

Teaching in English-Medium the Chinese Learner of International Business Studies: A Practicum Guide

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Abstract. There are particular hurdles for learning in international business studies in tertiary education by the Chinese cultural learner. The term cultural learner chiefly addresses Mainland Chinese students whose schooling cycle has been in Chinese characters and within the learning culture of Mainland China. The article draws on insights from language research and neuropsychology to indicate the steep learning curve and different learning strategies in reading/writing/learning in alphabetical literacy; and the steep learning curve and different learning and assessment strategies involved in international business studies. Becoming aware of the learning curve and the learning difficulties that are specific to cultural Chinese learners indicates pedagogic strategies that need to be encountered, formulated, and practised in order to induct and to teach cultural Chinese learners in the environment of international business studies education. Both from business-model perspectives and from educational perspectives there needs to be major rethinking/re-programming in the internationalisation of English-medium university education, by universities and by governments and other stakeholders alike.

Keywords: linguistic difficulties, cultural difficulties, pedagogic issues, psychological barriers, cultural Chinese learners, support needs.

1. Introduction

The effects of International English Language Testing System (IELTS) are evident: there is a crisis in language education in China. We are producing a whole generation of IELTS test-takers who don't read, can't write and can barely speak English.¹

1a. What is not in focus in this paper. Test scores for the IELTS predominate as assessment of English language proficiency in selection for admission to tertiary international business studies.² The present article does not directly deal with this

1. Philip Yeung, "How English testing is failing Chinese students by driving numbers, not proficiency", *South China Morning Post*, 12 December 2018: <https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/united-states/article/2177403/how-english-testing-failing-chinese-students>

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selection status. An Australian case study by O'Loughlin provides a searching and evidenced critique of the use and misuse of IELTS tests in student selection.³ The conclusion in that paper, citing Ingram,⁴ highlights that "...persons [who use IELTS test results] ...need to have a better understanding of what English language proficiency means and what English language tests (especially the IELTS) do and do not measure".⁵ The integrity of the conduct of IELTS testing is touched upon in O'Loughlin,⁶ but this remains an under-researched issue and is not investigated in this article. The wider scepticism that especially focuses on the growth of Chinese first-language students⁷ has attracted journalistic attention,⁸ and the impact of COVID-19 national borders closure in Australia upon international student entry and re-entry has also attracted journalistic attention.⁹ The excessive China exposure of Australian universities is examined from business analysis, ethics, and economic analysis perspectives by Babones.¹⁰ Because the focus of this article is *teaching the Chinese learner*, there is no direct examination of the conflicts in university business policies and academic/educational policies arising from the growth in intake of international students whose first language is not English.¹¹

1b. Focus on language and cultural competencies. English overwhelmingly is the language of international communication, not least in international business communications. It follows that overwhelmingly English-medium instruction is the norm in international business education. The testing for English competency for persons whose first language is not English is also an international business, with the most widely standard test being IELTS, that functions as a main gateway in admissions to international education programs at undergraduate and graduate levels. The integrity of administration of IELTS tests by licensees remains an open and under-researched question. But there is increasing evidence that IELTS tests themselves inadequately identify English language competencies for applicants whose first language is not English for undertaking international-standard tertiary business education, along with indicators that tertiary

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2. IDP Education Australia, *IELTS Guide* (Cambridge UK: IDP Education Australia, 2009) and *IELTS Handbook* (Cambridge UK: IDP Australia, 2007).
 3. K. O'Loughlin, "The Interpretation and Use of Proficiency Test Scores in University Selection: How Valid and Ethical Are They?", *Language Assessment Quarterly* 8 (2011): pp. 147-160.
 4. D. Ingram, "English language testing: A pass for proficiency is not necessarily the answer", *UniNews*, 14:5: <http://archive.uninews.unimelb.edu.au>
 5. O'Loughlan, p. 159.
 6. For example, mention of "risk", p. 148; "excessive coaching", "less stringent scoring in some countries", and "dishonesty on the part of students and/or examiners", p. 157; and wider scepticism leading to "increasing scrutiny by the federal government and wider public", p. 159.
 7. Data on overseas, especially Chinese, tertiary student growth is available from: B. Birrell and K. Betts, *Australia's Higher Education Overseas Student Industry: In a Precarious State* (Camperwell VIC, Australian Population Research Institute, 2019). <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2018-11/apo-nid206501.pdf> and, S. Babones, *The China Student Boom and the Risks It Poses to Australian Universities*, Analysis Paper 5 (Sydney, Centre for Independent Studies, 2019). <https://www.cis.org.au/app/uploads/2019/08/ap5.pdf>

educational institutes accept for entry too low IELTS scores.¹² Thus, establishing, maintaining, and advancing tertiary international business education requires that institutions develop more discriminating suites of language competency assessment if their awards are to maintain international rank and if the delivered education is to meet entrants and user expectations.¹³ As will be explained such identifications of language proficiency are particularly marked where students are from non-alphabetical literary cultures and mono-cultural backgrounds, as is the case with most Chinese-language entrants.

Identification of competencies for admission to programs is thus not simply a matter of a narrow perspective of English language competency. *To learn a language is to learn a culture*, and in international business contexts it is also to learn complex cross-cultural and inter-cultural competencies. Different cultures have different constructions of manners of reasoning (differing “rationalities” and differing “pedagogies”), and learning in international English-medium settings also builds upon foundations of wider cultural education—such as basic understandings of world history and world geography and world politics, as well as manners of reasoning and cultural ethics across international business environments.¹⁴

It follows that educational assessment of English-language competencies also range across cultural educational foundations that underly the cultural, political, and economic foundations of the emergence of English-medium international business practice and development. The focus issue in this paper is not

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8. For useful overviews, see: ICEF Monitor, “Australian international student enrolments up 11% through to September 2019”, where it is noted, “diversification is needed”: <<https://monitor.icef.com/2019/11/australian-international-student-enrolments-up-11-through-september-2019/>> Also, Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) report, “Australian universities risk catastrophe due to over-reliance on Chinese students, expert warns”, which names universities as treating Chinese students as “cash cows” <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-08-21/australian-universities-too-dependent-on-chinese-students-report/11427272>> Matt Wade, “Degrees of risk: Inside Sydney’s extraordinary international student boom”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 March 2018. This online article includes extensive graphical data, and speaks of “An obsession with growing the international student market risks turning our universities into diploma mills.” <https://www.smh.com.au/interactive/2018/international-student-boom/>
 9. For example: Paul Karp, “Australian universities facing \$16bn black-hole as COVID-19 student numbers plummet”, *The Guardian*, Australian Edition, 3 June 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jun/03/australian-universities-facing-16bn-black-hole-as-covid-19-student-numbers-plummet>
 10. S. Banones, *China Student Boom*. This analytical report also provides international comparisons revealing the excessiveness of China exposure by Australian universities, p. 9f; the routine compromising of standards to accommodate international students, p. 10f; and the political, economic, and financial risks that are entailed, pp. 12-18.
 11. The cumbersome phrase “whose first language is not English” arises because the usual “English as a second language” (ESL) is often a misnomer, since students from overseas may be multi-lingual but still lack proficiency in English for international-level tertiary education. As argued in this paper, the issue is heightened where student first-language is pictorial rather than alphabetical, as with cultural Chinese students.
 12. K. O’Loughin, “The Interpretation and Use of Proficiency”, p. 151.

institutional development of admission assessments¹⁵—but on understanding the particular hurdles faced by Chinese-language students engaging international business education. Sustaining and advancing institutional standards and reputation means that international business educators need refined appreciations of these challenges in order to provide needed institutional support services for Chinese-language students, and to cultivate teaching and learning cultures that allow Chinese-language students successfully to engage the difficult transitions required for successful performance outcomes in English-medium international business education. It follows that this paper focuses not simply upon a narrow perspective of language competencies, but on English language *and* culture for contemporary international business education.

1c. The perspective on English-language competencies. The title of this paper is chosen for compactness, and requires some immediate clarification. Here *Chinese* is only marginally used in a racial sense—its use is predominantly in a *cultural* sense that will be further explored. *Teaching* is used not principally in a didactic sense, but in a *pedagogic* sense—a sense to be further explained where the teacher is alert to the learning difficulties typically encountered by students of Chinese cultural and schooling/educational backgrounds as reinforced by cultural Chinese teachers. Teaching as a term has an immediacy of understanding, and even though there are varieties of pedagogy and of styles, the paper presents a particular perspective—that of inculcating the Chinese learner (cultural Chinese learner) to the particular difficulties that they encounter and have to deal with and to surmount in English-medium international learning environments with a focus on international business education. That is, although applicable to didactic/lecture and/or group-learning teaching functions, the main direction involves giving an account of *methodological treatment* of the learning difficulties in English that are more prevalent for cultural Chinese learners. Yet further, these

13. J. Rees, “Counting the cost of international assessment: Why universities may need a second opinion”, *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 24 (1999), p. 434.

14. Useful sources for understanding the cultural-distance in Chinese-learning and pedagogy from English-learning and pedagogy are: Nicole J. Conrad, “Does the Brain Read Chinese or Spanish the Same Way It Reads English”, *Frontiers for Young Minds*. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309887740_Does_the_Brain_Read_Chinese_or_Spanish_the_Same_Way_It_Reads_English> A more comprehensive and wider-referenced survey for pedagogy [but that deals from a Hong Kong context with Cantonese speakers]: Pauline Bunce, “Alphabet Headaches: The Bi-Literacy Challenge for Chinese Students”, *TESOL in Context, Special Edition S3* (Camberwell, Victoria: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2012): http://www.tesol.org.au/files/files/280_pauline_bunce.pdfhttp://www.tesol.org.au/files/files/280_pauline_bunce.pdf

15. An excellent review of entry selection using IELTS scores is: K. O’Loughin, “The Interpretation and Use of Proficiency Test Scores”, *Language Assessment Quarterly* 8 (2011): pp. 146-160.