

Chinese Overseas Students' Perspectives on Benefits and Limitations of English Language Learning and Teaching between China and Thailand

Singhanat Nomnian

Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia (RILCA)
Mahidol University, Nakhon Pathom, Thailand

Abstract

This research aims to explore Chinese overseas students at a Thai university with regard to their perceived benefits and limitations, which are underpinned by the cultures of English language learning and teaching in China and in Thailand. Drawing upon the notion of “cultures of learning” (Cortazzi & Jin, 2013; Jin & Cortazzi, 1993, 1996), this study investigates the students’ expectations, beliefs, and values in terms of effective teaching styles, approaches and methods, learning strategies and styles, classroom interactions, activities, and the appropriate rapport between students and teacher. Based on the students’ focus-group data, the findings reveal that the Chinese students compared and contrasted the benefits and limitations in terms of educational philosophies, values, policies, and practices, linguistic and cultural diversity, and sociocultural contexts, which impacted on their situated learning styles and strategies. “Cultures of learning” were linguistically specific, culturally sensitive, contextually dependent, dynamic, agentive, and non-generalizable. The pedagogical implications are related to Chinese students’ academic, socio-psychological, socio-economic, cultural and political dimensions. This study addresses the students’ beliefs and practices in a language and culture immersion program at a Thai university, which, in retrospect, promote culturally appropriate and sensitive teaching of English for comparative overseas education between China and Thailand.

Keywords: Chinese overseas students, cultures of learning, English language teaching and learning, Thai university

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Introduction

Chinese students have globally mobilized to study and seek internationally-recognized degrees for overseas higher education (UNESCO, 2013; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2014). A steady increase in a number of outbound Chinese students in higher education worldwide has clearly been evident and well-documented nearly the last decade (see Figure 1).

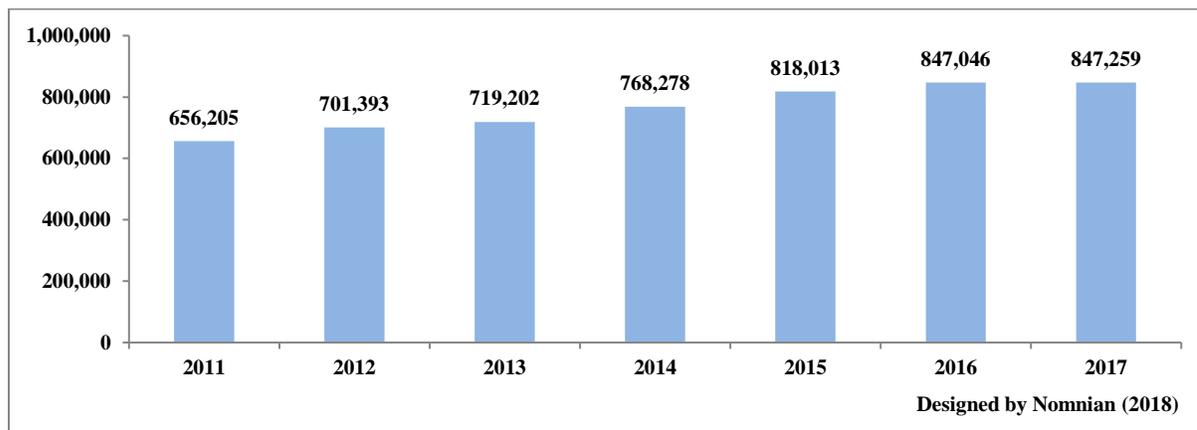


Figure 1. A number of outbound Chinese students mobility in tertiary education from 2011-2017 (Adapted from: <http://data.uis.unesco.org/Index.aspx?queryid=172#>)

In addition, based on World Education News and Reviews, Luo (2017) points out that there is an upward growth of overseas Chinese students in world-class universities in Asia due to the internationalization of Asian higher education and regional promising roadmaps such as One Belt and One Road (OBOR) initiatives, and the Asian Universities Alliance, which serve not only as a resource exchanging platform by facilitating more cross-border research activities, but also establish collaborative efforts by sharing values and common interests among staff and students within the Asian region.

According to Hui (2017), OBOR Initiatives have attracted more than 30,000 Chinese students to enroll in management, marketing and Thai language programs at Thai public and private universities in 2016. Thai higher education, as a result, also enjoys this regional university collaboration as it can benefit cross-border mobility of Chinese staff and students to build academic and research partnerships (Wattana, 2018).

Due to an increasing number of Chinese students in Thai universities, several studies (e.g., Lin & Kingmingkhae, 2014; Songsathaphorn et al., 2014; Yin et al., 2015; Yingxui & Nongbunnak, 2016) focus on Chinese international students' satisfaction and decision-making factors for Thai higher education. Studies with an emphasis on the concept of "cultures of learning," particularly between China and Thailand, are rather limited.

According to Cortazzi and Jin (2013), the concept of "cultures of learning" should be fundamentally recognized when it comes to teaching and learning international students because:

There is no expectation that every member of a particular group thinks or must behave in identical or even similar ways, despite group trends. Thus, the notion of applying a cultures of learning framework to classroom interaction with international students, say, should not involve reducing them to an oversimplified view, or one invoking stereotypes; on the contrary, the notion of cultures of learning has been developed precisely to counter stereotypes by focusing on specific aspects of real learning and getting those insider perspectives, preferably through research in which illuminate the activities and thinking of real learners or teachers in authentic contexts through rich data (p.3).

In this study, the “cultures of learning” concept can potentially unveil the views of Chinese overseas students undertaking a 10-month language and culture immersion program at a research-based university in Thailand. Throughout the course of their study, the students have gained experiences and attempted to acculturate themselves in Thai academic and social contexts. They have learned a variety of subjects including Advanced Thai Speaking and Writing, Media, Thai Society, Thai Arts and Culture, Translation, Interpretation, Internship, and Advanced English Speaking and Writing.

English is not only a required subject in Chinese and Thai higher education, but also a globally powerful *lingua franca* that increases the international mobility for Chinese students (Börjesson, 2017). This cross-cultural case study of a group of Chinese overseas students in a leading research-based university in Thailand potentially provides a stepping stone to explore their comparative viewpoints regarding cultures of English learning and teaching in Chinese and Thai higher education institutions.

Literature Review

The notion of “cultures of learning” (Cortazzi & Jin, 2013; Jin & Cortazzi, 1993, 1996) is employed in this study as “cultures” are often considered as complex, dynamic, changing, with shared common values, and yet recognized differences, which can contextually distinguish one group’s behaviors from another. “Cultures of learning” are thus ways of reciprocal exchanges between:

Learning about others’ learning and therefore learning about ourselves: It means learning more about ways of learning. Thus the culture of learners and teachers is not ‘background’; it means sets of foregrounded and explicit cultural processes which actually have a center-stage role, one which we can spotlight in research (Cortazzi & Jin, 2013, p.2).

Chinese overseas students’ academic practices and attitudes toward learning are mainly based on Confucian beliefs concerning a collective orientation, which is different from the individualism in Western academic culture (Yuan & Xie, 2013). Jin and Cortazzi (1993, 1996) identify cultural gaps and attitudes of Chinese international students toward British academic systems in terms of teachers’ expectations, beliefs, and values contributing to effective teaching styles, approaches and methods, learning strategies and styles, classroom interactions, activities, and the appropriate roles and relationships between students and teachers. Chinese students are negatively perceived as passive, silent, non-critical, and teacher-dependent, which are not suitable for Western academic practices and expectations (Cortazzi & Jin, 2013).

Due to the internationalization of higher education, the “cultures of learning” concept has been applied, extended and redefined in a number of Chinese students’ study abroad research. In the UK higher education, Yuan and Xie (2013), for example, view a reciprocally dynamic relationship between Chinese students and their British supervisors as waves and coastlines, which portray a constantly changing and evolving movement of both parties’ cultures of learning. Ryan (2013) suggests the mutual benefits shared by British and Chinese cultures of learning that promote intercultural and intellectual exchanges for enhancing experiences and knowledge for both parties.

In the US higher education, Chao et al. (2017), for instance, state that Chinese middle-class international students in American universities are motivated by non-Chinese cultural aspects in the US in order to understand the demand of the internationalization of business and global economy for achieving their long-term and prospective career path to become highly competitive international workforce. Cebolla-Boado et al. (2018), on the other hand, claim that Chinese overseas students are motivated to study in British universities not only due to non-career purposes, but they also would like to gain self-realization and cultural experience to be considered as active and mobile individuals.

The aforementioned studies conducted in Western academic settings where English is used as a first language and medium of instruction tend to represent and stereotype Chinese overseas students in these English-speaking higher education institutions as problematic, linguistically incapable, and culturally inappropriate that impedes the students’ academic achievement and constrains their social integration on campus (Fraiberg et al., 2017; Su & Harrison, 2016). Studies regarding Chinese students in Thai higher education where English is used as a foreign language, however, address wider sociocultural and economic issues. Lin’s study (2014), based on the surveys of Chinese undergraduates in Thai universities, found that lower-income rural students were more motivated and hard-working in order to find jobs in the Thai employment market. Upper-income students, on the other hand, did not perform well academically compared to their lower-income counterparts and returned home upon graduation or furthered their studies for higher degrees despite their poor academic performance (Lin, 2014).

Songsathaphorn et al. (2014), for instance, identify main factors positively influencing Chinese students’ satisfaction toward Thai higher education, which include education quality, safety, image and prestige of institution, and pre-departure preparation. Thailand’s quality higher education should be addressed and enhanced through quality assurance policies, internationally-recognized degrees, academic and professional capacity development, and effective international education promotions in China (Songsathaphorn et al., 2014).

Another key factor is the approval and acceptance by the Ministry of Education of China because degrees from Thai universities are not valid in mainland China; and thus the Thai Ministry of Education needs to seek approval from the Chinese Ministry of Education before embarking on accepting Chinese students (Yin et al., 2015). Although these previous studies have provided an overall picture of Chinese students in Thai universities in general, few studies address specific issues of language learning.

At an international university in Thailand, Huang (2017), for example, points out that Chinese students' language learning strategies changed as there were inter-related issues regarding the language learner's context, agency and strategic behaviors. Drawing upon the recent study by Wattana (2018), government-funded Chinese undergraduate students preferred active and friendly classroom environment and relaxed teaching style at the Thai research-based university although they were worried about their grades. They also employed social strategies the most as they enjoyed having daily communication with the locals in order to improve their Thai as a foreign language (Wattana, 2018).

Previous studies regarding Chinese students in Thai and Western academic contexts suggest underpinning issues related to contextually situated factors influencing the students' changing behaviors, shifting perspectives, and evolving trajectories over the course of their study abroad. It is thus vital for educators to be aware of the complex international learning contexts and individual factors affecting the students' adjustment to their new learning context and tasks (Fraiberg et al., 2017). This present study aims to explore government-funded third-year Chinese undergraduate students' insights into the benefits and limitations of English teaching and learning between China and Thailand.

Research Methodology

Drawing upon a qualitative research paradigm, this present study focused on a group of twenty-four third-year female Chinese undergraduate students studying at a research institute in a Thai university. Funded by the Chinese government, the students, who were majoring in Thai language as a foreign language, took part in a 10-month language and cultural immersion program with an emphasis on translation and interpretation, which was mutually established by and a collaboration between the research institute at a Thai research-based university located in Nakhon Pathom, a province in Central Thailand and a Chinese university in Yunnan Province located in southwestern China. The objectives of the collaboration were to develop Chinese students' Thai-Chinese translation and interpretation skills through authentic language use and exposure to Thai language and culture in Thailand and enhance international academic and research exchanges between China and Thailand. Based on the requirement of the Chinese students' home university in Yunnan, the students had to take a number of compulsory courses including Advanced Thai speaking and writing, Thai Culture and Media, Thai-Chinese Translation and Interpretation, and Advanced English Speaking and Writing skills.

The scope of this study was, however, limited to advanced courses in English speaking and writing skills taught by the author in the first and second semesters of the 2017 academic year respectively. The Advanced English Speaking course aimed at promoting the students' oral fluency in communicative English used in academic and workplace settings. The Advanced English Writing course, on the other hand, taught the students to correspond in various types of academic and business English including letters, and emails, as well as write essays. Employing both Thai and English as instructional languages, these two-credit courses were taught for two hours per week for the total of 15 weeks and assessed with assignments, presentations, quizzes, and essays.

Focus-group data was gathered by randomly separating the students into groups of four to five to discuss and compare the benefits and limitations of teaching and learning English in China and Thailand. They were freely allowed to discuss in Chinese; however, a representative had to present their group's ideas in English in front of the class via PowerPoint presentation slides. Their ideas were recorded, compiled, compared, contrasted and summarized on an MS Word file. Thematic analysis (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017) was used to explore emerging key themes namely benefits and limitations. The students were given written informed consent forms regarding the research project. Research ethics in humans were approved by Office of the Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University (IPSR-IRB) (COA. No. 2018/02-051).

Findings

Drawing upon the focus-group discussions, the findings of this study present and discuss the two main issues regarding the benefits and limitations of English teaching and learning between China and Thailand perceived by a group of Chinese overseas students at a Thai research-based university accordingly.

First of all, there are a number of key benefits that differ between Chinese and Thai "cultures of English teaching and learning." Chinese students felt that Chinese English language education is exam-based. Chinese teachers of English are keen on teaching grammar, vocabulary, and writing skills; and consequently, students have to take notes and use rote-learning strategies mainly by memorizing grammatical points and academic vocabulary that are relevant for college and national exams. Their objective in learning English is to pass the exams that can yield them opportunities for quality education.

The Chinese students in this study, however, found the teaching and learning of English at the Thai university rather dynamic and interesting due to flexible, active, and interactive teaching styles. Since studying English in Thailand did not require them to take high-stake tests, the students enjoyed using English inside and outside the classrooms more than they did in China due to the relaxing classroom atmosphere and practical teaching methods used (see Table 1).

Table 1. Benefits of English teaching and learning in China and in Thailand

China	Thailand
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Teachers focus on teaching grammar, vocabulary, and writing skills. 2. Students take notes to help students remember. 3. Students have knowledge in grammar and vocabulary. 4. Comprehensive exams (e.g. College Entrance Examination, CET4) are required. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Teaching styles are flexible, active and open. 2. Students have many opportunities to be exposed to spoken English with foreigners. 3. Interactions between teacher and students are frequent. 4. Students are trained with practical abilities. 5. Examination is flexible and open. 6. Classroom atmosphere is interesting and relaxing.

Based on the students' presentations, most of them positively found English language teaching and learning in Thailand enjoyable and interactive, which can be illustrated as follows.

"We like learning English in Thailand because we feel more relaxed than in China. We can talk with the teacher and friends freely".

"In Thailand, we can speak English more than when we were in China because we are exposed to foreign tourists when we travel."

Some students, however, preferred to learn more grammar and vocabulary as they felt that they had to take high-stake tests such as CET 4 when returning to China.

"We would like to learn more grammar and vocabulary as they are important for our examination in China"

"Our writing skill needs to be developed as our grammar knowledge and vocabulary are not good."

The other findings identify the key limitations of teaching and learning English in China compared to Thailand. Chinese English language pedagogy is viewed negatively as rigid, fixed, and exam-oriented. The critical thinking skill is thus neglected while summative assessment is strongly emphasized. The rapport and interaction between teachers and students are less whereas homework is more. The classroom atmosphere is one of the boredom and demotivation with unwelcome use of Chinglish rather than the target English.

In Thai university classrooms, however, Thai is the primary language of instruction. Used as the official and mother tongue language, Thai can often interfere with English. English spoken with a Thai accent is commonly used and heard; and, variations of standard English accents thus constrain English language acquisition. Test-taking strategies are not explicitly taught as university examination is not the main objective of the course (see Table 2).

Table 2. Limitations of English teaching and learning in China and in Thailand

China	Thailand
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Homework is excessive and difficult. 2. Teaching method is rigid and limited. 3. Students tend to lose interest in learning. 4. Teacher and students are less interactive. 5. Exam pattern is fixed. 6. There are few opportunities to speak English. 7. Students study to pass exams. 8. Chinglish is prevalent. 9. Critical thinking is not promoted. 10. Teaching objectives are based on examination-oriented education. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Most Thai people speak English with a Thai accent. 2. Exposure to Thai more than English. 3. Thai language interferes with English. 4. Different accents in English between Chinese and Thai speakers impede learning. 5. Students have poor exam-taking skills.

The students viewed that Chinese education is exam-oriented while Thai counterpart focuses on practice-based as their views are presented as the following.

“Our goal in learning English in China is to pass exams. We study very hard and the teachers give us a lot of homework. We are bored.”

“We often take notes and translate from Chinese to English and English to Chinese. We use a lot of Chinese-English dictionary.”

These statements reveal a grammar translation method used by Chinese teachers of English. The students consequently became bored and disengaged from class. There are also issues of the interference of Chinese and Thai on spoken English as some said that.

“We speak and listen to English with a Chinese accent in China. We also experience spoken English with a Thai accent in Thailand. We want to listen to more native English speakers.”

To sum up, Tables 1 and 2 have highlighted emerging benefits and limitations of English teaching and learning in China and in Thailand perceived by the Chinese students in this study. Their voices are sincere and meaningful, which should not be taken lightly as they can provide Thai teachers of English and relevant stakeholders ways to facilitate and improve Chinese students' English language learning in Thai higher education. The following section will provide discussions and pedagogical implications of this study.

Discussions and pedagogical implications

Based on the results of this study, the “cultures of learning” concept (Cortazzi & Jin, 2013; Jin & Cortazzi, 1993, 1996) perceived by the Chinese students in the Thai university is linguistically specific, culturally sensitive, contextually dependent, dynamic, agentive, and non-generalizable. Some of the emerging key issues are related to academic, socio-psychological, and socio-political and economic dimensions.

First, despite the fact that Thailand and China are geographically located in Asia, their academic systems, particularly English teaching and learning, are not underpinned by similar educational philosophies, policies, and practices (Huang, 2017). It is thus vital to strike an academically-appropriate balance between the students' beliefs and practices in their Chinese and Thai universities, which requires open-minded and on-going dialogic exchanges between Chinese students and Thai teachers. It is important not to take it for granted that the students can automatically accommodate and acculturate into the Thai academic system simply because it shares the same Asian values. Academic orientation can potentially alleviate misunderstandings and confusion that may emerge from mismatched expectations, education objectives, and learning outcomes. Since the students attended only a short-term immersion program, national high-stake exams were not the key evaluation criteria. Examination skills were therefore not practiced while interpersonal communication was promoted. In fact, enhancing translation and interpretation skills were the target outcomes, abilities that could promote their linguistic capital and cultural values in preparation for their later entry into the workforce.

Second, socio-psychological adaptations are perceived as relevant due to the students' daily exposure to linguistic and cultural diversity that required them to become more versatile in using Thai and English in academic and public spheres. Social support and acculturation of Chinese

students' socio-psychological needs should be considered and monitored for better prediction of cross-cultural adaptation results in order to alleviate students' loneliness while studying in Thailand (Lin & Kingmingkhae, 2014). Although the personal psychological issues such as homesickness, unmet expectations, loneliness, and social disintegration are unavoidable, teachers play essential roles in recognizing individual challenges, providing pastoral support, and monitoring academic progress throughout the course of such immersion programs. Without constant supervision and monitoring system, students may become less active, upset, disengaged, and isolated from classroom participation. Students, on the other hand, need to adjust and adopt suitable learning styles that facilitate acceptance of Thai academic practices.

Last but not least, governmental initiatives regarding socio-economic, political agendas and education policies toward globalization and internationalization in higher education are vital in determining national curriculum and standard criteria that can enhance their citizens' human capital and skills to meet the increasingly competitive demands of local, national, and global job markets (Songsathaphorn et al., 2014). As English taught, learned, and used in China and in Thailand is considered as a foreign language, it may not be readily available in sociocultural domains. Although English in Thailand may not represent native standard norms that are familiar to or expected by Chinese students, it is advisable for teachers to raise awareness of the variations of English used in Asian contexts by encouraging them to seek exposure to authentic English spoken by foreign tourists at various tourist sites in Thailand. English teaching and learning in Thailand can enable the Chinese students to recognize the changing status of English as a *lingua franca* in today's globalized society, which can potentially increase their awareness of English variations and promote their confidence as speakers of English.

In summary, practical pedagogical implications should elucidate and clarify fixed viewpoints, stereotypes, and attitudes towards Chinese overseas students in Thai higher education by allowing their agentive voices to appear and demystify academic systems and practices that are deeply embedded in both countries' academic systems. This study hopes to address and reciprocate our cross-cultural beliefs and practices of Chinese overseas students' "cultures of learning," which, in retrospect, promote "culturally appropriate and sensitive" teaching of English in Thai higher education. In addition, Chinese learners' learning objectives and needs of English should be explored prior to their arrival by asking their home university in terms of their expectation and final outcomes; thus, English courses offered by a Thai university can be better prepared in order to reach mutual goals of all relevant parties.

Conclusions and recommendations

This study explores Chinese overseas students' perceived benefits and limitations of English language teaching and learning in Thailand as compared to China. The benefits concern English language education philosophies, policies, and practices between teachers and students, exposure to English use, and high-stake tests in English teaching and learning. The Chinese education system focuses more on accuracy whereas the Thai counterpart emphasizes communicative fluency. Chinese students are competent in test-taking strategies and writing skills rather than speaking ones. The Chinese students in this study gradually revealed their preference for oral communication and become more aware of the variations of spoken English existing outside the classroom. The limitations, in contrast, are based on different educational outcome and assessment

criteria. Examinations are highly valued by Chinese tertiary institutions as a way to determining the students' English acquisition. Achieving mutual intelligibility, on the other hand, is the goal of communicative language teaching method in Thailand.

Although this study is based on a group of Chinese students at a particular university in Thailand, it will be of potential benefits to Chinese and Thai English language teachers, educators, course designers, teaching materials developers, researchers, administrators, and policy makers, for gaining practical ideas for English language teaching methods and curricula, and applicable to further such research on comparative overseas education between China and Thailand. Reciprocal exchanges of information shared by Chinese and Thai universities are compulsory as this immersion program is created by internationally collaborative agreement. On-going students' academic progress and personal trajectories should therefore be shared and monitored consistently by both institutes in order to avoid unexpected events and promote positive learning experiences for Chinese overseas students in Thailand.

About the author:

Singhanat Nomnian, Ed.D. is an Associate Professor and Chair of MA (Language and Intercultural Communication) at RILCA, Mahidol University, Thailand. His research interests include TESOL, Applied Linguistics, intercultural communication, English as a *lingua franca*, and internationalization in higher education. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6567-8328>

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