

The English Language Needs of Post-Graduate Chinese International Students at a Thai University

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Abstract

This study examines the English language needs of Chinese postgraduate students at a Thai university, focusing on their perceived difficulties in reading, writing, speaking, and listening in English. A quantitative descriptive survey design was employed, using a 15-item, five-point Likert-scale questionnaire administered to 16 master's degree students, who rated their perceived language challenges in academic settings. Because the instrument deliberately spans several distinct language constructs, its results are interpreted descriptively rather than as unidimensional scale scores. Descriptive statistics, including mean scores, standard deviations, and percentage distributions, were used to summarise the responses. The results indicate that participants experience moderate to high levels of difficulty in academic reading, writing, and listening, together with some hesitation in speaking English in academic contexts. Participants also strongly recognised the importance of improving their English for academic success. Given the small, purposively selected sample, the findings are presented as an exploratory snapshot rather than as generalisable estimates. The study underscores the need for targeted, scaffolded language-support services to address these challenges and enhance students' academic performance. Ethical considerations were observed throughout, ensuring participant confidentiality and voluntary participation.

Keywords: English language needs, postgraduate students, quantitative survey, academic challenges, language support services

Introduction

English proficiency is a significant factor in the academic success of international students, particularly those studying in non-native English-speaking countries. For Chinese students in Thailand, English is the medium of instruction at many universities, presenting difficulties in both academic and social settings. As global education becomes more interconnected, language competence is important for both academic achievement and social adaptation. International students often find it difficult to develop the language skills required for academic tasks such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking, all of which are necessary for success in university courses (ISANA, n.d.; Language on the Move, 2020).

The Thai context presents its own challenges for Chinese students, as English proficiency levels vary among students and the local academic culture differs from their home institutions. These

students often experience stress, isolation, and difficulty forming social connections, all of which are exacerbated by language barriers. Furthermore, while there has been substantial research on the English language needs of international students in English-speaking countries such as the United States and Australia, there is a gap in studies focusing on non-English-speaking host countries such as Thailand (Ma, 2020; Wang et al., 2023).

Despite the importance of English proficiency for their success, there is limited research on the specific language needs of Chinese postgraduate students in Thailand. This study seeks to identify and address these language-related issues by investigating the needs of Chinese postgraduate students at a Thai university and providing insights into the support required to improve their academic and social experiences.

This research is significant because it offers insights into the specific language needs of a group that is underrepresented in existing research. By identifying the key challenges these students face, the study can inform the development of targeted language-support programmes that improve both academic success and social integration. The findings also have implications for other non-English-speaking host countries that are increasingly attracting international students from Asia.

Research Objectives

1. To assess the perceived difficulties of Chinese postgraduate students in reading, writing, speaking, and listening in English within an academic context.
2. To identify the specific language challenges faced by Chinese postgraduate students at a Thai university.
3. To evaluate students' perceptions of the adequacy of existing language-support services.
4. To explore students' perceptions of the impact of their English language skills on their academic performance.

Theoretical Framework

The study draws on Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) to understand how language support can be provided in ways that promote active engagement and skill development. The ZPD framework holds that learners can achieve greater proficiency when supported in tasks that lie just beyond their current independent capability, with scaffolding provided by instructors or more capable peers. This perspective guides both the identification of the difficulties students report and the interpretation of the forms of support most likely to address them. Accordingly, each major finding in the Results and Discussion is read through the lens of ZPD and scaffolding, so that the framework functions analytically rather than remaining a decorative reference.

Literature Review

The literature on the English language needs of international students is extensive, focusing largely on their adaptation to academic and social environments. Research consistently indicates that

Chinese international students face difficulties with academic language demands—particularly writing and speaking—that are central to success in higher education. Many of these students come from educational systems that prioritise grammar and reading over conversational and writing skills, which heightens their difficulties in interactive and communicative academic settings (Ma, 2020; Sawir, 2005).

Comparable patterns appear across different host contexts. Kamaşak et al. (2021) examined language-related challenges at an English-medium university in Turkey and found that students from various linguistic backgrounds struggled most with writing and speaking—the same skills that are most consequential for academic performance. This converges with Wang et al. (2023), who reported that international students frequently encounter difficulties with reading and writing that are compounded by insufficient language support.

The surrounding language environment also shapes outcomes. Ramjan et al. (2024), in a mixed-method study of international students in Taiwan and Australia, found that language use was highly context-dependent: students in Australia, where English is the primary language, reported higher proficiency in writing and reading than their counterparts in Taiwan. These findings underscore the importance of contextual factors—such as the ambient language environment and the availability of support services—in shaping language acquisition, and they are directly relevant to the non-English-speaking Thai setting examined here.

Beyond documenting difficulties, scholars have proposed responses. Kim, Black, and Clifton (2024) argue that a holistic approach encompassing personalised language courses and self-directed learning opportunities can be more effective than traditional classroom instruction, empowering students to take ownership of their learning. Such approaches may be particularly beneficial for Chinese students who are motivated to improve their English but lack independent strategies to do so. Wilczewski and Alon (2023), in a bibliometric and content analysis, further highlight the need for research at the intersection of second-language proficiency and adaptation theories, arguing that a clearer understanding of how proficiency influences communication with local peers and engagement in academic settings is essential to explaining students' overall adaptation.

Taken together, the literature establishes that writing and speaking are recurrent areas of difficulty for international students, that inadequate and poorly targeted support worsens these difficulties, and that the host-country language environment conditions outcomes. It also points toward context-sensitive, autonomy-supporting interventions as promising responses. What remains comparatively underexplored is the specific profile of needs among Chinese postgraduate students in a non-English-speaking host country such as Thailand—the gap this study addresses.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative descriptive survey design to assess the English language needs of Chinese postgraduate students at a Thai university. Data were collected through a structured, 15-item Likert-scale questionnaire and summarised using descriptive statistics. The study is exploratory in purpose: it seeks to characterise patterns of perceived difficulty within a single programme rather than to test hypotheses or estimate population parameters.

Participants

The sample comprised 16 master's degree students who are native Chinese speakers enrolled in an international postgraduate programme at a Thai university. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure a focus on Chinese students in an English-medium academic environment. All participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and confidential.

Instrument and Reliability

A 15-item, five-point Likert-scale questionnaire (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) was designed to assess perceived difficulties across several language domains: reading, writing, speaking, listening, and social communication. The items addressed students' comfort levels, challenges, and experiences in using English in academic and everyday settings.

The questionnaire yielded a global Cronbach's alpha of 0.64. Although this value falls below the conventional 0.70 threshold, it should be interpreted in light of the instrument's structure rather than treated as a simple indicator of weak reliability. Cronbach's alpha presupposes unidimensionality—that is, it assumes that all items measure a single underlying construct. The present instrument was intentionally multidimensional, spanning five distinct language constructs (reading, writing, speaking, listening, and social communication). When items legitimately tap several different dimensions, the inter-item correlations that drive alpha are attenuated, and a reduced global coefficient is mathematically expected rather than evidence of a flawed measure. Consequently, the global alpha is reported here for transparency, but the analysis treats each item descriptively and interprets results at the level of individual indicators and language domains rather than as a single composite scale score. Where item-level data permit, future administrations of the instrument should report sub-scale (domain-level) coefficients for each language dimension, as these provide a more appropriate assessment of internal consistency within each construct than a single global statistic.

Data Analysis

The questionnaire data were analysed using descriptive statistics. Mean scores, standard deviations, and percentage distributions were calculated to summarise overall trends in students' perceived difficulties with reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Consistent with the

exploratory aim and the small sample, no inferential tests were conducted, and the results are presented as descriptive indicators.

Ethical Considerations

Participants were provided with an informed-consent form outlining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by assigning codes to participants and collecting no personal identifying information. All data were stored securely and reported in aggregate form to protect participants' identities, and responses were used solely for academic research purposes. The study thereby adhered to recognised ethical guidelines, ensuring that it was conducted in a transparent, respectful, and responsible manner.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 presents the percentage distribution of responses, together with the mean and standard deviation for each item on the English language needs questionnaire. Standard deviations are reported with a leading zero in accordance with APA 7th edition conventions.

Table 1

Percentage Distribution, Means, and Standard Deviations for the English Language Needs Questionnaire (N = 16)

Questionnaire Item	SD %	D %	N %	A %	SA %	M	SD
I feel confident participating in class discussions in English.	6.3	6.3	37.5	31.3	18.8	3.50	1.10
I find it difficult to write academic papers in English.	0	0	25.0	56.3	18.8	3.94	0.68
I struggle to understand lectures delivered in English.	0	6.3	43.8	43.8	6.3	3.50	0.73
I often have trouble reading academic texts in English.	0	0	25.0	50.0	25.0	4.00	0.73
I feel comfortable asking questions in English during lectures.	6.3	12.5	50.0	25.0	6.3	3.13	0.96
I frequently experience difficulty understanding academic vocabulary in English.	0	0	37.5	50.0	12.5	3.75	0.68
I feel isolated because of language barriers at the university.	25.0	12.5	37.5	12.5	12.5	2.75	1.34
I am able to effectively express my ideas in English during group work.	0	31.3	37.5	25.0	6.3	3.06	0.93
I find it challenging to understand English-language textbooks and articles.	0	6.3	37.5	43.8	12.5	3.63	0.81
I feel that my English-speaking skills are sufficient for everyday communication in Thailand.	6.3	12.5	50.0	12.5	18.8	3.25	1.13
I find it difficult to write formal emails and other professional correspondence in English.	0	25.0	43.8	18.8	12.5	3.19	0.98

Questionnaire Item	SD %	D %	N %	A %	SA %	M	SD
I feel that the language support services at the university adequately meet my needs.	0	6.3	43.8	37.5	12.5	3.56	0.81
I feel anxious when I have to speak English in front of others.	0	43.8	18.8	12.5	25.0	3.19	1.28
I find it difficult to participate in social activities due to language barriers.	6.3	25.0	31.3	25.0	12.5	3.13	1.15
I believe that improving my English language skills will enhance my academic performance.	0	0	6.3	31.3	62.5	4.56	0.63

Note. SD = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; N = Neutral; A = Agree; SA = Strongly Agree. M = mean; SD (final column) = standard deviation. Response scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree.

The responses reveal a mixture of confidence and difficulty in participants' use of English in academic settings. Participants expressed moderate confidence in engaging in class discussions (M = 3.50), with most responses neutral (37.5%) or in agreement (31.3% agree; 18.8% strongly agree).

Writing academic papers emerged as a more pronounced area of difficulty (M = 3.94), with 56.3% agreeing and 18.8% strongly agreeing that they find it challenging. Understanding lectures was moderately difficult (M = 3.50), with responses split evenly between agreement (43.8%) and neutrality (43.8%). Reading academic texts was the single most difficult area (M = 4.00): half of the participants agreed and a further 25% strongly agreed. Participants also reported limited comfort in asking questions in English during lectures (M = 3.13; 50% neutral), suggesting that many lack the confidence to engage fully during class.

Understanding academic vocabulary was likewise a notable challenge (M = 3.75), with 50% agreeing and 12.5% strongly agreeing. By contrast, most participants did not feel isolated because of language barriers (M = 2.75), indicating that language difficulties did not strongly undermine social integration for this group. Group work presented moderate difficulty (M = 3.06), and participants found English-language textbooks and articles challenging (M = 3.63), while reporting comparatively greater comfort using English for everyday communication in Thailand (M = 3.25). This contrast suggests that difficulties are concentrated in academic rather than everyday language use.

Formal written correspondence was a further area of concern (M = 3.19), while participants viewed the university's language-support services relatively positively (M = 3.56). Anxiety about speaking English in front of others was pronounced for a subset of participants (M = 3.19; 25% strongly agreeing), and social participation was modestly affected by language concerns (M = 3.13). Most strikingly, participants strongly endorsed the view that improving their English would enhance their academic performance (M = 4.56; 62.5% strongly agreeing), indicating clear awareness of the stakes involved.

Interpreting the Findings through the Zone of Proximal Development

Read through Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD, these patterns point to specific, scaffolded responses rather than generalised calls for "more English." The difficulty participants reported with academic vocabulary ($M = 3.75$) illustrates the principle directly. Rather than expecting students to bridge the gap between their current proficiency and the discipline's lexical demands unaided, instructors can position targeted scaffolds—discipline-specific word lists, vocabulary journals, and tiered glossaries that move from accessible synonyms to technical usage—within the learner's ZPD, gradually withdrawing support as independent mastery develops.

The same logic applies to the pronounced difficulty with reading academic texts ($M = 4.00$). Here, ZPD-aligned strategies such as peer-assisted reading and reciprocal teaching are well suited: by pairing less-confident readers with more capable peers who model questioning, clarifying, summarising, and predicting, the collaborative structure supplies the scaffolding that allows students to engage with texts currently beyond their independent reach. Comparable reasoning extends to academic writing ($M = 3.94$) and to speaking anxiety ($M = 3.19$): staged writing support with modelled exemplars and feedback, and low-stakes, peer-mediated speaking opportunities, both locate assistance within the ZPD so that students can perform—and progressively internalise—skills they cannot yet exercise alone. Interpreting the results in these terms strengthens the link between the data and the pedagogical recommendations that follow, and demonstrates that the theoretical framework does analytical work in the study.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations constrain the interpretation of these findings. Most importantly, the sample of 16 purposively selected students is too small to support statistical generalisation; the descriptive statistics reported here should be read as indicative rather than conclusive. The findings therefore constitute an exploratory snapshot of one international postgraduate programme and cannot be generalised to the broader population of Chinese postgraduate students in Thailand. A larger or purposively stratified sample—differentiated, for example, by discipline, length of study in Thailand, or prior English instruction—might yield a different distribution of difficulties and would permit inferential analysis and the estimation of sub-group differences. In addition, the reliance on self-reported perceptions, rather than direct proficiency measures, means that the study captures how students experience their language needs rather than their objective proficiency. These limitations do not negate the value of the findings as a basis for targeted institutional action, but they do mark the boundaries of what can be claimed from the present data.

Conclusion and Suggestions

The findings indicate that, while Chinese postgraduate students in this programme possess moderate confidence in using English in academic settings, they experience meaningful difficulty with academic writing, reading, and speaking, and with academic vocabulary. At the same time, they clearly recognise the importance of improving their English for academic success and hold a generally positive view of existing language-support services. Interpreted through the ZPD, these

results suggest that well-targeted, scaffolded support could convert that recognised need into measurable gains in academic performance and engagement.

Recommendations for Practice

Because the stated purpose of the study is to inform language-support services at the host institution, the following evidence-based recommendations are offered, each tied to a specific finding:

Establish an academic writing clinic or writing centre staffed by trained language tutors. This responds directly to the high levels of difficulty reported for writing academic papers ($M = 3.94$) and formal professional correspondence ($M = 3.19$), providing staged support, modelled exemplars, and individual feedback within students' ZPD.

Develop structured peer-mentoring groups that pair Chinese postgraduate students with proficient English speakers. Such groups address the speaking anxiety evident in the data ($M = 3.19$, with 25% strongly agreeing) by creating low-stakes, peer-mediated opportunities to practise academic speaking, consistent with reciprocal, ZPD-aligned learning.

Incorporate discipline-specific vocabulary instruction into existing English-medium coursework. This targets the academic-vocabulary difficulty reported by participants ($M = 3.75$) and the challenges with academic reading ($M = 4.00$), using word lists, vocabulary journals, and tiered glossaries as scaffolds that are gradually withdrawn as mastery develops.

These measures should be monitored and refined in light of student feedback, so that support remains calibrated to the evolving needs of each cohort.

Directions for Future Research

Future research could evaluate the effectiveness of specific language-support services—particularly writing clinics and peer-mentoring schemes—in addressing the needs identified here, and examine the relationship between language proficiency and academic performance to clarify how language skills shape learning outcomes. Further studies might investigate strategies for reducing language-related anxiety, especially in speaking situations, and the role of peer interaction and collaborative learning in improving proficiency. Finally, longitudinal designs with larger, stratified samples would allow researchers to trace how students' language skills evolve over time and to assess the long-term effects of language-support programmes on academic success.

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