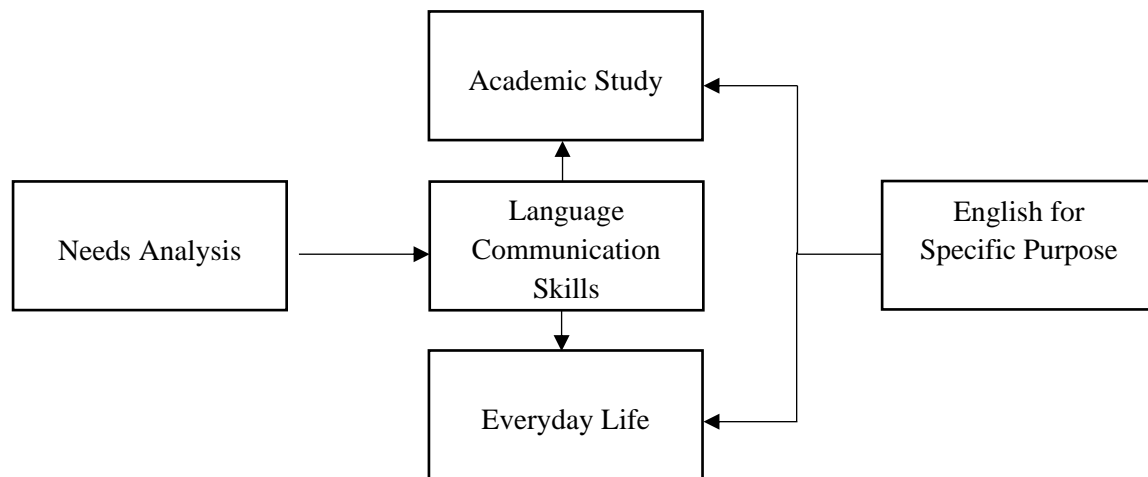


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework
Note: Constructed by the author

First, this study employed the needs analysis model of Dudley-Evans and St John's model to investigate Chinese undergraduates' real needs for English language improvement and problems encountered in English communication. The gap between Chinese students' present English abilities and the requirements of English studying in Thai universities would be set up based on the language information of learners and learners' lack in this model. Besides, concepts, language learning needs, and learner's needs from the course were used to explore the needs and challenges of Chinese students as well as their expectations. This aligned with the idea that needs analysis could offer information for developing a curriculum that will meet the needs of Chinese undergraduates studying in Thailand.

Secondly, the conceptual framework of English for Academic Purposes and English for everyday life provided insights into English communication in several tasks and activities in academic and daily contexts, according to the studies conducted by Flowerdew (2012), Hyland (2002), and Wang (2013). However, the background of the present study is Chinese undergraduates in Thailand, certain specific tasks and activities, thus, were designed into the questionnaire to strengthen the representation of subjects.

Lastly, the theoretical perspective on language communication skills indicated there were four skills that learners need to complete communication, which was similar to English skills that were widely used by Chinese undergraduates studying in Thai universities (Canagarajah, 2006; Coleman, 2006). English four skills were mainly required to be used in tasks of academic study despite other skills like grammar being also important during students' learning. At the same time, these four skills also played an essential role in daily communication for Chinese undergraduates in Thai society.

Methodology

1. Participants

The present study consisted of 80 Chinese undergraduates with IELTS overall scores above five who were selected randomly from seven international programs provided by three Universities. 42 participants



were from bachelor's degree of science majoring in Information Communication Technology (ICT) at Mahidol University, and Software Engineering (SE) as well as Modern Management and Information Technology (MMIT) at Chiang Mai University. Besides, programs for bachelor's degrees in arts consisted of 38 participants whose majors were Social Science (SS) and Humanities and Sustainability (HS) at Chiang Mai University, and Thai Studies (TS) and Chinese Studies (CS) at Thammasat University, respectively.

The proportion of participants of a different gender was similar with about 56% of males and 44% of females, whose age range was between 18 to 21 years old which was a common age group at the undergraduate level. Besides, the number of students in all academic years was the same, except for students in the third academic year, the main reason was that these students were engaged in internships and extracurricular activities. Different students in the first to fourth year could also reflect changes and differences in their needs and expectations.

2. Research tool

There were two research instruments employed in the present study including an online closed-ended questionnaire and a focus-group interview. The design of the questionnaire was based on a needs analysis of Dudley-Evans and St John's model using the five Likert scales, which included four parts aiming to explore all participants' different degrees of English abilities, English needs, and English difficulties. In addition, a final open-ended item is also included in the last part to allow participants to express any additional comments or suggestions.

An online focus-group interview was conducted with 12 participants who volunteered to provide in-depth perspectives based on data from the questionnaire. The interview questions mainly inquire about the reason for students' English skill needs as well as their expectations and suggestions in academic study and everyday life based on the questions of the questionnaire.

3. Data collection

The questionnaire was piloted and validated with an English expert and translated into Chinese, 20 Chinese participants were invited to pilot the questionnaire. Then, all 80 participants were invited to complete all questions of the questionnaire within 15 - 20 minutes using online software. All questionnaire data was stored in network software for data analysis. After that, participants who were willing to participate in the interview voluntarily from the questionnaire were invited to conduct the interview.

4. Data analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze the data of the questionnaire because it can calculate data quickly with wide application scope. For the statistics of the questionnaire, in addition to frequency and percentage that were used to describe demographic information, the rest of the data in terms of the average English language abilities, needs, and difficulties were calculated by arithmetic mean and standard deviation, as well as the degree, was illustrated by different mean range.

For the information gathered from interviews, content analyzed of text data was strictly analyzed by the grounded theory which involved the refinement and interrelationship of categories of information. All information was classified and interpreted as relevant results and used for analysis together with the corresponding questionnaire results. A combination of information provided from interviews and data from questionnaires draw comprehensive conclusions.

Results

The findings revealed that speaking and writing were the most needed skills that students desired to improve in their academic study, followed by listening and reading skills respectively. EAP courses like academic writing courses are considered the most necessary during the study period. However, listening and speaking skills in a daily context showed a high need to strengthen when students communicate in English. In terms of problems in English communication, writing skills showed the highest difficulty in an academic context, while speaking was rated as the least difficult for students. Besides, interactions between students and officers from authority institutions were troublesome in daily life as well.

1. Participants' perceptions of their English language needs

1.1 The need for improvement in English in academic study



Table 1 Overall perceived needs for improvement in students' English skills in academic study

English skills	Mean	S.D.	Degree of needs	Rank
Listening	4.06	0.79	Much	3
Speaking	4.08	0.79	Much	1
Reading	4.04	0.85	Much	4
Writing	4.08	0.84	Much	1
Average	4.06	0.82	Much	

Chinese undergraduates expected to improve their four English skills in academic study because the degree of needs was much level ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 0.82$) from Table 1. They generally accepted that writing and speaking were the most needed skills to be improved in academic study equally ($M = 4.08$). In addition, listening skills ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 0.79$) were placed in third place for many students. As for reading skills ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 0.85$), it was considered the least needed skill for students who would like to improve in academic study.

There was still a gap between students' actual ability of four skills and their expectations in mind. In other words, there is a great need for students to improve these skills to meet the needs of academic study and research activities. An IELTS score of 5 was considered to be the basic level of English, and such English abilities of students were still far from academic study at the university level. Additionally, conductive skills like speaking and writing had traditionally been a weakness for Chinese students, so it was not surprising that students were eager to upgrade and develop these skills.

Table 2 Perceived needs for improvement in speaking skills in academic study

Speaking skills in tasks and activities	Mean	S.D.	Degree of needs	Rank
Participating in academic discussion	4.04	0.89	Much	4
Speaking at seminars, meetings, and presentation	4.01	0.92	Much	5
Making presentations and oral reports	4.05	0.87	Much	3
Using academic vocabulary while speaking	4.11	0.86	Much	2
Asking and answering questions in class	3.94	0.96	Much	7
Asking and answering questions at presentations	3.96	0.95	Much	6
Talking with lecturers, faculty staff, and students	3.89	0.99	Much	8
Interacting with specialists in your field of study	4.20	0.75	Much	1

Table 2 illustrated that interacting with specialists in your field of study ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 0.75$) was ranked at the level that students expected to improve listening skills mostly. Students held the second most needed skill to improve was using academic vocabulary while speaking ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.86$), followed by making presentations and oral reports, participating in academic discussions, as well as speaking at seminars, meetings, and presentations. Whereas, the bottom three sub-skills, asking and answering questions at presentations, asking and answering questions in class, and talking with lecturers, faculty staff, and students, suggested that these three skills need less improvement for Chinese students.

There was a series of oral speeches and presentations in international programs. Although Chinese students could enhance their speaking skills through numerous practical exercises, academic speaking involved not only idea and content development but also posture, style, and interaction. The lack of this aspect was precisely the part that students desired to improve in oral expression. Meanwhile, presentation is a student's output, rather than an interaction with others. Chinese students seldom could attend academic conferences, let alone communicate with experts face to face. Some students, therefore, expressed a willingness to experience conferences or lectures.





Table 3 Perceived needs for improvement in writing skills in academic study

Writing skills in tasks and activities	Mean	S.D.	Degree of needs	Rank
Taking notes in lectures	3.69	1.00	Much	9
Using academic vocabulary in writing	4.06	0.85	Much	2
Writing a transcript for an oral presentation	3.93	0.99	Much	4
Writing term papers	4.15	0.86	Much	1
Writing lab projects or reports	4.04	0.92	Much	3
Writing instructions	3.83	0.99	Much	6
Writing informal texts	3.66	1.10	Much	10
Writing essays in examinations	3.81	1.02	Much	7
Writing business letters, personal letters, and CV	3.80	1.04	Much	8
Mechanics (spelling, format, etc) in writing	3.85	1.00	Much	5

As shown in Table 3, students perceived that writing term papers ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.86$) should be improved firstly among all writing tasks and activities, followed by using academic vocabulary in writing ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 0.85$) and writing lab projects or reports ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 0.92$), at the much-needed level. By contrast, taking notes in lectures ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.00$) and writing informal texts ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 1.10$) were the bottom two needed skills to improve respectively, which means that students could do them best among all writing sub-skills.

Those who chose to improve their writing first pointed out that writing at the college level required an academic level rather than simply stating one's ideas. The writing assigned in the homework and exam has higher requirements for the structure, logic framework, and language expression of the essay, which makes it urgent to improve the writing ability. Interestingly, high-frequency writing tasks and argument-writing styles were common in programs of arts, whereas science program students were more likely to be required to complete lab or project reports.

Brief sum up, students were generally eager for the faculties and colleges to offer some specialized English courses in line with their field of study as basic English was not enough to support academic study. The course content was closely related to specific-field English, and more terminology, and topics were involved in the daily teaching. Moreover, these courses were more conducive to the development of students' skills which were set up directly linked to the objectives of the programs. Fewer students who have taken the academic writing course said that the course has improved their writing skills, which has a positive impact on the subsequent research and graduation thesis to a greater extent.

1.2 The need for improvement in English in everyday life

From Table 4, it was found that all four English skills ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.93$) were ranked at a much needed of improvement level by students in daily life. However, considering each skill, listening and speaking skills were ranked at the highest mean score of 3.89, which means the most needed skills to improve for students, followed by reading skills ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 0.95$). The last skills, writing ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 0.94$), were the least needed for students who hoped to be promoted.

Table 4 Overall perceived needs for improvement in students' English skills in everyday life

English skills	Mean	S.D.	Degree of needs	Rank
Listening	3.89	0.93	Much	1
Speaking	3.89	0.89	Much	1
Reading	3.80	0.95	Much	3
Writing	3.71	0.94	Much	4
Average	3.82	0.93	Much	

In terms of tasks and activities in each skill in everyday life, students generally agreed that listening to conversations on general topics was the most needed listening sub-skills to improve during their daily





life while listening to directions of public facilities was the least needed for improvement. Speaking skills were the most needed to improve for speaking with staff at the immigration office, whereas speaking with staff at an apartment or dormitory was not seen as a need of improvement. Regarding reading sub-skills in everyday life, reading the documents at the immigration office was the most needed to improve. As for writing, completing the application forms in visa was students expected to improve most, by contrast, writing messages to staff at the apartment or dormitory was the least for them.

Even though English communication in daily life was less difficult than academic learning, students still had a particular need to improve their listening and speaking skills. Among them, the English communication scene of the immigration office was mentioned by many students. Compared with shopping and traveling in daily life, English communication in official organizations such as the Immigration office is more formal and complicated, and students need to understand the handling process and answer some questions from officials. For inexperienced Chinese students, how to understand the requirements of speakers and how to express their questions was worth learning and strengthening.

2. Participants' perceptions of their English language difficulties

2.1 The difficulties of English skills in academic study

Table 5 Overall perceived difficulties of students' English skills in academic study

English skills	Mean	S.D.	Degree of difficulties	Rank
Listening	2.91	0.94	Moderate	3
Speaking	2.78	0.97	Moderate	4
Reading	3.01	0.89	Moderate	2
Writing	3.03	0.95	Moderate	1
Average	2.93	0.94	Moderate	

According to Table 5, students perceived that the degree of difficulties in English skills was moderate level ($M = 2.93$, $SD = 0.94$), which means these students had encountered problems in an academic context. According to the individual's English ability, the frequency and difficulty of problems for students with better performance were relatively small, and the other side had a greater impact. In general, the difficulty of these skills was still within the acceptable range of most students; however, to seek better performance in each course and achieve academic success eventually, potential problems were still worth attracting students' attention as well as solving them in the following study period.

Among four skills, they insisted that writing ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 0.95$) was the most difficult skill. Indeed, students' poor performance on the writing task was influenced by its difficulty, which coincided with students' desire to improve their writing skills. Besides, although speaking tasks were filled with students' learning, the traditional course mode was still dominated by instructors. In other words, students had relatively few opportunities to express themselves, so speaking skills were considered to be the least difficult among the four skills in academic study.

Table 6 Perceived difficulties of writing skills in academic study

Writing skills in tasks and activities	Mean	S.D.	Degree of difficulties	Rank
Taking notes in lectures	2.55	1.04	Moderate	9
Using academic vocabulary in writing	2.99	0.99	Moderate	3
Writing a transcript for an oral presentation	2.79	1.03	Moderate	5
Writing term papers	3.14	1.11	Moderate	1
Writing lab projects or reports	3.03	1.10	Moderate	2
Writing instructions	2.99	1.10	Moderate	3
Writing informal texts	2.53	1.08	Moderate	10
Writing essays in examinations	2.75	1.00	Moderate	6
Writing business letters, personal letters, and CV	2.66	1.02	Moderate	7
Mechanics (spelling, format, etc) in writing	2.66	1.14	Moderate	7





As seen from Table 6, students perceived that writing was the most difficult for term papers ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 1.11$). And writing lab projects or reports ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 1.10$) was rated the second most difficult. It was worth noting that the standard deviation of the above two sub-skills was higher than 1.00, which could imply that the degree of difficulties was highly diversified. Programs with higher requirements for writing skills were bound to be more difficult than others. And there was a gap in the ability of individual students to write term papers and lab projects.

With the findings from the interview, the problems students encountered in writing focused on the following four areas, the structure of the essay, the source of vocabulary, the content of arguments, and critical thinking. These problems also hurt students' writing performance and even affected their grades and graduation. In addition to the above problems, reports and papers written by Chinese students were a little tanglesome with unclear frameworks and unconcise expressions, which was not conducive to the output of main ideas and arguments.

Table 7 Perceived difficulties of reading skills in academic study

Reading skills in tasks and activities	Mean	S.D.	Degree of difficulties	Rank
Reading lecture handouts	2.66	1.03	Moderate	9
Reading specialized textbooks	2.88	0.97	Moderate	4
Reading articles in professional journals	2.99	1.01	Moderate	3
Reading specialized reports	3.05	0.98	Moderate	2
Reading English newspapers and magazines	2.71	0.96	Moderate	6
Reading texts on the Internet	2.70	1.01	Moderate	7
Reading instructions booklets or user manuals	2.70	0.89	Moderate	7
Reading reference books	2.83	0.87	Moderate	5
Reading graphs, charts, tables, etc	2.58	0.93	Moderate	10
Recognizing terminology while reading	3.09	0.93	Moderate	1

Table 7 showed that reading skills in recognizing terminology while reading ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 0.93$) and reading specialized reports ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 0.98$) were one of the top difficulties for students, respectively. followed by reading articles in professional journals ($M = 2.99$, $SD = 1.01$). It was obvious that troubles in reading were more concentrated in reading academic texts, especially in recognizing terms. In addition to describing the results of research in various fields, academic texts were also full of certain unfamiliar words, which makes students spend a lot of time and energy understanding the content of the articles.

Additionally, compared with the primary educational stage, the amount of reading at the university level has increased dramatically, which requires students to have excellent reading skills. However, the fact was that students were restricted by the vocabulary in unfamiliar and specialized fields. What's worse, the sentence-by-sentence translation often ignored the understanding of the overall content of the article.

To sum up, Chinese students' undergraduate studies in Thailand were unlikely to be completely smooth due to higher required English abilities and a greater number of academic assignments. To a greater or lesser extent, the English challenges that students encountered in classroom scenarios affected student performance. The lack of English vocabulary in one's professional field and less systematic intake of academic writing and academic reading deserve the consideration, of course, developers to design corresponding courses to solve these problems.

2.2 The difficulties of English skills in everyday life





Table 8 Overall perceived difficulties of students' English skills in everyday life

English skills	Mean	S.D.	Degree of difficulties	Rank
Listening	2.63	0.95	Moderate	3
Speaking	2.54	1.01	Moderate	4
Reading	2.74	0.91	Moderate	2
Writing	2.79	0.94	Moderate	1
Average	2.67	0.95	Moderate	

From Table 8, Chinese students generally pointed out that English language skills of communication in daily life were moderately difficult when they lived in Thailand. Writing was the biggest trouble during their daily life, followed by reading and listening skills, respectively. Students expressed that they were not good at writing in completing the application forms for visas. Among reading and listening skills in a daily context, the most difficult ones were reading the documents at the immigration office and listening to directions in public areas and public facilities, respectively, while the opposite was reading the announcements in public areas and listening to the staff at apartment or dormitory, respectively. Besides, expressing problems encountered at the immigration office was the most difficult speaking skill while speaking with staff at an apartment or dormitory was the least difficult for students.

There were a few English communication problems encountered by Chinese students in Thailand, and they were more concentrated on some specific occasions. The listening and speaking questions were mainly concentrated in the immigration bureau. Students showed that it was the most difficult thing for them to understand the requirements of the officials and express their visa-related problems. Some students stressed that broadcasting in public places is also difficult to fully understand. In addition, their own reading ability and writing skills were not easy to cope with filling out forms and applications. Despite English explanations being attached to Thai documents, Chinese students still misunderstood certain items and completed forms accurately by themselves.

It was clear that the order of difficulty of each skill in academic study and daily life was consistent; however, students highly agreed that the impact and trouble brought by academic challenges were higher than that of everyday life. This was because of the purpose of Chinese students in Thailand, that is, to complete their undergraduate studies. The importance of English skills to academic performance was self-evident, and academic performance also affected the success of graduation. Everyday English communication, on the other hand, was more about conveying information. Chinese students could use simple sentences and even body language to interact with others on most general topics.

Discussion

1. The need for English language for Chinese undergraduates

Students expressed a high demand for improving and strengthening their English abilities so that they could finish their full course studying and achieve degree qualification successfully. Because English skills were one of the most essential factors in contributing to an excellent academy. The real needs of students obtained through needs analysis would provide a meaningful reference value for course developers. Chinese students expected to improve their writing and speaking skills first, followed by listening and reading, respectively. A similar result of the need for English language skills was the study by Panita (2010) and Akyel (2010) the point that two skills that students mostly needed to improve were writing and speaking skills despite the sample was Thai students in a postgraduate stage in study conducted by Panita (2010).

It was well-known that papers and thesis at the college level required higher writing abilities, which was a preference for more academic writing. Besides, the Chinese students had little training in writing only at high school, they naturally lacked systematic writing knowledge. Exposed to English academic writing firstly in Thai education, they were always confused about paper structures, writing logic, and paragraph cohesion. Chinese students, whereby, had higher expectations of improving their writing skills than those who experienced writing courses and training in their primary education stage.

In terms of speaking, Chinese students' scores in English tests such as IELTS and TOEFL were relatively low, and their oral performance in actual overseas study was also unsatisfactory. In the





undergraduate stage, lower-grade students were more eager to improve their ability to fully express opinions and express sentences, higher-grade students, nevertheless, were more focused on demonstrating the depth of professional knowledge and opinions. In general, with the increase in students' learning years, their emphasis on oral English improvement was also different. In other words, the contents and materials for improving oral skills needed to be set up at different levels to meet the different needs of beginners and senior students.

In addition, the results revealed that reading was the least needed skill that they wanted to improve. However, this was opposite to the study carried out by Chen (2016), who pointed out that most students expected to improve their reading skills. The key point was that most Chinese students have accumulated some methods and strategies in reading before studying at universities since reading courses played an important role in China's basic education. Compared with Chinese students from different programs, science-program students were required to read and understand experimental instructions and practical operations, thus, reading skills were of greater significance to them rather than to arts-program students.

Listening and speaking skills were used most widely and frequently in daily contexts because conversational communication relied on these two skills more than the remaining two. More importantly, although the popularity of English was high in Thailand, as a non-English native country, the English accent of Thai people was also one of the communication barriers that students could not ignore. Students still needed a certain amount of time to get used to the Thai pronunciation of certain English words as well as the mode and style of communication with Thai people.

2. The difficulties of English language for Chinese undergraduates

The results revealed that students perceived writing skills was the most difficult for them in academic study, which was similar to the study conducted by Sawapat (2016). Students mentioned that term papers and reports had specific norms and requirements, including the structure, format, elements, language as well as style, and academic writing was unfamiliar and difficult for Chinese undergraduates who were not good at using the English language academically. Moreover, one of the hallmarks of academic writing was that it was filled with discipline-specific terminology, and familiarity with these specialized vocabularies was viewed by professors as a crucial requirement in term papers and lab projects. The study conducted by Alhassan (2019) also concluded this. Unfortunately, almost all Chinese students have not been exposed to the specialized terms of their disciplines in advance, which makes the use of academic and professional words in writing a frequent problem, and indirectly affects and leads to the unsatisfactory performance of Chinese students in writing.

Another point worth noting is the learning characteristics and learning system of Chinese students themselves. The first point was the difference in writing emphasis. Chinese students' writing often focused teachers on the correctness of English grammar and vocabulary, rather than the elements emphasized by native speakers in academic writing, such as citations, arguments, organization, and authorial voice (Zhang & Hasim, 2023). In the current English teaching system of primary and secondary schools in China, the proportion and training degree of English writing was relatively small, which made students' writing skills relatively weak (Shi, 2001; Zhang & Hasim, 2023).

Reading was perceived as the second difficulty next to writing, however, this was opposite to the study carried out by Panita (2010), in which results showed that reading skills were the least difficult for Thai students studying economics (English programs). Most Chinese students pointed out that recognizing terminology while reading was the most difficult for them. When it came to the reasons for the difficulty in reading journals and professional reports, students generally said that unfamiliarity with words, especially specialized terminology, brought great obstacles to reading.

Alhassan (2019) suggested that terminological familiarity would help students read, understand, and cope with the various sub-disciplines. Compared with Thai students studying in their own country, they could understand the meaning of the article with the help of Thai annotations and explanations, which reduces the difficulty of reading to a small extent. On the contrary, Chinese students may hardly taste the benefits of this method. In addition, reading lecture handouts and reading graphs, charts, and tables were considered the easiest for Chinese students, this characteristic implied that they were satisfied with their reading abilities on legend information.

In terms of speaking skills, students asserted that their spoken language was the least problematic in academic studying, meaning that speaking skills were the least difficult among the four skills. Whereas the result from the study conducted by Panita (2010) was different, in which speaking was considered the most difficult for participants. The lack of specific-filed terminology led students' oral expression to tend to the





output of simple sentences and the repeated explanation of some important points. Another point that should not be ignored is that interacting with specialists in students' field of study, which was a kind of face-to-face discourse communication in real situations rather than students expressing their own opinions in front of familiar professors and classmates. Of the lack of ability and the nervous psychology of communicating with scholars and experts, the speaking skills of dialogue and communication, in reality, were the most difficult for Chinese students, and even the most fearful.

According to the results of this study, the difficulty of English communication in academic studying was higher than that in everyday life, in which writing and reading were considered as the most difficult and second most difficult skills respectively. As mentioned before, English communication in the immigration office was emphasized. Compared to general topics in everyday conversations, the seriousness and strangeness of the immigration scene could be stressful for Chinese students with little experience living abroad. In addition to immigration, public broadcasting and notification were also more troublesome for Chinese students. In Thailand, public areas were bilingual broadcasting in English and Thai. In the absence of reliance on Thai, English listening was very important, and it also caused problems for some students with poor listening skills, such as violating rules in public places, missing transportation, and so on.

Conclusion

The objectives of the present study were to survey the needs for the English language of Chinese undergraduates studying in Thai universities and to explore the difficulties encountered by these students during both academic study and everyday life. The results revealed that writing was considered the most difficult for students in academic study. Most of the problems focused on academic study were as follows: The first to be mentioned was the use of academic vocabulary, especially specific-filed terminologies, including in writing term papers and reports, reading literature and articles, and oral presentation of intermediate tasks and scenarios.

As for problems of communication in daily life, most students asserted it was a medium difficulty, whose order of the four skills was writing, reading, listening, and speaking. Compared with ordinary daily English communication, the dialogue and visa processing in the immigration office were relatively difficult for Chinese students who had little experience living abroad. In addition, understanding English broadcasts in public places also caused a lot of stress and inconvenience for students who have just arrived in Thailand.

Given the above difficulties and problems encountered in academic study and everyday life, there was a huge need and desire for Chinese undergraduates to improve their English skills. Writing skills were the most needed skills for Chinese undergraduates to improve. Equally, the improvement in students' speaking skills was also the highest. Furthermore, there was high expectation for EAP courses throughout four-year undergraduate studies, for the sake of improving English learning academically. As a result of the needs of these Chinese students, course developers could design academic English courses and supplement courses based on practical situations. Meanwhile, Admission requirements of each international program may consider the detailed criteria of English abilities to emphasize the specific skills in the academic study.

In an aspect of needs for improvement in everyday life, listening and speaking shared the most needs to improve and strengthen as general conversation happened in many situations. Four English skills used in the immigration office, mostly important, showed the highest needs and expectations to improve in everyday life. To adapt to life in Thai, pre-courses before university may incorporate real-life communication scenarios into language learning. The cooperation of universities and Chinese students would create a better learning atmosphere to promote students' successful academics.

Recommendation

Firstly, the sample size of this study was small with only 80 students and the number of students in third grade was the least, so the results might have represented a group of fewer students instead of Chinese undergraduate students. Besides, the three universities and the two categories of degrees in arts and sciences included in this study were not able to cover Thai universities and other programs that Chinese undergraduates were studying. Therefore, further study should be conducted with a larger number of





Chinese undergraduate students as a sample, and it would be interesting to investigate students from other fields.

Secondly, there were two dimensions of the English language acquired by Chinese undergraduates in academic study and everyday life, however, due to the cultural, educational, and social differences between China and Thailand, in addition to the need to understand the English needs of Chinese students in academic study and daily life, future research can also take into account the investigation in the fields of cross-cultural communication and cultural conflict.

Thirdly, each skill and related task and activity of this study were considered only in the situation of learning and living. This presupposed that students need English only for learning and living in Thailand. The study of students' English needs, however, should also consider the needs and difficulties in non-teaching settings, such as career plans and promotion for international students. When course developers consider conducting students for EAP courses, they can also plan ESP courses for careers, which can comprehensively provide all aspects of ability improvement for students in international programs.

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