



Challenges and Strategies in English-Medium Learning Among Chinese International Students in a Malaysian University

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Wu Zhangli¹ , Wang Xuewen², Lilliati Ismail²,
Norhakimah Khaissa Ahmad², and Omer HassanAli Mahfoodh³

Abstract

This study examined the challenges of English learning encountered by Chinese international students in a Malaysian university, as well as the contributing factors and strategies students employ to cope with these challenges. A total of 60 Chinese international students (51.7% male and 48.3% female) participated in this study, with an average stay of 8.5 months in Malaysia. The study adopted a sequential mixed-methods approach, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection. Quantitative data were gathered through a questionnaire, while qualitative data were collected via interviews. Descriptive analysis was used to identify students' challenges, while *T*-tests and ANOVA were conducted to examine statistical differences based on gender and academic qualifications. The contributing factors and students' coping strategies were identified through thematic analysis of the interviews. The results indicated that participants acknowledged challenges in English language learning, particularly in speaking and listening. Additionally, significant statistical differences were found across different academic qualification levels. These findings provide deeper insights into the English learning problems faced by Chinese international students and contribute to a greater understanding of how academic qualifications impact foreign language education.

Plain Language Summary

Why was the study done? Chinese international students, for whom English is taken as a foreign language, encounter significant challenges in term of linguistic obstacles. This article aimed to investigate the challenges faced by Chinese international students in English-medium learning in a Malaysian university, and the contributing factors and strategies students take to cope with these challenges. What did the researchers do? A total of 60 Chinese international students (51.7% males and 48.3% females) with 8.5 months average duration of study in Malaysia participated in a mixed method research. Subsequently, the descriptive analysis was used to identify the English learning challenges among Chinese international students, then *T*-test and ANOVA were used to gain further insights into the statistical differences attributable to the variable of gender and academic qualification. The thematic analysis was used to summarize the semi-structured interview data to reveal the contributing factors and students' coping strategies. What did the researchers

¹Dezhou University, China

²Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia

³Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia

Corresponding Author:

Wu Zhangli, School of Foreign Languages, Dezhou University, Dezhou 253000, China.
Email: 846575499@qq.com

Data Availability Statement included at the end of the article



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find? The results indicated that informants acknowledged the challenges in English language learning during their study in Malaysia, particularly in speaking and listening. Additionally, there were significant statistical differences among different academic qualifications. What do the findings mean? The findings revealed that students faced challenges, especially in speaking and listening skills. The study also identified significant differences related to academic qualifications. In essence, this research provides valuable insights into the perspectives of Chinese international students on English learning challenges and highlights the impact of academic qualifications on foreign language education.

Keywords

challenges and strategies, English-medium learning, Chinese international students, Malaysian university

Introduction

With the rapid globalization of the economy, technology, and culture, enrolling in prestigious international academic programs offers Chinese students' superior education and highly sought-after career opportunities. In recent years, the quality of higher education in Malaysia has been recognized internationally by authoritative organizations such as UNESCO and the Times Higher Education University Rankings, resulting in many international students showing interest in pursuing their studies at universities in Malaysia. According to Education Malaysia Global Services (EMGS), the volume of new applications from international students in 2022 witnessed a substantial increase compared to the previous year. Application trends indicate that China continues to be the largest source market for Malaysia by a significant margin. In 2022, Chinese students submitted 21,943 applications, a 15% increase from the previous year, accounting for 43% of the total application volume (EMGS, 2023).

In addition to acquiring knowledge and qualifications, studying abroad offers Chinese international students the opportunity to engage with students and faculty from diverse countries, allowing them to develop into independent thinkers, and catalysts for personal growth (Lillyman & Bennett, 2014). For international students, English has become the primary means of communication throughout their educational journey, placing greater demands on their English proficiency (Warring, 2010). Chinese international students, for whom English is learned as a foreign language, encounter significant challenges related to linguistic barriers, cultural disorientation, and the pressure of academic and societal expectations. Zhai and Razali (2022) report that Chinese international students at Malaysian higher education institutions face several challenges in English communication, including speaking anxiety, hesitation in expressing themselves, and a limited vocabulary in specific academic subjects. Additionally, Chinese international students not only experience academic stress but also face significant challenges in improving their English proficiency. These challenges include difficulties

in reading due to cultural differences and struggles with producing scholarly writing in English.

In the Malaysian context, a plethora of research has examined international students' academic difficulties, non-academic challenges, and academic needs (e.g., Alghail & Mahfoodh, 2016; S. Jiang et al., 2022; Shafaei et al., 2016; Shafaei & Razak, 2016; J. K. N. Singh et al., 2014; M. K. M. Singh et al., 2015; Yusoff, 2012). These studies included samples of students from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds, such as those from Middle Eastern and Arab countries. For instance, the sample in Alghail and Mahfoodh (2019) consisted of Yemeni postgraduate students from a single Malaysian public university, while the sample in S. Jiang et al. (2022) focused on Chinese international students studying at Malaysian universities. It is worth mentioning that Alghail and Mahfoodh (2016) provided an overview of studies on Arab postgraduate students in Malaysia, showing that most of these studies focused on the academic writing difficulties encountered by these students.

Concerning international students in the Malaysian context, studies have been limited to topics such as the correlation between psychological well-being and perceived social support (e.g., L. Y. Qi et al., 2021), academic writing (e.g., S. Jiang et al., 2022), and levels of well-being and foreign language enjoyment (e.g., D. Qi & Haladin, 2022). A quick overview of studies on international students in Malaysian institutions of higher education reveals that the difficulties encountered by Chinese international students and how they manage to overcome these challenges have not received adequate attention from researchers. Furthermore, despite the increasing number of Chinese international students in Malaysia, empirical studies have yet to adequately address the specific challenges these students face in learning English. As a result, there is a notable lack of comprehensive research and analysis on the English language learning experiences of Chinese international students in Malaysian higher education. To address this research gap, the present study investigates the challenges Chinese students face in learning English at Malaysian higher education institutions through a

questionnaire survey. It also explores the factors contributing to these challenges and the coping strategies used by the students through interviews. Specifically, this research addresses the following five research questions:

1. What linguistic difficulties and challenges do Chinese international students in Malaysian higher education institutions face in English language learning?
2. Are there statistically significant differences in the challenges faced by Chinese international students in Malaysian higher education institutions concerning their gender in the context of English language learning?
3. Are there statistically significant differences in the academic challenges faced by Chinese international students in Malaysian higher education institutions concerning their academic qualifications in the context of English language learning?
4. What are the underlying factors contributing to the English learning difficulties and challenges faced by Chinese international students in Malaysian higher education institutions?
5. What strategies do Chinese students in Malaysian higher education institutions adopt to address their linguistic difficulties and challenges in English language learning?

Literature Review

Learning English as a Foreign Language in China

Within the existing body of scholarly literature, a multitude of scholars have made notable distinctions and elucidated the variances and conceptual underpinnings between English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a second language (ESL; Ellis, 1997; Krieger, 2005; Setiyadi, 2020). In the context of China, English does not serve as the primary medium of everyday communication or as the principal tool for social interaction among learners. Rather, it is perceived as a subject or an additional language that warrants study and utilization. Chinese EFL learners commonly participate in English language acquisition with a clear aim of meeting specific needs related to academia, career progression, travel, or similar purposes (Gu, 2010). In pursuing these objectives, their goal is to strengthen their language skills and improve their cross-cultural communicative competencies (Mugford, 2021).

In the realm of EFL pedagogy, instructional frameworks and methodologies primarily focus on various aspects of the English language, including grammar, vocabulary, listening, speaking, and reading comprehension (Iskandar, 2020). In the classroom setting, instructors frequently employ educational tools such as

textbooks, workbooks, audio resources, and Supplemental Materials to foster the advancement of learners' English aptitude (Alzebaree & Zebari, 2021). Therefore, a distinctive feature of EFL learning is the limited exposure of learners to authentic English communication in their day-to-day routines (Kohn, 2015). As a result, there is a heightened focus on developing proficiencies in written language, specifically in the domains of reading and writing (Wei, 2016). To overcome this limitation, learners may be required to augment their opportunities for language input and output through classroom exercises, language practice activities, and leveraging online resources (Leech et al., 2014).

The field of EFL learning in China has become a fertile ground for extensive research, with many scholars exploring its intricacies. Some studies have specifically examined the learning strategies and motivational factors influencing EFL learners. For instance, Gong et al. (2020) revealed that Chinese EFL learners tend to adopt an examination-oriented approach, prioritizing test scores over genuine language proficiency. Other studies have examined the utilization of learning strategies by learners in diverse learning contexts, as well as the impact of these strategies on academic achievements and language proficiency development (e.g., H. Chen et al., 2020; Z. Chen et al., 2020; L. Jiang et al., 2019; Z. Wang, 2015). In recent years, prominent themes attracting considerable attention include mobile-assisted language learning, project-based learning, and blended learning (e.g., C. Jiang, 2023; F. Li et al., 2022; Lin et al., 2023; N. Wang et al., 2021). The continuous evolution of mobile devices, games, and virtual worlds remains a focal point of researchers' interest (H. Chen et al., 2020; Z. Chen et al., 2020; R. Li et al., 2021; Tai et al., 2022). Furthermore, scholars and educators have recently begun integrating various technologies, such as the combination of mobile technology and AI models for vocabulary learning (Song et al., 2023). This integration encompasses various contexts, with one notable example being the incorporation of digital multimodal composing into the writing performance of Chinese EFL learners (Xu, 2023).

The aforementioned studies have predominantly concentrated on the English language learning context of local students in China, with relatively limited research specifically addressing the English language learning situation of Chinese international students in other countries such as Malaysia (Y. M. Chen & Wei, 2023; Zhai & Razali, 2022). In response to this research gap, the primary objective of this study is to investigate and analyze the challenges faced by Chinese international students in learning English in Malaysia. Additionally, the research aims to explore and propose potential strategies for mitigating these obstacles and facilitating effective language learning outcomes.

Chinese International Students in Malaysian Higher Education Institutions

In recent years, there has been a notable increase in the number of Chinese international students enrolling in Malaysian higher education institutions, with many opting to pursue a diverse array of disciplines (Zhai & Razali, 2022). Chinese students have made significant contributions to promoting multicultural exchange and understanding within these institutions. They engage with students from diverse countries and regions, sharing their cultural backgrounds while also embracing and integrating into Malaysian educational culture (Yassin et al., 2020). However, researchers have noted that Chinese students in Malaysia often encounter cultural differences in some areas such as language, food, customs, and social norms (Zhao et al., 2023). Adapting to a new cultural environment can initially pose challenges, including academic ones, but it also provides opportunities for personal growth, cross-cultural learning, and the broadening of global perspectives (Zhao et al., 2023).

Despite the prevalent use of English in Malaysian higher education institutions, Chinese students, as non-native English speakers, may face linguistic obstacles in both academic settings, and daily interactions (Huiling & Ismail, 2022; Zhai & Razali, 2022). Proficiency in English is crucial, as it is essential for academic success and effective communication. Previous studies (e.g., Kamal Basha et al., 2016; J. K. N. Singh, 2020; Xiuwen & Razali, 2020) have identified various linguistic challenges that Chinese international students may confront, including limitations in vocabulary, grammatical inaccuracies, pronunciation and accent differences, and difficulties with comprehension and fluent expression. In their everyday social interactions with local Malaysian students and other international peers, they may struggle with understanding idiomatic expressions, managing accent variations, and navigating cross-cultural differences. These linguistic challenges can significantly affect their ability to form friendships and establish effective social networks. Additionally, international students often need to adjust to the demands of academic English, including mastering academic writing, comprehending complex scholarly texts, and actively participating in classroom discussions (Zhao et al., 2022).

A wealth of scholarly literature on the adaptation of Chinese students consistently indicates that this cohort faces heightened challenges during the acculturation process (e.g., Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016; Galchenko & van de Vijver, 2007). Early research has shown that Chinese international students experience greater difficulties in adapting compared to their English-speaking counterparts, with lower English language proficiency identified as a key contributing factor (Chataway & Berry, 1989; Gan, 2013).

It is important to note that existing research on the adaptation of Chinese students has predominantly focused on Western countries, such as the United States and Russia, while limited attention has been given to Asian countries, including Malaysia. In line with the assertions of Xiuwen and Razali (2021) and Zhao et al. (2023), there is a noticeable gap in the literature regarding a detailed exploration of the challenges and adaptation experiences faced by Chinese students in Malaysia. Furthermore, the body of literature addressing the English language learning challenges of Chinese international students within Malaysian higher education institutions remains notably limited, with few research initiatives in this area. Consequently, the primary aim of this study is to conduct a thorough examination of the adaptation process among Chinese students in Malaysia, thereby contributing valuable insights to the current state of research on this topic.

Theoretical Background

This study is supported by two key theories: the Theory of Second Language Acquisition (SLA; Cummins, 1980) and the Sociocultural Theory of Learning (Vygotsky, 1986). Cummins (1980) posited that cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) is directly related to formal academic learning, where students engage with academic content through the four major language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Accordingly, the success of Chinese international students in Malaysian universities largely depends on their English language proficiency. The development of academic language skills is essential for these students, as it helps them overcome the linguistic and academic challenges they encounter.

As this study focuses on how Chinese international students navigate and overcome difficulties, Vygotsky's (1978, 1986) Sociocultural Theory is particularly relevant. This theory views learning as a fundamentally social activity, highlighting the critical role of social contexts in shaping individual growth during the socialization process (Innes, 2004). Vygotsky's theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how learning and development are influenced by sociocultural factors. Rather than being an isolated or purely individual process, learning is collaborative and interactive. Students learn from one another through dialog, guidance, and participation in shared academic activities.

By incorporating these two theories, this study situates Chinese international students in Malaysia as members of various disciplinary communities, where proficiency in all language skills is essential. These students must use English not only to acquire academic knowledge but also to communicate effectively within their academic communities. Their learning process involves active

participation, requiring them to engage in academic activities and interact with peers to share knowledge and experiences.

Method

Research Design

In the current study, a mixed-methods approach was employed to achieve comprehensive and multidimensional research outcomes by integrating qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques into the research design (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007). Specifically, the mixed data collection involved administering questionnaires and conducting semi-structured interviews to ensure a thorough understanding of the research topic. This research design is particularly suitable for the current study for several reasons. First, this design helped the researchers to provide a good understanding of the two concerns of this study: quantitative and qualitative. Second, this mixed-methods research design is regarded as the most straightforward among other mixed-methods research designs (Creswell et al., 2011). The sequence of the two approaches helped the researchers to explain and elaborate on the quantitative results obtained through the analysis of the questionnaires. Third, the nature of the research questions necessitates the use of two approaches for answering the research questions. Fourth, this current study employed this design because the primary focus of the study is the results obtained from the analysis of data which were collected using questionnaires. Hence, these reasons can provide justifications for the selection of the mixed methods design for this study.

Quantitative data from the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive analysis, t-tests, and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to address the initial three research questions. Concurrently, qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews underwent thematic analysis to answer the fourth and fifth research questions. Collectively, the overarching aim of employing a mixed-methods approach is to comprehensively investigate the challenges, influencing factors, and coping strategies experienced by Chinese international students in Malaysia when learning the English language.

Research Setting and Participants

This study was conducted at a public research university situated in Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia, with an enrollment of 5,289 international students, and a total population of around 30,000 students in 2023. Recognized as one of Malaysia's premier public universities, it holds the 158th position in the QS World University Rankings for 2024. Encompassing 1,245 hectares, the main campus is

conveniently located just 25 kilometers from Kuala Lumpur.

Following the rationale presented by Creswell and Creswell (2017), stratified sampling was employed to identify all accessible informants and select participants who could meaningfully contribute to the research objectives. This approach enhanced the representativeness of the sample, improved the reliability and precision of this study, and facilitated the selection of a sample that would provide a comprehensive understanding of the research topic. As shown in Table 1, the target population was stratified into three levels: undergraduate, master's, and Ph.D. Within each level, Chinese international students who had studied full-time in Malaysia were randomly sampled as participants. Finally, 20 international students were selected as survey participants at each level, resulting in a total of 60 participants: 31 are males (51.7%) and 29 are females (48.3%). Within each level, two international students were purposively chosen as participants for semi-structured interviews (6 students in total). The consent forms of the 60 informants were collected through email and they voluntarily participated in the study. To safeguard the anonymity of the participants and maintain the confidentiality of their data, pseudonyms were assigned by the researchers.

Instruments

This study employed a mixed-methods research approach utilizing questionnaires and semi-structured interviews for data collection. According to Harmer (2001), questionnaires are extensively employed and valuable instruments for gathering survey data, offering structured and often numerical information and are typically relatively straightforward to analyze. The questionnaire, designed to collect quantitative data, focused on key aspects of SLA abilities. To ensure effective engagement and accurate data collection, the questionnaire was administered in Chinese. This choice aimed to enhance participants' comprehension and minimize potential language barriers, facilitating clearer communication between participants and researchers and improving the overall reliability of the responses. It was divided into three parts: the initial section collected demographic information from the participants, the subsequent section assessed their overall level of English language proficiency, and the final section investigated the obstacles and hurdles encountered in the process of learning English. Specifically, the third section examined the difficulties and challenges experienced in various aspects of English language acquisition, including Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing, Grammar, and Vocabulary, each aspect comprising 10 items, totaling 60 items.

The quantitative data were collected using a questionnaire adapted from Hyland (1997) and Evans and Green

Table 1. Participants' Demographic Information.

Degree level	Number	Major	Average time in Malaysia (month)	Sex ratio (male/female)
Undergraduate	20	Software Engineering Business Administration Mathematics Psychology Human Resources Development Communication Journalism	8	12/8
Master's	20	Environment management Economics Innovation Engineering Design MBA Educational Technology Educational Psychology Curriculum and Instruction	7.5	10/10
PhD	20	Music Finance Marketing Integrated Design Studies Educational Technology Sport Science Technical and Vocational Education Economics Biochemistry	10	9/11

(2007). The questionnaire utilized a five-point Likert scale, where a score of 1 indicated "strongly disagree" and subsequent scores represented increasing levels of agreement, culminating in a score of 5 denoting "strongly agree". This design aims to comprehensively assess respondents' attitudes and perspectives regarding various language skills. The explicit scoring system facilitates a more accessible analysis and interpretation of the results. Throughout the entirety of the procedure, respondents were provided with an assurance of complete anonymity while completing the questionnaire.

The preliminary assessment of the questionnaire revealed Cronbach's alpha coefficients of .732 (Listening), .814 (Speaking), .781 (Reading), .923 (Writing), .861 (Grammar), and .886 (Vocabulary) for each respective aspect, with an overall coefficient of .950. These Cronbach's alpha coefficients indicate a high level of internal consistency within different aspects of the questionnaire, reflecting strong interrelatedness among its measured constructs. Furthermore, to measure the content validity of the questionnaire, a panel of relevant experts was formed to evaluate and confirm the instruments (DeVellis & Thorpe, 2021), which comprised two university lecturers with PhD qualifications specializing in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) and expertise in educational technology, along with one university lecturer holding a PhD in Applied Linguistics. In response to feedback from the experts, one questionnaire item was revised to address concerns related to language

and sentence structure complexity. Uncommon vocabulary was replaced with more familiar alternatives to improve student understanding.

To obtain comprehensive and unbiased insights into the research questions, the semi-structured interviews in this study were designed to explore the underlying reasons and coping strategies associated with the difficulties faced by Chinese international students in their English language learning journey. Conducting the interviews in Chinese facilitated clearer understanding and communication, enabling both participants and researchers to engage more effectively. This choice not only minimized potential language barriers but also enhanced the depth and accuracy of the data collected, ensuring that the insights reflected the participants' true experiences and perspective. Before the commencement of data collection, the interview questions and protocols were subjected to evaluation and assessment by the expert panel. They made slight modifications to specific terminology and verified that the interview protocol could precisely and efficiently capture the genuine perspectives of the interviewees, which affirmed a robust validity of the interview protocol.

Data Collection and Analysis

As this research adopted the mixed-methods approach, the whole data collection process in this research was divided into two phases: the quantitative data phase,

involving questionnaire survey, and the qualitative data phase, comprising recorded semi-structured interviews. During the first stage, the researchers utilized stratified sampling to choose participants from the university campus. Following their voluntary agreement, printed questionnaires were distributed, and data were gathered through the respondents' completion of these questionnaires.

In the second phase, the researchers purposively selected six students from the 60 participants for face-to-face oral interviews, and all interviews were recorded. The interview protocol was initially structured to focus on two main aspects: the underlying factors influencing the challenges encountered in English language acquisition within Malaysian higher education institutions, and the strategies and methodologies employed by participants to cope with these challenges. Each interview session lasted approximately 15 min, and strict measures were implemented to protect participant anonymity, ensuring that no personal information was solicited, or disclosed during the interviews.

In the realm of quantitative data analysis, this study utilized descriptive analysis, t-tests, and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to delve into the first three research questions. On the qualitative front, thematic analysis was chosen as the methodological approach to tackle the fourth and fifth research questions. Prior to engaging in statistical analysis, this study conducted a normality test and an assessment of homogeneity of variance using IBM SPSS version 26.0, which aimed to ascertain the suitability of the collected data for subsequent analysis. According to the test results, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test's Sig. values for normality were .181 (Listening), .200 (Speaking), .200 (Reading), .176 (Writing), .200 (Grammar), .138 (Vocabulary), and the Shapiro-Wilk test's Sig. values were .240 (Listening), .126 (Speaking), .226 (Reading), .209 (Writing), .235 (Grammar), .154 (Vocabulary). The analysis indicates that the questionnaire data conforms to a normal distribution. Moreover, the results of Levene's test indicated that the Sig. values were .088 (Listening), .855 (Speaking), .374 (Reading), .086 (Writing), .718 (Grammar), .846 (Vocabulary), which confirmed the homogeneity of variance.

In the qualitative phase of the study, the semi-structured interviews were conducted in a quiet and undisturbed environment. Audio recordings were captured using the iFlytek AI Smart Recording Pen SR502. Subsequently, the audio files were imported into the Tencent Cloud Speech Recognition system for verbatim transcription. For reliability, the researchers checked the accuracy of the transcription twice. Further, the transcribed texts underwent a meticulous review and verification process by an expert panel to ensure precision and completeness, leaving no room for omission. Utilizing

Table 2. Descriptive Analysis of Challenges in English Learning.

Categories	N	Mean	Std. deviation
Writing	10	3.84	0.961
Listening	10	3.77	0.910
Reading	10	3.71	0.932
Grammar	10	3.69	1.051
Speaking	10	3.65	1.055
Vocabulary	10	3.56	1.094
Average	10	3.70	1.005

the thematic analysis approach, the qualitative data were carefully analyzed, yielding two major themes: (1) factors influencing these challenges and (2) strategies employed to surmount them, both of which hold paramount significance in addressing the research questions.

To analyze the interviews, we followed the recommended processes and stages outlined by Clarke and Braun (2017) and Brinkmann and Kvale (2018): categorization, contrast, structuring, and theorization. In the categorization process, the researchers read the interview transcripts multiple times, labeling the themes in light of the interview questions and the study's research objectives. During the contrast process, the researchers convened to compare the analyses and generated themes, ensuring consistency by comparing the themes across all six interviews until consensus was reached. This was followed by the structuring process, in which themes and sub-themes were organized based on the students' linguistic difficulties and the strategies they employed to overcome these challenges. Finally, theorization was conducted to report and interpret the results of the analysis, supported by excerpts from the interviews.

Results

Difficulties and Challenges in English Learning

In this section, the report presents difficulties and challenges Chinese international students in Malaysian higher education institutions face in English language learning. These were obtained using the questionnaire.

Table 2 illustrates the linguistic difficulties and challenges faced by Chinese international students during their study abroad in English language learning. The overall average mean is 3.70, indicating a relatively high level of acknowledgment of these difficulties by the informants. The mean and standard deviation for each set of 10 items were calculated in terms of each aspect of the academic challenges. After that, the overall average mean was computed. As shown in Table 2, the two highest average mean scores were obtained for Writing (3.84) and Listening (3.77), indicating that the participants

Table 3. Statistical Analysis Attributed to Students' Gender.

Categories	Gender	N	Mean	Std. deviation	T-value	Sig.
Listening	Male	31	3.68	0.883	-0.837	.591
	Female	29	3.88	0.930		
Speaking	Male	31	3.59	1.046	-0.501	.422
	Female	29	3.72	1.065		
Reading	Male	31	3.61	0.938	-0.919	.385
	Female	29	3.82	0.919		
Writing	Male	31	3.79	0.963	-0.395	.546
	Female	29	3.89	0.964		
Grammar	Male	31	3.65	1.030	-0.264	.435
	Female	29	3.72	1.074		
Vocabulary	Male	31	3.54	1.002	-0.149	.282
	Female	29	3.58	1.194		
Average	Male	31	3.64	0.977	-0.511	.443
	Female	29	3.77	1.024		

perceived relatively high levels of difficulties and challenges in these two language skills.

In the Speaking domain, the items with the highest average mean score are "It's difficult for me to use advanced words and sentences in my English writing." (4.13) and "It is difficult for me to correctly use rhetorical devices and literary skills in English writing." (3.95). Indicating that the participants generally perceive a lack of proficiency in writing skills and find it challenging to retrieve and employ vocabulary and sentences swiftly during writing. In the Listening aspect, "I find it difficult to understand listening contents in which there are too many unfamiliar words" (3.98) and "I find it difficult to understand the listening text when speakers speak with varied accents." (3.95) obtained the two highest average mean scores. This indicates that the participants' listening proficiency is influenced by the speaker's accent and affected by their vocabulary mastery during the listening process. Furthermore, vocabulary (1.094) exhibited the highest standard deviation values. This may reflect the presence of differences or heterogeneity within the sample, indicating that there are individual variations in the participants' vocabulary proficiency, with some individuals exhibiting a high level of proficiency while others demonstrate comparatively weaker vocabulary mastery.

Differences in Students' Challenges Across Their Gender

In this section, we report the statistically significant differences in the English learning challenges faced by Chinese international students in Malaysian higher education institutions due to their gender. To statistically measure these differences, *t*-test in SPSS was used to reveal the differences among males and female for each language skill.

Table 3 displays the absence of statistically significant differences among the responses of the participants concerning the challenges and difficulties faced by Chinese international students studying in Malaysian higher education institutions during their English language learning process, attributable to the gender variable. The researchers performed *T*-tests to compute values for different aspects of English learning and subsequently calculated their means. In Table 3, it is evident that *T*-values associated with each aspect were comparatively modest, and all corresponding Sig. values exceeded the significance level of .05. These findings suggest that the differences observed in sample means were relatively minor, indicating a lack of statistically significant variations based on the gender variable within the collected dataset.

Differences in Students' Challenges and Their Academic Qualifications

This section reports the answers to Research Question 3, which examined the differences in students' challenges based on their academic qualifications. Table 4 presents the results of ANOVA analysis. As reflected in Table 4, statistical differences exist among students' challenges according to their academic qualification (Undergraduate, Master's, and PhD). The researchers conducted an ANOVA data analysis on the responses of informants with different academic qualifications regarding each aspect of the questionnaire and subsequently calculated their means. As shown in the table, all aspects of the questionnaire (except for Grammar) yielded high *F*-values and Sig. values smaller than .05, indicating a significant difference in the perception of English learning difficulties and challenges among participants with varying academic qualifications. The observed phenomenon can be attributed to multifarious factors. Diversity in academic

Table 4. Differences in Students' Challenges Across Their Academic Qualifications.

Categories	Group	Sum of squares	Df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Listening	Between groups	757.433	2	378.717	12.433	.008
	Within groups	1,736.300	57	30.461		
	Total	2,493.733	59			
Speaking	Between groups	932.633	2	466.317	9.657	.003
	Within groups	2,752.350	57	48.287		
	Total	3,684.983	59			
Reading	Between groups	672.700	2	336.350	8.649	.011
	Within groups	2,216.700	57	38.889		
	Total	2,889.400	59			
Writing	Between groups	699.700	2	349.850	9.484	.029
	Within groups	2,102.700	57	36.889		
	Total	2,802.400	59			
Grammar	Between groups	734.700	2	367.350	7.273	.012
	Within groups	2,878.950	57	50.508		
	Total	3,613.650	59			
Vocabulary	Between groups	889.233	2	444.617	8.208	.039
	Within groups	3,087.500	57	54.167		
	Total	3,976.733	59			

qualifications among participants can lead to notable distinctions in their educational backgrounds. Those possessing higher academic qualifications might have undergone more targeted and advanced training, fostering a greater proficiency in handling challenges related to English language learning. Additionally, academic credentials could serve as indicators of the participants' practical experiences and proficiency in the realms of teaching or learning. Consequently, individuals with greater exposure may harbor a more extensive and profound grasp of the intricacies surrounding learning challenges. Moreover, the academic qualifications of participants may be linked to the specific disciplines or fields of study they have pursued. Diverse knowledge and skills acquired from various disciplines could impact their interpretations and comprehension of challenges encountered in the process of English language learning.

Factors Contributing to Chinese International Students' Linguistic Difficulties, Challenges, and Strategies

This section presents the findings related to Research Question 4, which examined factors that contribute to contribute to difficulties and challenges encountered by Chinese international students in Malaysian higher education institutions. Further, strategies (Research Question 5) that Chinese students in Malaysian higher education institutions adopt to address these difficulties and challenges in English language learning are also presented in this section.

Table 5 outlines the fundamental factors that contribute to challenges in various facets of English learning for Chinese international students, along with the primary

strategies they employ, as revealed through thematic analysis. An important subtopic under the initial theme of Listening pertained to the difficulty in dealing with various pronunciations and accents, as highlighted during the interviews. Interviewee 2 articulated, "*At times, diverse accents can be confusing, making it challenging to discern the words being spoken. It takes some time to adapt to this.*" Moreover, two participants expressed that they lack sufficient accumulation of vocabulary and grammatical knowledge, highlighting the ongoing need for exposure to authentic communicative settings. Crucial factors within the subcategories of theme 2, Speaking, comprised deficiencies in vocabulary, expressive skills, self-confidence, and cultural comprehension. As described by interviewee 3, "*Due to the educational environment in China, we have limited opportunities for authentic language communication. This results in challenges in oral expression during our study abroad journey, including a restricted vocabulary, lack of self-confidence, and unfamiliarity with the local culture, thereby increasing the difficulty of oral communication.*"

A key aspect within theme 3, Reading, revolved that students lack motivation and patience, especially when reading academic materials. Interviewee 2 and 5 remarked, "*some specialized vocabulary can be confusing to me, and rapid reading remains challenging. At times, there is a lack of patience to read thoroughly.*" For theme 4, interviewees 1 and 6 mentioned, "*I still lack extensive writing practice, including various types of texts, and the consolidation of basic grammar and vocabulary.*" The sub-themes under the category "Factors" in theme 5, Grammar, unveiled a significant concern. For example, one of the interviewees expressed that "*The exam-*

Table 5. Themes and Sub-themes in the Interviews.

No.	Themes	Sub-topics	
		Factors	Strategies
1.	Listening	Pronunciation and accents Vocabulary and grammar Authentic communication settings	Online platforms Native English speakers
2.	Speaking	Vocabulary Expressive ability Self-confidence Understanding of cultures	Presentation and speech Native speakers Online practice and training Discussion forum
3.	Reading	Culture and background Sentence structure Reading skills Motivation and patience	Reading clubs Vocabulary accumulation Library Academic material reading
4.	Writing	Writing practice Vocabulary Grammar	Writing workshops Academic conferences Supervisors
5.	Grammar	Authentic grammar practice Exam-oriented education	Online video lessons Writing and translation practice
6.	Vocabulary	Learning strategy Vocabulary application	Reading materials Mobile phone Apps

oriented education system has left me lacking practical experience and flexibility in applying grammar. Additionally, it has diminished my enthusiasm for learning English grammar.” With reference to theme 6, Vocabulary, participants pointed out that they lack effective strategies. Interviewees 3 and 6 remarked, “Simply rote memorization is not the best approach for vocabulary retention; we still need to accumulate vocabulary in authentic language environments.”

The subtopics within the “Strategies” category in theme 1, Listening, indicate a trend among students to leverage online resources and seek support from native speakers. For example, Interviewees 2 and 5 revealed that they “engage in listening exercises on online platforms and regularly undergo listening training.” Other interviewees showed that they “increase communication and interaction with native English speakers to adapt to diverse English environments with different pronunciations and accents.” Concerning theme 2, Speaking, two interviewees revealed their practice of speaking through presentations, speeches, and discussion forums. They emphasized their commitment to “creating opportunities for oral communication and participating in more conversations and discussions.”

The sub-themes within the category “Strategies” in theme 3 involve various strategies. Interviewee 6 expressed a desire to participate in reading clubs to enhance reading interest and motivation. Interviewee 5 highlighted the wealth of literature accessible in the school library, noting, “Whenever I have leisure time, I spend entire days in the library”. Regarding theme 4, Writing, two interviewees concurred on participating in

writing workshops or academic conferences and actively seeking feedback and guidance from supervisors. The sub-themes within the category “Strategies” in theme 5, Grammar, have brought to light the students’ preference for online courses. Interviewee 3 mentioned, “I typically utilize online platforms for systematic grammar learning and training”, while Interviewee 4 added, “I aim to enhance my writing skills through translation practice.” Regarding the last theme, Vocabulary, three interviewees emphasized their use of Apps on mobile phones to enhance their vocabulary. According to interviewee 3, “Mobile apps are not only convenient but also clear, offering significant assistance to me”. Additionally, interviewee 2 noted, “Vocabulary acquisition can also be achieved through reading diverse articles, including materials like supermarket flyers—learning opportunities are ubiquitous.”

Discussion and Implications

The findings of the questionnaire survey indicate that Chinese international students face challenges in various aspects of English language acquisition, aligning with similar research efforts, such as Yang (2017), who noted that language-related obstacles, and pedagogical challenges suggest that many Chinese students enter their programs without adequate preparation in English language proficiency and familiarity with the academic cultures of their host institutions. The same is true for the study by Zhang and Li (2022), whose findings indicated that language proficiency plays a pivotal role in fostering cross-cultural adaptation among Chinese international

students and they included in the survey encountered challenges in comprehending instructors, the content taught, and articulating their thoughts during classes. Moreover, according to the descriptive analysis of questionnaire data in this study, writing ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 0.961$) emerges as the most challenging aspect of English language learning for Chinese international students in terms of mean scores. This finding diverges slightly from the results obtained by Zhou et al. (2021), whose research identified reading proficiency as a primary obstacle to the cultural adaptation of Chinese international students.

The T -test results from our study reveal that there is no statistically significant variation observed in any aspect of English learning when considering the gender as a variable. This observation aligns with findings from other comparative studies that explore the impact of gender on English learning, such as the works of Ranjan and Philominraj (2020) and Melvina et al. (2023). Ranjan and Philominraj (2020) reported that their statistical analysis concluded there were no significant gender differences in the utilization of learning strategies. This finding aligns with Melvina et al. (2023), who similarly observed no notable differences in the use of language learning strategies between the two gender groups within the student population.

Furthermore, ANOVA results indicated that Chinese international students of different academic qualifications had significantly different overviews about the challenges in terms of Listening ($F = 12.433$, $p = .008$), Speaking ($F = 9.657$, $p = .003$), Reading ($F = 8.649$, $p = .011$), Writing ($F = 9.484$, $p = .029$), Grammar ($F = 7.273$, $p = .012$), and Vocabulary ($F = 8.208$, $p = .039$). The findings of this study align with similar observations made in Oliver et al.'s (2012) research, which was based on the responses of over 5,000 undergraduate and graduate students to English tests. Their study substantiated the existence of differences in English acquisition among individuals with varying academic backgrounds. The observed phenomenon could be attributed to differences in the initial points and educational backgrounds of students with varying academic qualifications within the framework of English language learning. These distinctions may encompass aspects such as prior language knowledge, learning experiences, and skill levels, as discussed by Getie (2020). Consequently, these variations may significantly impact their perceptions and responses to challenges encountered during the process of learning English.

The analysis of qualitative data unveiled that the predominant factors contributing to these challenges include struggles in managing phonetic and accent variations, shortcomings in vocabulary and grammar proficiency, and limited exposure to authentic language

communication settings. Additionally, cultural background disparities and factors such as self-confidence or motivation exert an influence on the overall experience of English language learning. Further, these findings align with the conclusions drawn in the research conducted by Amoah and Yeboah (2021), Zhai and Razali (2022), and Alrasheedi (2020), all of which delved into various factors that affect language learning. In response to the challenges and obstacles faced, Chinese international students have implemented a range of strategies. In alignment with the research findings of Zhai and Razali (2022), students have intensified their involvement in listening and speaking exercises, actively seeking opportunities for communication with local individuals to acclimate to diverse phonetic and accent variations. Additionally, participants have taken various strategies to tackle challenges encountered in other dimensions of English proficiency, including active participation in discussion forums, enrollment in workshops, and involvement in reading clubs.

Considering the results reported in this paper, our study can offer some significant insights to the ongoing academic discussion surrounding importance of English language proficiency for international students in the Malaysian context. Through a thorough examination of the challenges encountered by Chinese international students during the process of acquiring English language skills and the strategies employed in response, this research not only enhances our understanding of cross-cultural language acquisition but also provides valuable theoretical applications for educational practices. Further, this research has the potential to offer valuable insights to educators and educational institutions, enabling them to provide more personalized and effective guidance and support to international students in their pursuit of learning English. This research suggests that educational institutions in Malaysia need to consider implementing targeted enhancements in curriculum design to address language proficiency disparities. Additionally, the establishment of comprehensive language support services can be instrumental in assisting international students in overcoming linguistic challenges. Furthermore, the introduction of teacher training programs specifically tailored to understand and address the unique needs of Chinese international students would play a pivotal role in fostering a more inclusive and effective learning environment.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Collectively, the findings of this research have shed light on the English acquisition experiences of Chinese international students in Malaysian higher education institutions. However, this study is not without its limitations.


First, the sample selection in this study may suffer from bias since it solely concentrated on Chinese international students enrolled in Malaysian higher education institutions, featuring a limited sample size of 60 individuals in one public university in Malaysia. Consequently, the research findings may lack generalizability and cannot fully represent the English language learning experiences and challenges of international students from other countries and areas. While this study has predominantly focused on the English learning challenges encountered by Chinese international students in Malaysian higher education institutions, it is crucial to acknowledge that similar challenges may be prevalent among students from other nations and cultural backgrounds, such as students from Arabic-speaking countries. Future research endeavors may encompass a more comprehensive exploration of the varied experiences and unique challenges faced by international students from different regions, contributing to a broader understanding of the nuanced dynamics in English language learning within the global higher education landscape. Additionally, increasing the sample size would improve the representativeness of the research findings, thereby enhancing the generalizability of the study.

Another limitation of this study is related to the instruments used to collect data. As the study relied on self-reported instruments, a comprehensive examination of all possible academic and non-academic challenges was not possible in this study. Hence, future researchers may employ other instruments to reveal other academic challenges encountered by international students in Malaysia. Other potential variables, such as individual learning styles, family background, and social support, were not fully explored within the scope of this research. Hence, further investigations can be carried out to address these issues and to incorporate larger and more diverse samples of Chinese international students to improve the applicability of the findings, encompassing students from different educational institutions and countries.

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ORCID iD

Wu Zhangli  <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-0400-2643>

Ethical Considerations

Approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects Universiti Putra Malaysia

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Consent to Participate

All participants in this study were fully informed about the nature and purpose of the research before providing their voluntary consent to participate. Informed consent was obtained verbally, and participants were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

Author Contributions

Wu Zhangli: Conceptualization, methodology, and writing—original draft preparation. Wang Xuewen: Statistical analysis, visualization and contributing to the discussion of results. Omer Hassan Ali Mahfoodh: Editing, supervision, and critical revision of the manuscript. Lilliati Ismail: Review, editing and supervision. Norhakimah Khaissa Ahmad: Review, editing and supervision.

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Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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