ENGLISH LANGUAGE ATTRITION OF EFL TERTIARY STUDENTS IN CHINA OVER A TWO-MONTH BREAK

YU ZHONGGEN

FBMK 2011 2
ENGLISH LANGUAGE ATTRITION OF EFL TERTIARY STUDENTS IN CHINA OVER A TWO-MONTH BREAK

YU ZHONGGEN

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA
2011
Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Senate of University Putra Malaysia in Fulfilment of the Requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ATTRITION OF EFL TERTIARY STUDENTS IN CHINA OVER A TWO-MONTH BREAK

By

YU ZHONGGEN

January 2011

Chairperson: Professor Chan Swee Heng, PhD

Faculty: Modern Languages and Communication

This study aims primarily to identify if participants experience attrition in speaking, speed and in-depth reading comprehension, short conversation and passage listening comprehension and writing abilities over a two-month holiday. Another research objective is to identify the attrition in vocabulary knowledge. Taking into consideration research practicability and efficiency, different numbers of participants took different tests. Three hundred and forty tertiary students from Nanjing University of Posts & Telecommunications (NUPT) were randomly selected to participate in the reading and listening tests before and after the holiday, 50 participants took part in the tests of writing, and 121 participated in the vocabulary tests.
A questionnaire was administered to 340 tertiary students and it included numerous variables in relation to language attrition such as self-assessment of speaking skills, motivation and social activities. The data collected from the tests and questionnaire were analyzed via nonparametric and parametric tests using SPSS. Cranach’s alpha coefficient and MFRM (Multi Facets Rasch Model) were used to validate the reliabilities.

The results of the tests indicated that participants’ short conversation listening comprehension scores gained significantly \((p=0.05)\) over the holiday period, showing improvement. However, no statistical significance was found in the passage listening comprehension scores, thus indicating no presence of significant attrition or improvement. In addition, the results did not indicate any statistically significant attrition in both modes of reading comprehension though a slight increase was found in speed reading comprehension scores and evidence of slight attrition was obtained in in-depth reading comprehension. No significant gender differences were found in speed and in-depth reading, short conversation listening and passage listening conversation scores. The results also showed that participants experienced a statistically significant level of attrition in not only overall writing skills but also specific writing skills such as pertinence, coherence, clarity and grammar over the holiday period. Females suffered a higher level of attrition than males in all tested specific writing skills except for grammar. Significant
attrition was also found in vocabulary knowledge.

The results of the questionnaire showed that participants believed that their overall English proficiency (including speaking skills) attrited over the holiday period although the listening and reading test results did not reveal any statistically significant attrition. Participants showed a lower level of positive motivation and fewer social activities for studying English language during the holiday than before the holiday and this could have contributed to the attrition in some of the linguistic abilities.

The findings suggested that attrition was not an overall phenomenon affecting all language skills. Thus, it might point to students having different threshold levels in learning and maintaining the language skills learnt. Institutions would need to initiate measures that address attrition in order that the problem be minimized. A low level of attrition would lead to graduates having a better language ability to serve the China economy that is fast expanding. More proficient graduates in English would help to realize the economic goals and to participate more efficiently both locally and globally.
Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia
Sebagai memenuhi keperluan ijazah Doktor Falsafah

HAKISAN DALAM BAHASA INGGERIS SEPA NJANG TEMPOH CUTI
DUA BULAN DALAM KALANGAN MAHASISWA EFL DI NEGARA CHINA
SELEPAS DUA BULAN REHAT

Oleh

YU ZHONGGEN

Januari 2011

Pengerusi : Profesor Chan Swee Heng, PhD

Fakulti : Bahasa Moden dan Komunikasi

Penyelidikan ini terutama sekali bertujuan untuk mengenal pasti sama ada responden mengalami hakisan bahasa dalam pertuturan, kelancaran dan pemahaman dalam bacaan, perbualan pendek dan mendengar petikan pemahaman juga kemampuan penulisan sepanjang tempoh cuti dua bulan. Selain itu, objektif lain adalah untuk mengenal pasti hakisan dalam pengetahuan kosa kata. Demi kepraktisan dan keberkesanan penyelidikan, terdapat perbezaan responden dalam mengambil ujian yang berlainan. Seramai tiga ratus empat puluh mahasiswa dari Universiti Pos dan Telekomunikasi Nanjing telah dipilih secara rawak dalam ujian bacaan dan mendengar sebelum dan sesudah cuti. Lima puluh responden telah terlibat
dalam ujian penulisan dan seramai 121 peserta mengambil bahagian dalam ujian kosa kata.

Satu soal selidik telah diedar kepada 340 mahasiswa. Soal selidik ini melibatkan pelbagai pembolehubah yang berkaitan dengan hakisan bahasa seperti penilaian kendiri dalam kemahiran pertuturan, motivasi dan aktiviti sosial. Data yang dikumpul dari ujian dan soal selidik telah dianalisis melalui ujian bukan parametrik dan parametrik dengan menggunakan SPSS. Pekali alpha Cronbach dan Model Multi Facets Rasch (MFRM) digunakan untuk kesahan dan kepercayaan kajian ini.

Responden dalam ujian mendengar petikan pemahaman telah menunjukkan peningkatan dalam bahasa Inggeris, iaitu memperolehi skor yang signifikan \((p=.05)\) selama tempoh bercuti. Walau bagaimanapun, tiada skor yang signifikan dalam statistik yang ditemui dalam aspek mendengar petikan pemahaman yang menunjukkan tanda hakisan mahupun pembaikan bahasa. Tambahan pula, keputusan kajian tidak menunjukkan sebarang hakisan dalam kedua-dua model pemahaman bacaan. Walaupun terdapat sedikit pembaikan ditemui dalam kelancaran bacaan dan sedikit bukti hakisan bahasa telah diperoleh dari pemahaman dalam bacaan. Tidak ada perbezaan gender yang signifikan dalam skor kelancaran bacaan,
mendengar perbualan pendek serta mendengar petikan pemahaman. Keputusan juga menyatakan bahawa responden mengalami tahap hakisan bahasa yang signifikan bukan sahaja dalam penulisan tetapi juga kemahiran tertentu seperti ketepatan, koherensi, kejelasan dan tatabahasa selama tempoh bercuti. Respoden perempuan mengalami tahap hakisan bahasa yang lebih daripada responden lelaki dalam semua ujian kecuali aspek tatabahasa. Hakisan bahasa yang signifikan juga ditemui dalam pengetahuan kosa kata.

Keputusan dalam soal selidik menunjukkan bahawa responden percaya secara keseluruhannya kemahiran berbahasa Inggeris mereka terhakis (termasuk keupayaan bertutur) selama tempoh bercuti, walaupun dalam ujian mendengar dan membaca tidak mendedahkan hakisan bahasa dari segi statistik. Dapatan kajian mendapati responden menunjukkan tahap motivasi positif yang lebih rendah dan aktiviti sosial yang sedikit dalam mempelajari bahasa Inggeris semasa cuti jika dibandingkan dengan sebelum cuti. Situasi ini telah menyumbang kepada hakisan bahasa dalam beberapa aspek kemahiran linguistik.

Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa hakisan bahasa bukan fenomena yang menyeluruh dalam mempengaruhi kemahiran bahasa. Namun
demikian, ini mungkin menunjukkan responden mempunyai tahap yang berbeza dalam pembelajaran dan pemeliharaan kemahiran bahasa yang telah dipelajari. Institusi perlu mengadakan inisiatif untuk mengukur hakisan bahasa agar masalah ini dapat diminimumkan. Tahap hakisan bahasa yang rendah membolehkan para graduan memiliki kemahiran berbahasa untuk memberi sumbangan dalam era ekonomi negara Cina yang kian pesat berkembang. Lebih ramai graduan yang mahir dalam bahasa Inggeris akan membantu pencapaian sasaran ekonomi dan mengambil bahagian dengan lebih cekap sama ada tempatan mahupun global.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I cannot but show my sincere gratitude to my supervisory committee at Universiti Putra Malaysia: Professor Dr. Chan Swee Heng, Associate Professor Dr. Ain Nadzimah Abdullah, Associate Professor Dr Bahaman Abu Samah, and Dr Yap Ngee Thai. Their comments and suggestions were very helpful for the development of my thesis. They have been guiding, supporting and encouraging me in the process of writing my thesis. All of them contributed numerous suggestions for the improvement of my thesis from the beginning to the completion.

The tolerance and support from my family, in particular, my wife and son, has provided me with the energy and courage to continue this arduous journey. When I pursued the Ph.D. degree in Malaysia, my son stayed in China without a father in attendance and my wife attended to my son and the whole family on her own without any complaints. Although they could not help me directly, they have in their own unique way silently and unselfishly stood by me.
In addition, I would like to extend my deep gratitude to Professor Sun Zhi Xin, Mrs. Zhang Xiao Hong, Mr. Jin and Mr. Zang Qing who shared with me their precious time to help me organize the tests in China when I was in Malaysia. Professor Sun Zhi Xin was so kind that he played a key role in encouraging other colleagues to help me. Mr. Zang Qing was ever so generous in offering me several sets of exam papers that proved to be excellent references for the tests used in this study. Although Mrs. Zhang Xiao Hong was terribly busy she still generously and energetically did me a favor in the organization of the test sessions and she also helped motivate the participants with her enthusiasm to take part in the study.

Finally, I also feel indebted to all of the participants, who patiently and willingly completed the tests and the questionnaire without any financial reward.
I certify that an Examination Committee has met on 10 January, 2011 to conduct the final examination of Yu Zhonggen on his Doctor of Philosophy thesis entitled “English Language Attrition of EFL Tertiary Students in China over a Two-month Break” in accordance with Universiti Putra Malaysia (Higher Degree) Act 1980 and Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Act 1981. The Committee recommends that the candidate be awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Members of the Thesis Examination Committee were as follows:

**Wan Roselezam Wan Yahya, PhD**
Associate Professor
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Chairperson)

**Tan Bee Hoon, PhD**
Associate Professor
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia
/Internal Examiner

**Jayakaran Mukundan, PhD**
Associate Professor
Faculty of Educational Studies
Universiti Putra Malaysia
/Internal Examiner

**James Dean Brown, PhD**
Professor
The Graduate Faculty of the Department of SLS
University of Hawaii at Manoa,
Honolulu, Hawaii
/External Examiner

HASANAH MOHD. GHAZALI, PHD
Professor/ Dean
School of Graduate Studies
Universiti Putra Malaysia
Date:
This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The members of the Supervisor Committee were as follows:

**Chan Swee Heng, PhD**  
Professor  
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Chairperson)

**Ain Nadzimah Abdullah, PhD**  
Associate Professor  
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Member)

**Bahaman Abu Samah, PhD**  
Associate Professor  
Faculty of Educational Studies  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Member)

**Yap Ngee Thai, PhD**  
Senior Lecturer  
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Member)

---

**HASANAH MOHD. GHAZALI, PhD**  
Professor and Dean  
School of Graduate Studies  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
Date:
DECLARATION

I declare that the thesis is my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously, and is not concurrently, submitted for any other degrees at University Putra Malaysia or other institutions.

YU ZHONGGEN

Date: 10 January 2011
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CET- College English Test
CET4- College English Test Band 4
CET6- College English Test band 6
MFRM- Multi Facets Rasch Model
NUPT- Nanjing University of Posts and Telecommunications
SLA- Second Language Acquisition
SL- Second Language
FL- Foreign Language
EFL- English as a Foreign Language
ESL- English as a Second Language
IE- Integrated English
CLL- Common Language Law
LRGV- Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas
UTP- University of Texas-Pan
STARS- Nebraska’s School-Based Teacher-Led Assessment and Reporting System
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRAK</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPROVAL</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DECLARATION</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>xviii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS</td>
<td>xiv</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER

### 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study
   1.1.1 Bilingual Education
   1.1.2 Current Status of English Language Learning in China
   1.1.3 English Language Programs in China
   1.1.4 Models of Mandarin-English Bilingual Education in China

1.2 Statement of the Research Problem

1.3 Purpose of the Study

1.4 Theoretical Framework for this Study

1.5 Conceptual Framework

### 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Foreign Language and Second Language Learning

2.2 Language Attrition
   2.2.1 Definition and Taxonomy in Language Attrition
   2.2.2 The Relationship between Language Attrition and Language Acquisition
   2.2.3 Hypotheses Related to Attrition
   2.2.4 Gender as a Factor Influencing Language Attrition
   2.2.5 Other Social Factors Affecting Attrition
   2.2.6 Attrition of Sub-skills
   2.2.7 Attrition over Time

2.3 Affective Factors Influencing the Learning of a Foreign Language

2.4 Language Contact

2.5 Language Shift

2.6 Language Maintenance

2.7 Conclusion
3 METHODOLOGY 95
3.1 General Design 95
3.2 Procedure of the Study 97
  3.2.1 Population and Sampling 97
  3.2.2 Instrumentation 103
  3.2.3 Methods of Analysis 129
3.3 Conclusion 136

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION 139
4.1 Findings and Discussion 140
  4.1.1 Research Question 1: Do English language
  skills attrite after a two-month holiday in
terms of speaking, vocabulary, short
conversation and passage listening, speed
reading and in-depth reading, and
writing? 140
  4.1.2 Research Question 2: Are there gender
differences in English language attrition
after a two-month holiday? 164
  4.1.3 Research Question 3: Are there any
differences in both frequencies of social
activities and levels of motivation in
relation to English use before and during the
holiday? 169
4.2 Conclusion 178

5 CONCLUSION 180
5.1 Overview 180
5.2 Limitations of the Study 184
5.3 Suggestions for Further Research 185
5.4 Concluding Remarks 190

REFERENCES 192
APPENDICES 217
A A READING COMPREHENSION TEST 217
B A TEST OF LISTENING COMPREHENSION 227
C A WRITING TEST 233
D A QUESTIONNAIRE FOR AN ENGLISH
LANGUAGE ATTRITION PROJECT 234
E DATA OF VOCABULARY TESTS 239
F CLASSIFIED DATA FOR MEASURED
VOCABULARIES 241
G DATA OF WRITING TESTS 243
H DATA OF READING TESTS 247
I DATA OF LISTENING TESTS 255
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>J</th>
<th>CONSENT FORM 263</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>A QUESTIONNAIRE FOR PILOT STUDY OF AN ENGLISH LANGUAGE ATTRITION PROJECT 264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BIODATA OF STUDENT 270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LIST OF PUBLICATIONS 271</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>