

Through a Looking Glass

A Profile of PRC SM3 Students Enrolled in an Intensive English Course

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This study aims to present a general profile of 151 PRC SM3 students enrolled in a pre-matriculation intensive English course at the National University of Singapore. These students' attitudes and actions in managing their learning were gathered through the analysis of a questionnaire. The results indicated that the students were generally confident about learning English well and about speaking English in public. They believed that they should work hard and showed an inclination for self-directed learning, especially with regard to out-of-class situations. However, the results also showed a lack of confidence in their own language learning aptitude and in specific knowledge on learning strategies. Also, there was little inclination of being actively involved in the fine-tuning and the evaluation of their formal in-class learning. The paper thus calls for pedagogical intervention to help PRC ESL learners build on their confidence and their belief in self-effort on the one hand, and to enhance their knowledge of strategies and their in-class responsibility on the other.

■ Introduction

From the early 1990s, the Ministry of Education, Singapore, has offered undergraduate scholarships to People's Republic of China (PRC) students to study at the National University of Singapore (NUS). Pre-session language support is provided to these students by the Centre for English Language Communication (CELC) at NUS through an intensive English course that aims to help students reach approximately 'O' level proficiency by the end of six months. (There are actually two different courses: SM2 for scholars who have completed Senior Middle 2 in China, and SM3 for those who have completed Senior Middle 3.)

In 2005, when I was teaching on the SM3 course at the CELC, I was invited by Dr Rebecca Hughes, Director of the Centre for English Language Education (CELE) at the University of Nottingham, UK, to pilot a questionnaire with the SM3 students. The questionnaire was developed by Dr Hughes and Dr Xin Gao, Research Fellow at the University of Nottingham at Ningbo, China (UNNC). The questionnaire was also to be piloted with UNNC's Year One PRC students in 2005. The main purpose of the questionnaire was to look at attitudes and strategies for language learning.

I accepted the invitation as I was interested in obtaining a profile of SM3 students which I hope will contribute to a better understanding of PRC students in the field of ELT. This knowledge will be especially helpful in the present day when an increasing number of PRC students are seeking an English medium tertiary education abroad. For them to have a good chance of succeeding in their majors conducted in English, it is

imperative that they get the appropriate support for their language learning. Research findings on these students would contribute to the efforts of EFL/ESL teachers, curriculum designers and textbook writers to provide that support.

In this paper, I aim to present a profile of the SM3 cohort as reflected by the results of the questionnaire and draw some pedagogical implications for teaching English to PRC students.

■ Literature Review

This literature review will highlight the research findings in two broad areas: learner contributions in second language acquisition (SLA) and Chinese learners. The review is far from exhaustive but is meant to provide a brief overview of the two aspects pertinent to this paper.

In revisiting and updating her earlier writings on SLA, Larsen-Freeman (2001:12) reiterates that the significance of the learners' role in the SLA process has been underestimated and that the learner is not merely a passive recipient of customized native speaker input. She goes on to define and review research on learner contributions to include *attributes* (age, aptitude, personality, learning disabilities, social identities), *conceptualisations* (motivation, attitude, cognitive style, beliefs) and *actions* (learning strategies). Finally, she calls for more holistic research that links integrated individual difference research to the processes, mechanisms and conditions of learning within different contexts over time (p.24).

Writing on learning strategies, Chamot (2001: 42) also calls for more descriptive research on students

coming from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds as “additional information is needed about the actual relationship between learning strategies and cultural beliefs and values”.

In the literature on PRC Chinese ESL/EFL learners, researchers have suggested that Chinese students, like their other East Asian counterparts, contribute to their learning of English in a culturally unique way.

Jin & Cortazzi (1998) details a highly influential Chinese culture of learning a language. This culture focuses on a mastery of knowledge (including knowledge of skills) primarily from two sources, the teacher and the textbook. Learning is achieved through “dedication and hard work, through close attention to texts and memorisation of vocabulary” (p.102). This is basically a transmission model of learning which has its roots in the teachings of Confucius. Due to this culture of learning, Chinese learners may appear to Western teachers as ‘weak’ at oral communication. The students also seem ‘shy’ and ‘passive’. However, the students see themselves as ‘active’ in class as they are mentally interacting with the teaching intensively and ‘co-operating’ with the teachers. Some think of themselves as ‘independent’ learners who ‘think for themselves’ and ‘overcome their puzzles and difficulties on their own’ (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998:104).

Wachob (2004) suggests that it is important to consider three issues and their impact on classroom practices. First, basic to Chinese students’ orientation to learning is the notion that anyone can learn if there is the right stimulus (p.9). Secondly, with regards to the role of the teacher and the students, “teachers are seen as paternalistic, knowledgeable and keepers of knowledge” (p.9). Finally, Chinese students’ learning styles can fall into three categories or stages: the practical student who is a rote learner; the deep thinker who uses techniques to facilitate the understanding of concepts through memorization; and the Confucian scholar who takes a mature approach by emphasizing inner needs, self-improvement and contribution to society (p.10). Alongside these three types of learners from within the Chinese tradition is the Chinese student who is “affected by the presence of Western influence, which is most often seen among the young and felt more strongly in the large cities of China” (Yang, 1996 cited in Wachob, 2004:10).

In examining the contributions of Chinese learners in SLA, Zhang (2003) reviews two decades of research into Chinese EFL learner strategies and concludes that the research design and instrumentation in this area have become more mature since its beginnings in the 1980s. This review of the research findings shows that, in general, there are differences between successful/good and less successful/poor learners in their use of language learner strategies. However, it is not apparent if the strategies in the studies reviewed are comparable due to the fact that different instruments were used in collecting data. It is also not certain if some findings are statistically significant because of the size of the samples or number of variables involved. One other drawback is the question of causality as many reports are based on correlations.

As for reports on studies which used qualitative methods, the implications of their results are limited due to their small sample size. Thus, further studies, especially consistent, well-designed ones, are needed to give a clearer picture of Chinese EFL learner strategies (pp. 310-311).

With regard to language confidence and anxiety, Yang, Noels, & Saumure (2006) reported on the cross-cultural adaptation of “[e]ast Asian students who share a collectivistic orientation and Confucian tradition” (p.4). The study was conducted on a group of international students (of whom 40.7% were Chinese students) enrolled in a western Canadian university. The results show that “independent self-construals (defined as ‘the conception of the self and behavior shaped through the primary culture’) were found to positively predict greater English self-confidence...this path suggests that those people who are more independently minded are less likely to feel anxious using English” (p.14).

Turning now to PRC students learning English in Singapore, we find a number of studies on the contributions of these students in SLA. These studies focused on such aspects as anxiety, language learning strategies and metacognitive awareness. They are of particular relevance to the present study whose subjects share similar demographic features with the participants of the earlier research. These learners are defined as ESL learners by Cohen (1998) as they are learning a language in a community where it is spoken (p.4).

Zhang (2001) explored the general language learning anxiety of PRC students in a study-abroad context. Using a *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale* (FLCAS) and informal interviews, the researcher compared two groups of students: 75 SM2 with an average age of 18 and 70 SM3 aged around 19. The results indicated that all the ESL learners experienced a certain level of anxiety. However, on average, the SM3 group showed a higher level of anxiety right from the beginning of their course. Zhang suggests that this variability in anxiety could be “attributed to differences in their biological ages, complicated, possibly, by their varying levels of proficiency in ESL”. More significantly, the difference might also be due to the “different language learning and epistemological experiences and their socio-economic backgrounds, and possibly a change in the learning environment in a study-abroad context” for the two groups. A further complication might be the SM3 students’ lack of certain study skills for independent learning (p.84).

Kwah & Goh (1996) attempted to find out what learning strategies are employed by ESL learners from the PRC and whether language proficiency and gender have any influence on the choice of these strategies. The study used the *Secondary Level English Proficiency* (SLEP) Test to assess the students’ proficiency. The test results divided the 175 subjects (aged 17 to 19, with 50 females and 125 males) into three levels of proficiency: high, medium and low. The 5-point *Strategies in Language Learning* (SLL) designed by Oxford (1990) was used to elicit the kind of strategies that the students used. The

analysis showed that these learners “generally did not apply learning strategies very frequently” (p.15). The two most commonly reported strategies, metacognitive and compensation, were slightly beyond the range of 2.5 to 3.4, which Oxford (1990) designates as medium use. With regard to proficiency, results from ANOVA indicated that high-proficiency students used significantly the most cognitive strategies. They also used compensation strategies more than their low-proficiency counterparts. As for the influence of gender, the results of the t-test showed that “female students reported using significantly more compensation and affective strategies than male students” (p.17).

Goh (1997) reported on a diary study which revealed the metacognitive awareness that PRC students had about their listening. The author’s analysis of the diaries of 40 ESL learners with an average age of 19 showed that these students “had clear ideas about three aspects of listening: their own role and performance as second language listeners, the demands and procedures of second language listening, and strategies for listening” (p.361). The diaries, kept over ten weeks, demonstrated the high degree of metacognitive awareness that the students possessed and their ability to verbalise their theories about learning to listen in English (p.367).

The above review of literature is aimed at giving the reader an overview of issues touching on PRC ESL/EFL learners and SLA. It is hoped that the findings of the present study, albeit a limited one, will add useful information to the profile of the Chinese student.

■ Method

Approval to conduct this pilot study with the whole 2005 SM3 cohort was granted by CELC’s Management and the SM3 Course Coordinator. The study was also explained to the students and their consent obtained. The questionnaire, which comprised 85 items on a five-point scale from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”, was then administered twice, about three weeks apart, in order to test the reliability of the test items. Please see Appendix I for a copy of the questionnaire, UNNC (v6-1)-2005. In Round 1, 156 out of 163 students participated in the study while in Round 2, 152 students took part.

At the time of their responding to the questionnaires, the average age of the SM3 students was 19. They had studied English as a foreign language for approximately six years prior to coming to Singapore.

The hard copies of the questionnaires were forwarded to Dr Gao who carried out an analysis of the two rounds of responses of 151 students. Item analysis was conducted on the 85 items of the questionnaire to examine the internal consistency (i.e. the degree to which all the items of a particular scale measure the same construct). All the correlations were found to be greater than .30 except for 27 items in the first administration of the questionnaire and eight more items in the second. These items were deleted from the questionnaire. Spearman *rho* was used to obtain item correlation between matched items from the first and second distribution of the

questionnaire. From this non-parametric test, 50 items ranging from .30 to .61 were obtained due to their high statistical significance at $p \leq .01$ levels, and five more items were dropped from the questionnaire.

Based on the SM3 students’ responses to the remaining 45 items found to be reliable after the above analysis, I drew upon two sets of data for discussion in this paper:

1. The mean (the standard deviation was mostly <1)
2. The percentage for “Agree or strongly agree”.

These results are shown side by side for each item in four tables in the following section.

■ Data Analysis and Discussion

Learner confidence and anxiety

Generally, the majority of participants are optimistic that they will eventually learn and speak English well. As reflected by Items No.1 and 2 in Table 1 on page 14 (Questionnaire Items 67 and 74 respectively), 89.4% of the SM3 students believe they will speak English very well someday while 75.1% are confident that they will be able to learn English well.

However, this general optimism seems undermined by a lower level of confidence in their perception of their aptitude for English (No. 3: 48.3%), their ability to find an effective way to learn English (No. 4: 35.5%) and their ability to achieve a desired score for the next English test (No. 5: 32.7%).

The scores are even lower when the students rated their ability to learn foreign languages. They do not seem to think they are good language learners as reflected by No. 6 and 7 (25.5% and 20.3% respectively).

Overall, the picture that emerges from the above is the students are optimistic and confident about their ability to learn English and to speak it well, but only in general terms. When it comes to specifics like language learning aptitude and ability to achieve set goals, they seem to “back off” from the more confident position.

However, I feel that the above picture may not be entirely accurate of how students perceive themselves. Having worked with five cohorts of SM3 students, I suspect that the modesty of Chinese students may play a part in their response to the questionnaire items on confidence. For many of them, to say that they consider themselves to be good language learners or that they have the ability to get the score they set themselves may make them appear overly-confident. This postulation is in line with the findings of Jin & Cortazzi (1998) that Chinese students view “their academic life in a collective way, in which they care about relationships, harmony in their learning and in their communication with others” (p.112). So there is the possibility that the low scores of No. 3 to 7 are in part due to the reluctance of the participants to appear boastful and out of sync with other students.

With regard to speaking English in public, however, the results of Items No. 8 to No. 13 in Table 1 indicate that most participants feel little anxiety. They feel less

Table 1 Confidence in learning English

No.	Questionnaire Item	% Agree or Strongly agree	Mean
1	67. I believe that someday I will speak English very well.	89.4	4.3
2	74. I am sure I will be able to learn English well.	75.1	4.0
3	78. I think I have a good feel for English.	48.3	3.4
4	26. I am confident that I know how to find an effective way to learn English.	35.5	3.1
5	12. I have the ability to get the score I am trying for in my next English test.	32.7	3.1
6	85. I consider myself to be a good language learner (i.e. I can pick up language easily).	25.5	2.9
7	81. I have a special ability for learning foreign languages.	20.3	2.7
8	20. I would get nervous if I were asked to interpret for an English speaker in a shop.	33.4	3.0
9	6. I find it embarrassing if I make mistakes when speaking English.	30.1	2.9
10	13. I feel timid speaking English with other people.	21.6	2.8
11	44. I am anxious when I am speaking English in class.	19.8	2.7
12	35. I am afraid that other students will laugh at me when I speak English.	15.7	2.4

and less anxious as the situation and their interlocutors become increasingly familiar. Hence, while 33.4% of the students would get nervous if asked to interpret for *an English speaker in a shop*, the figure drops to 15.7% when they are among *other students*.

As the questionnaire was administered in late April and mid-May 2005, which means that the students were into their fourth and fifth months respectively of the SM3 Intensive English Course, is it highly probable that most of them had, by then, overcome much of whatever anxiety they might have felt about speaking English in public. They would have had many opportunities to speak English in NUS and in Singapore since their arrival and might have grown more confident.

This result may also be due to a reason suggested by Yang, Noels, & Saumure (2006). The article mentions that "it is possible that those people who decide to travel abroad are more individualistic than those people who decide to remain with friends and family" (p.15). It may be possible that the students in this NUS cohort possess mainly independent self-conceptions.

It would be interesting to compare the above results about language learning anxiety with the findings of Zhang (2001), where the SM3 subjects displayed a certain level of anxiety which was higher than that for the SM2 subjects. However, it might not be feasible to draw parallels between the two studies because of the different instrumentation. Moreover, the students in the earlier study responded to the FLCAS in the eighth week of their course when they might still be adjusting to the course and the context while the subjects of the present study responded to the questionnaire around their twentieth week. So whether the latter students experienced less anxiety cannot be conclusively answered.

Learner independence

An overwhelming majority of respondents believe that they should make themselves work harder (No. 1 in Table 2: 81.7%). The responsibility and ability to identify their

own weaknesses in English, and then overcome them also feature prominently in the responses (No. 2: 90.9%, No. 5: 62.8% and No. 8: 52.7%). The students believe that it is their responsibility to evaluate their own learning (No. 4: 78.4%). There is hence a strong emphasis on self-effort and self-evaluation as reflected by these responses. This seems in agreement with the findings of Jin & Cortazzi (1998) and Wachob (2004) on the Chinese students' orientation to learning. For them, learning is achieved through one's effort and diligence.

Furthermore, the students indicated that they should decide what they learn outside class (No. 3: 80.4%), that they like trying new things without a teacher (No. 6: 61.2%) and they think they would be good at choosing objectives outside class (No. 7: 53.6%). These responses show an inclination for independence when it comes to learning outside of formal lessons. About half of the students also think that they should decide how long to spend on learning activities (No. 9: 50.3%).

However, when it comes to questions on learning *within the classroom*, the participants seem less independent about their responsibility and ability to choose their learning objectives (No. 10: 47.7%, No. 14: 35.9%, No. 16: 29.5% and No. 17: 28.8%). They also seem uncertain about their ability to choose and pace their learning activities in class as evidenced by the responses to No. 15 and No. 18 (35.8% and 26.1% respectively). Furthermore, there is a lack of general consensus about their ability to evaluate their English course and their learning (No. 11: 45.1%, No.12: 44.4% and No. 13: 43.1%). This contrasts with their belief that it is their responsibility to evaluate their own learning (No. 4: 78.4%) mentioned earlier.

Overall, the above results suggest that the students feel that it is their responsibility to work hard, evaluate their learning and overcome their weaknesses. They also believe they should and can set their learning objectives and experiment without a teacher outside class. Thus, they seem ready for independence outside of class.

Table 2 Self-directed learning belief

No.	Questionnaire Item	% Agree or Strongly agree	Mean
1	45. I should make myself work harder.	81.7	4.1
2	36. I should identify my own weakness in English.	80.9	4.0
3	65. I should decide what I learn outside class.	80.4	4.0
4	61. I should evaluate my learning.	78.4	3.9
5	25. I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better.	62.8	3.6
6	21. I like trying new things without a teacher there.	61.2	3.7
7	66. I think I would be good at choosing learning objectives outside class.	53.6	3.6
8	57. I think I would be good at identifying my weaknesses in English.	52.7	3.4
9	27. I should decide how long to spend on each activity.	50.3	3.5
10	48. I should decide the objectives of my English course.	47.7	3.5
11	71. I believe that I know best how well I am learning.	45.1	3.4
12	80. I think I would be good at evaluating my course.	44.4	3.3
13	82. I think I would be good at evaluating my learning.	43.1	3.3
14	29. I think I would be good at deciding what I should learn next in my English lessons.	35.9	3.2
15	33. I think I would be good at deciding how long to spend on each activity.	35.8	3.2
16	51. I should decide what I should learn next in my English lessons.	29.5	3.1
17	55. I think I would be good at choosing learning objectives in class.	28.8	3.2
18	69. I think I would be good at choosing learning activities in class.	26.1	3.1

However, when it comes to setting goals, choosing activities, pacing and evaluating their learning in class, the students feel that they are not ready or capable. They might think that since the course objectives, activities and assessments had been spelt out for them, they were not responsible for these aspects. Instead, they should find ways to set goals, experiment with activities and evaluate their learning outside class.

Dependence on teachers

From the results shown in Table 3 on page 15, it appears that the participants display a low degree of dependence on their teachers in various aspects of their learning. They do not agree to statements that their teachers are responsible to ensure their progress in class (No. 2: 37.2%) nor outside class (No. 4: 26.1%). They also do not think their teachers should monitor their progress (No. 1: 38.2% and No. 5: 25.5%). This corresponds with the results in Table 2, which indicate that students feel they should put in more effort and be responsible for monitoring their own learning.

The scores for No. 3, 6 and 7 are also low, hovering around only one-third to one-fourth of the cohort. These low figures indicate that the students do not feel that teachers should choose the materials, pacing and the activities for their lessons. As for teachers choosing learning objectives for their learning, the responses are even lower, with 20.3% for objectives of their English course, and only 8.6% for learning outside class.

These results showing low teacher-dependence appear puzzling in view of the results for Items 10 to 18

of Table 2, which indicate that students are not ready to set their own objectives, select activities, decide on pacing and evaluate their learning in class. If neither the students nor the teachers should decide on these aspects, who should decide?

A possible reason for the paradox may lie in the phenomenon that *beginning* to *intermediate* EFL/ESL learners are often unsure how they should manage their language learning. Hence, they cannot say specifically that they are good at deciding objectives, materials and activities, and pacing and evaluating themselves. Yet, for the subjects of this study, because they felt they were responsible or had been told they were, they did not want to say the teacher should decide these aspects for them. Another reason could be the fact that, since they were approaching the end of their course, the students felt that they should not seem overly dependent on their teachers.

If, however, it is true that the students had come to feel that they should depend less on their teachers in the management of their language learning, it is a departure from the Chinese culture of learning, as mentioned by Jin & Cortazzi (1998) and Wachob (2004), where the teacher is seen as one of the main sources of knowledge. It might be that the students had indeed become more independent in their learning. As pointed out by Goh (1997), the ESL learners in her study demonstrated a high degree of metacognitive awareness; they had clear notions on how to go about learning to listen in English. It is possible that the students in the present study had a sense of their growing metacognitive awareness and were moving towards greater autonomy.

Table 3 Teacher-directed learning belief

No.	Questionnaire Item	% Agree or Strongly agree	Mean
1	28. I believe the role of the teacher is to tell me what progress I am making.	38.2	3.1
2	17. My teacher should make sure I make progress during lessons.	37.2	3.1
3	68. My teacher should choose what materials to use to learn English in my English lessons.	32.9	3.2
4	31. My teacher should make sure I make progress outside class.	26.1	2.8
5	34. I believe the teacher knows best how well I am learning.	25.5	2.8
6	46. My teacher should decide how long to spend on each activity.	23.5	3.0
7	24. My teacher should choose what activities to use to learn English in my English lessons.	22.9	2.9
8	54. My teacher should decide the objectives of my English course.	20.3	2.9
9	75. My teacher should decide what I learn outside class.	8.6	2.4

Strategies for language learning

Though the full results on language learning strategies are still not available yet, the picture we got from Table 4 below points to a possible link between language and culture in the students' minds. It may be that the students think that knowing the English language will enable them to know various cultures and people (No. 1). Conversely, it appears to them that to learn the language, they should try to learn about the culture of English speakers (No. 4).

A congenial atmosphere and a positive mood also seem essential elements for students to learn well. Hence, they think that English conversation lessons should be enjoyable (No. 2) and they try to ensure a friendly and harmonious atmosphere during group work (No. 3). A smaller group of students ask English speakers for help (No. 5).

Hence, these SM3 students seem more inclined towards the use of social and affective strategies. However, as only five questions on learning strategies were eventually found to be reliable and included in the analysis of the questionnaire, we do not have a clear picture of these learners' use of strategies. As mentioned by Zhang (2003), further investigation using consistent, well-designed instruments would greatly facilitate the study of learner strategy use among PRC learners.

■ Pedagogical Implications

What implications can we draw from the above findings for designing and teaching an English course for SM3 students? I suggest that we explore the following possibilities.

Self-effort, responsibility and out-of-class independence

The students believe that they should work hard and be responsible for their own English learning. They are comfortable with speaking in English and inclined to more independent language learning outside class. They also have some idea of the link between language and culture, and are aware of the benefits of a supportive environment for learning. These are the strengths that can be extended.

The students can be encouraged or even required to keep a diary or journal of their learning objectives, plans, strategies, achievements and difficulties, and to review, evaluate and act on these regularly. In the beginning of the course, the teacher can also initiate discussions on how students can take charge of their learning outside class. Some of them may come up with interesting ideas on how to create opportunities in authentic situations. For example, one of my former SM3 students wrote in his journal that he went window shopping in Little India in order to practise his English. Since the students feel confident about speaking English in public, they should certainly be encouraged to create opportunities for themselves to practise speaking more often.

As global citizens, the students can be encouraged to explore the culture of English speakers and how it impacts or is impacted by the language. They can go a step further by comparing this link with that between Chinese culture and its language(s). For accountability, students should report on their progress and difficulties to their teachers or a "buddy" periodically.

Table 4 Language learning strategies

No.	Questionnaire Item	Mean
1	77. Knowing English will enable me to get to know various cultures and people.	4.1
2	63. English conversation class should be enjoyable.	4.0
3	53. When I am working in a group, I like to help keep the atmosphere friendly and harmonious.	3.9
4	3. I try to learn about the culture of English speakers.	3.6
5	7. I ask for help from English speakers.	3.4

Teachers should work with these ESL learners to create and maintain a congenial classroom atmosphere to support the students in their learning. Pair and group work should be carefully facilitated and monitored, especially at the beginning of the course when students need to adjust to a new culture of learning and to overcome any anxiety they may have.

Confidence in own ability, strategies and in-class responsibility

The results indicate that while the students believe that they will learn English well eventually, they are not very sure how to go about achieving this in the here and now. They are also diffident with regard to the objectives, activities, pacing and evaluation of their course. These are areas that students can be encouraged to put in more effort.

To help students develop greater confidence in their own ability as ESL learners and to encourage greater responsibility for their role in class, they can be given training in goal setting and learner strategies. These objectives and strategies can be reviewed and discussed periodically after the training to help students share and evaluate their choices and take further action.

Journal-keeping mentioned above may also sensitise students to the fact that they *should* play a more active role in their own learning, whether in or out of class. It has been shown in one of my previous studies that journals can be a useful tool to raise Chinese students' metacognitive awareness of English learning over time. This in turn may help students to become more independent learners in the longer term (Young & Fong, 2003).

While the course syllabus has been carefully prepared for the course, and students rightly treat it with respect, they can be encouraged to be more "thinking" learners. They can ponder and discuss how closely the objectives, activities and pacing of the lessons as well as the assessments dovetail with the stages of their language learning. Their feedback can lead to modifications, where necessary, which better match their needs. It is probably true that these learners are not ready for a negotiated syllabus, but if they know that they can contribute to their course by constructive feedback, they would take greater responsibility for their learning in class.

Conclusion

The profile of SM3 students that emerges from this study shows that these ESL learners are generally confident that they will learn English well though they do not express the same confidence in their language aptitude and learning strategies. After being in the course for nearly five months, they do not feel anxious when they speak in English.

These Chinese ESL learners believe very much in the need to work hard, to evaluate their learning, to identify their weaknesses and to improve their English. They also believe that they should and can choose their own learning objectives and activities outside class, and they like to experiment with their learning without the

guidance of a teacher. The above beliefs indicate the students' emphasis on self-effort and their inclination towards greater independence.

On the other hand, the students also display a high degree of deference to the pre-set objectives, activities, pacing and assessments of their course, preferring not to take charge of any of these aspects for themselves. Yet, the students seem inclined to be less dependent on their teachers. They indicate that they are ready to move away from teacher-directed learning and evaluation, both in and out of class.

With regards to strategies for language learning, only five of the questionnaire items drew reliable responses. These responses indicate that students see a link between learning a language and learning its culture. They also see that language learning is best facilitated in a positive and congenial atmosphere. It may be inferred then that these students prefer the use of social and affective learning strategies.

In discussing the pedagogical implications based on the above findings, I made two broad categories of suggestions that may help students to build on their strengths and to improve in the weaker areas. It is hoped these suggestions will go towards supporting such ESL learners adjust and learn in a new linguistic-cultural context and a new learning culture.

This paper presents a profile of SM3 students enrolled in an Intensive English course in CELC, NUS. However, the picture presented is a limited one as only one instrument, a questionnaire, was used in gathering data at only one point, around the fifth month, in the subjects' course of study. A more extensive profile could probably be obtained from triangulation and over time: using data gathered from a number of instruments administered at different points in time.

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Appendix: Questionnaire on language learning (pilot version)

Dear Student,

We are carrying out research into language learning and would be grateful if you could take 15 - 20 minutes to complete this survey. This is a pilot (test) version. We will ask you to take a similar test in around 2-3 weeks time. We are very grateful to you for your help in this, and we hope that our findings will help to improve courses for future students.

Please note the following points regarding the use of your data:

- The staff administering this project can match the survey number to the respondent (via Student ID number). However, individual responses are not the main focus of this part of the project.
- All answers will be treated confidentially, and in any publication the respondent will be made anonymous.
- Data will be stored securely and anonymously.
- The lecturer who is administering this test for us will be looking at these results as part of her own research project.
- Permission to access the results has also been granted to Ms Fong Yoke Sim, Centre for English Language Communication, National University of Singapore.
- Other access to the data will only be given to specific, named, researchers. Requests by other researchers to access these data will be given on the basis of a formal written request to the University of Nottingham.
- Your responses will not be seen by other teachers or non-research staff.
- You can ask to see who has accessed these data at any time by contacting the University of Nottingham, Centre for English Language Education.

Please tick the box and sign below to indicate that you agree to the data you give being used in the research project.

Agree Disagree

Student ID _____

Below is a list of statements some people agree with and some people do not. From your point of view, please encircle a number from 1 to 5 for each item which best expresses to what extent they describe your own feelings or situation. Do not answer how you think you should be, or what other people do. Please underline any words/phrases you find difficult to understand.

1 = Strongly Disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly Agree

Please encircle one (and only one) whole number for each item and do not leave out any of them.

1. I look for people I can talk to in English.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I practise English with other students.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I try to learn about the culture of English speakers.*	1	2	3	4	5
4. Trying new things without a teacher is a waste of time.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I ask questions in English.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I find it embarrassing if I make mistakes when speaking English.*	1	2	3	4	5
7. I ask for help from English speakers.*	1	2	3	4	5
8. I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English	1	2	3	4	5
9. I like activities where there is a lot of discussion with classmates in small groups (of between 3 and 5 students).	1	2	3	4	5

10. I want my teacher to correct all my mistakes.	1	2	3	4	5
11. I enjoy practising English with the Americans (English speakers) I meet.*	1	2	3	4	5
12. I have the ability to get the score I am trying for in my next English test.*	1	2	3	4	5
13. I feel timid speaking English with other people.*	1	2	3	4	5
14. I study English because it is useful to communicate with English-speaking people.	1	2	3	4	5
15. I try to guess what the other person will say next in English.	1	2	3	4	5
16. I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk.	1	2	3	4	5
17. My teacher should make sure I make progress during lessons.*	1	2	3	4	5
18. Learning English is mostly a matter of translating from Chinese.	1	2	3	4	5
19. I start conversations in English.	1	2	3	4	5
20. I would get nervous if I were asked to interpret for an English speaker in a shop.*	1	2	3	4	5
21. I like trying new things without a teacher there.*	1	2	3	4	5
22. I believe the role of the teacher is to set my learning goals.	1	2	3	4	5
23. I like activities where I am part of a group in which we are all working towards common goals.	1	2	3	4	5
24. My teacher should choose what activities I use to learn English in my English lessons.*	1	2	3	4	5
25. I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better.*	1	2	3	4	5
26. I am confident that I know how to find an effective way to learn English.*	1	2	3	4	5
27. I should decide how long to spend on each activity.*	1	2	3	4	5
28. I believe the role of the teacher is to tell me what progress I am making.*	1	2	3	4	5
29. I think I would be good at deciding what I should learn next in my English lessons.*	1	2	3	4	5
30. My language learning success depends on what I do in the classroom.	1	2	3	4	5
31. My teacher should make sure I make progress outside class.*	1	2	3	4	5
32. I believe feedback on my language learning that I give myself helps me most.	1	2	3	4	5
33. I think I would be good at deciding how long to spend on each activity.*	1	2	3	4	5
34. I believe the teacher knows best how well I am learning.*	1	2	3	4	5
35. I am afraid that other students will laugh at me when I speak English.*	1	2	3	4	5
36. I should identify my own weaknesses in English.*	1	2	3	4	5
37. I believe feedback on my language learning from the teacher helps me most.	1	2	3	4	5
38. Opportunities to use the language should be provided by my classmates.	1	2	3	4	5
39. I can communicate in English without knowing the rules.	1	2	3	4	5
40. I should choose what materials to use to learn English in my English lessons.	1	2	3	4	5
41. My teacher should identify my weaknesses in English.	1	2	3	4	5
42. I think I would be good at choosing learning materials in class.	1	2	3	4	5
43. In the classroom I see the teacher as somebody whose authority should not be questioned.	1	2	3	4	5
44. I am anxious when I am speaking English in class.*	1	2	3	4	5
45. I should make myself work harder.*	1	2	3	4	5
46. My teacher should decide how long to spend on each activity.*	1	2	3	4	5
47. Opportunities to use the language plays an important role in successful language learning.	1	2	3	4	5
48. I should decide the objectives of my English course.*	1	2	3	4	5
49. I need to know language rules before I can communicate in English.	1	2	3	4	5
50. I believe the role of the teacher is to give me regular tests.	1	2	3	4	5
51. I should decide what I should learn next in my English lessons.*	1	2	3	4	5
52. I have had some bad experiences with learning English (i.e. being criticized).	1	2	3	4	5
53. When I am working in a group, I like to help keep the atmosphere friendly and harmonious.*	1	2	3	4	5
54. My teacher should decide the objectives of my English course.*	1	2	3	4	5

55. I think I would be good at choosing learning objectives in class.*	1	2	3	4	5
56. My language learning success depends on what my classmates do in the classroom.	1	2	3	4	5
57. I think I would be good at identifying my weaknesses in English.*	1	2	3	4	5
58. I work especially hard when my own success will benefit other people (e.g. my family or other students) as well as me.	1	2	3	4	5
59. I should choose what activities to use to learn English in my English lessons.	1	2	3	4	5
60. My teacher should decide what I should learn next in my English lessons.	1	2	3	4	5
61. I should evaluate my learning.*	1	2	3	4	5
62. Learning English is mostly a matter of learning grammar rules.	1	2	3	4	5
63. English conversation class should be enjoyable.*	1	2	3	4	5
64. My teacher should make me work harder.	1	2	3	4	5
65. I should decide what I learn outside class.*	1	2	3	4	5
66. I think I would be good at choosing learning objectives outside class.*	1	2	3	4	5
67. I believe that someday I will speak English very well.*	1	2	3	4	5
68. My teacher should choose what materials to use to learn English in my English lessons.*	1	2	3	4	5
69. I think I would be good at choosing learning activities in class.*	1	2	3	4	5
70. My teacher should evaluate my learning.	1	2	3	4	5
71. I believe that I know best how well I am learning.*	1	2	3	4	5
72. If I learn to speak English very well, I will have many opportunities to use it.	1	2	3	4	5
73. I think I would be good at choosing learning activities outside class.	1	2	3	4	5
74. I am sure I will be able to learn English well.*	1	2	3	4	5
75. My teacher should decide what I learn outside class.*	1	2	3	4	5
76. I think I would be good at choosing learning materials outside class.	1	2	3	4	5
77. Knowing English will enable me to get to know various cultures and people.*	1	2	3	4	5
78. I think I have a good feel for English.*	1	2	3	4	5
79. I can improve my English by speaking English with my classmates.	1	2	3	4	5
80. I think I would be good at evaluating my course.*	1	2	3	4	5
81. I have a special ability for learning foreign languages.*	1	2	3	4	5
82. I think I would be good at evaluating my learning.*	1	2	3	4	5
83. My teacher should stimulate my interest in learning English.	1	2	3	4	5
84. My language learning success depends on what I do outside the classroom.	1	2	3	4	5
85. I consider myself to be a good language learner (i.e. I can pick up language easily).*	1	2	3	4	5

* Author's note: The asterisks indicate the 45 items analysed in this paper.

Thank you very much for your cooperation!