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## CURRICULUM & TEACHING STUDIES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Investigating the target language usage in and outside business English classrooms for non-English major undergraduates at a Chinese university

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**Abstract:** This article reports an investigative study on the target language use in and outside business English classrooms for non-English major undergraduates in a Chinese university context. The aims of the study are to identify the actual situation of target language use in business English teaching and to suggest ways for improvements. The study uses the research instruments of questionnaires containing rating and open-ended questions, and participant observation of 128 participants from different academic disciplines enrolled in business English courses. The results show that although the teacher talk ratio of target language and first language (L1) use is 90:10, the participants' target language use in various communicative contexts in and outside the classroom is inadequate. The constraint factors include study environment, L1 and other languages, low English proficiency, personality and limited resources. Pathways to improve the English language learning environment are thus suggested. This study informs business English teaching practices, curriculum implementation, and language policy development under the background of new College English Teaching reform in China within the international context.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Under the background of economic globalization, Chinese universities are facilitating their internationalization processes. English learning is imperative in the globalized environment. This article investigates the target language usage in and outside business English classrooms for non-English major undergraduates in a Chinese university context. The research shows that target language use in various communicative contexts in and out of classrooms is inadequate. Students tend to use more of their mother tongue than English. The target language use tends to be constrained by the negative influence of mother tongue environment, language proficiency and personal variables such as personality and lack of language learning resources. Suggestions for improvement include organizing more English activities, having more communication with English native speakers and enhancing the exposure to English use through out of class activities. This study serves as an example for improving business English teaching and curriculum development for both the Chinese and international university context.

**Subjects: Higher Education; Teaching & Learning; Bilingualism / ESL; Curriculum Studies; Language Teaching & Learning**

**Keywords: target language; first language; business English teaching; Chinese university; non-English major undergraduates**

## 1. Introduction

Under the background of economic globalization, Chinese universities are facilitating their internationalization processes. Yang (2001) observes that English learning is imperative for Chinese higher education system, in light of the trend that English has become a global language. Moreover, Hayhoe and Zha (2004) mention that one of the features is internationalizing higher education curricula and faculty. Ma and Yue (2015, p. 222) indicate that under the guidance of Ministry of Education policy, “5–10% of the undergraduate courses must be taught in English or bilingually” in the main science and social science disciplines, offered in key universities in China. In this context, Hu (2007) stresses that tertiary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching should shift toward preparing students for academic study in English, which poses new challenges for university teachers and learners.

However, Cai (2015) identifies the gap between the industry demand for international talents and Chinese university students’ inadequate English communicative competence. Chinese tertiary EFL teaching should reform to remedy this inadequacy. According to the EF (2015) English proficiency index report, mainland China is still ranked 47th, with a score of 49.41, far behind Japan, South Korea and Hong Kong, etc. Meanwhile, the report indicates that while English has become the major global communication language, how much English should be taught in education systems varies from country to country.

In the current China’s Ministry of Education College English Teaching Advisory Committee (2014) *College English Teaching Guide Consultative Version* in the latest round of college English teaching reform, *English for specific purposes* courses, consisting of *English for academic purposes* and *English for occupational purposes* courses, have become important components of the curriculum to develop students’ communicative competence in academic and professional contexts. This article focuses on the *English for occupational purposes* group, i.e. business English courses. To serve as an example of EFL teaching in the internationalizing Chinese university context, this article investigates the key issue of how much the target language (English) has been used in and outside business English classrooms for non-English major undergraduates from different academic disciplines. It also gathers students’ perspectives on how their first language (Chinese) is being used and identifies the major factors that influence target language use. The routes to enhance the English learning environment and the effectiveness of communicative competence development in China’s tertiary EFL teaching context are proposed. This study also has significant theoretical and practical implications for other higher education contexts, where faculty and students strive to maintain balance between the use of English and their mother tongue in various teaching contexts.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Understanding target language and first language use in English teaching in the international context

Theoretical arguments on target language use and the necessity of first language (L1) use have been ongoing for a long time. The history of English language teaching shows that the approaches have evolved from “the grammar-translation method, innovative language teaching approach, reform movement, direct method to communicative language teaching” (Richards & Rodgers, 1986, p. 3). The use of a second language (L2) as the medium of instruction (MOI) “has been a rule rather than an exception” (Cummins, 2009, p. 162). According to V. Cook (2001), initially L1 use is to be avoided in order to maximize the learners’ exposure to the target language. Later, various teaching methods, such as the bilingual method, can be adopted to more effectively make use of L1 in English teaching. Teachers can use L1 to “check meanings of words, explain grammar, organize tasks, manage

disciplines and get in contact with students” (p. 414). Students also can use L1 in classroom activities in connection with target language learning. Butzkamm and Caldwell (2009) elaborate upon the necessity and benefits of using the mother tongue in different foreign language classrooms to inform various aspects of the teaching process. The work of G. Cook (2010) also supports the use of L1 and translation in language teaching.

Informed by theories, previous studies on target language and first language use inside and outside classrooms have been conducted in different countries, using various research instruments to gather empirical evidence. In a study of EFL teaching in four Asian university contexts using interviews with teachers and class records and observation, Barnard (2013) finds that teachers switch between the target language (English) and students’ first language at different levels. The codeswitching practices during teaching play different roles, such as “presenting, eliciting, evaluating and socializing etc.” (p. 79), and are valued by teachers based on their observation of student motivation and language proficiency levels. In the Japanese university context, Moore (2013) studies the use of L1 in an EFL classroom using student interaction data, student reflection and task performance record, and finds that students’ L1 use during the task varied, due to differences in their students’ English proficiency levels, engagement in the tasks and pedagogical concerns. The researcher supports the view that first language use occurs naturally in EFL classroom discourse and that contextual factors should be taken into consideration.

In the wider context of the US and Canada, Levine (2003) studies the target language (TL) use and L1 use in foreign language (FL) classrooms with 600 students and 163 instructors using questionnaires. The findings support the view that the amount of the target language and first language differs according to the interlocutors and the communicative contexts. In the context of the English Language Center in the US, Shvidko, Evans, and Hartshorn (2015) study the factors affecting students’ English language use outside the classroom by student interviews. They find that factors such as “peer pressure and communication patterns, low language proficiency, translating habits, and differences in English and L1, motivation and personality, lack of confidence, stress and fear” (p. 15) contribute to the decreased use of English outside the classrooms.

## **2.2. Target language and first language use in English teaching in the Chinese context**

Previous studies also focus on target language and first language use in English teaching in the Chinese context, including mainland China and Hong Kong, at both the secondary school and tertiary levels for both language-oriented and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) courses. For example, Yan, Fung, Liu, and Huang (2016, p. 75) have conducted a large-scale survey of the target language and first language use in EFL classrooms of “seven secondary schools and four universities” in the South of China. The study reports a larger amount of target language use in the secondary schools and universities when the MOI was English for content courses. Participants tended to use more target language in course content-related activities and less target language in discussion with administrative subjects such as assignments and exams.

In the context of Chinese universities, Meiji and Zhao (2010) study teachers’ and students’ attitudes and perceptions of codeswitching in different EFL classrooms based on teacher and student questionnaires and lesson records and find that teachers’ language proficiency, students’ language proficiency and course types influence the frequency and length of codeswitching practices, which are perceived as useful approaches to achieve desired learning outcomes. In another context, Cai and G. Cook (2015, p. 242) have investigated the “own-language use” in a Chinese tertiary English language teaching case study by analyzing lesson records and interviews with students and teachers. Their study enlists the pedagogical functions of L1 (Chinese) in tertiary English language teaching, which include explaining difficult language, giving direction in class, managing class and interaction between teachers and students. The study recommends the shift of teacher-centered focus toward a communicative student-centered approach.

In the context of Hong Kong, Evans (2008) studies the classroom language use in English medium schools using survey questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Evans (2008) finds that due to government policy requirements, English medium schools tend to use more English in the classrooms, although inadequacy remains compared with the language immersion approach. Evans (2008) also finds that the English only policy can create problems in teaching practice and that teachers occasionally use Cantonese or Chinese along with English to achieve better learning outcomes. In Hong Kong's secondary school context, Lo (2015, p. 270) investigates the extent of using L1 and English as a second language (L2) in CLIL courses based on 30 class records. The study finds that CLIL teachers use a high proportion of L1 if students' L2 proficiency does not reach the required standard, while more L2 is used when students have higher L2 levels. L1 serves different purposes in the CLIL classrooms, ranging from explaining abstract concept to teacher-student interaction to raising students' awareness of L2 learning. Teachers are sensitive about the use of L1 and L2, which is based on "students' abilities and classroom interaction."

Littlewood and Fang (2011) conduct a comparative study on the use of the mother tongue in secondary school EFL classrooms in mainland China and Hong Kong based on "students' recollection" (p. 46). The study finds variations of mother tongue use in different mainland China and Hong Kong contexts. The major functions of the mother tongue include addressing personal needs, classroom discipline management, and ensuring student understanding. However, their study indicates that the use of foreign language should be maximized to create a suitable learning environment with students being exposed to adequate language input.

### **2.3. Target language and first language use in business English teaching in China**

Previous studies in the Chinese context also focus on target language and first language use in business English teaching. Huang (2009) analyzes business English teachers' classroom discourses and conducts surveys and interviews with the students. He finds that the use of Chinese is inevitable in teaching, while English language input is critical in ensuring the quality and effectiveness of business English teaching. Teachers' English use in class can be categorized into oral interaction and written practice. The study concludes that teachers' classroom English language use should be carefully designed to ensure desired learning outcomes. For bilingual teaching, Liu (2011) studies codeswitching in business English courses by conducting surveys with students, interviews with teachers and audio recording the course delivery process. The study finds that codeswitching is necessary, as it plays the roles in creating class atmosphere, facilitating students' understanding and increasing course efficiency.

In the context of vocational colleges, Liang (2009) studies the use of English-Chinese codeswitching in business English teaching based on her own teaching experiences and observation. She concludes that it is necessary to use the L1 to explain business English vocabulary, syntax and text rather than using English Medium Instruction (EMI), which may create difficulties for students' understanding in the Chinese context.

### **3. Research objective and questions**

In summary, few previous empirical studies focus on the actual extent of target language and L1 use in teaching based on students' perceptions, the factors that influence the target language use in and outside classrooms and the routes to enhance the English learning environment and teaching effectiveness.

This study thus aims to fill in the research gap to explore the actual situation of target language use in business English teaching and to suggest ways for improvements in English learning environments in an increasingly internationalized higher education context. In this study, the target language is English, especially for business purposes. This study centers on four research questions:

- (1) How much target language is perceived to be used in business English classrooms in the Chinese university context?
- (2) How much target language is perceived to be used outside business English classrooms in the Chinese university context?
- (3) What are the factors which influence target language use in and outside classrooms?
- (4) How can the English learning environment be improved in the Chinese university context based on participants' perceptions?

#### 4. Methodology

As this study investigates the extent of target language and first language use in business English classrooms, the factors that influence the language use and the solutions, both numerical and non-numerical information is needed. This study therefore follows both quantitative and qualitative paradigms in data collection and analysis (Brown, 2014). The research instruments are questionnaires and teacher/researcher's participant observation (Lynch, 1996). The data collection process, participant information and data analysis procedures are explained in the following three sections.

##### 4.1. Data collection

The data collection process consists of questionnaires and participant observation. Fifteen-question questionnaires (see Appendix 1) were administered in the last week of the business English courses, in May 2016, to gather participants' perceptions of target language use in and outside class, the factors that influence the actual language use and their suggestions to improve the English learning environment. The response rate was 100%. The questions were adapted from the studies of Yan et al. (2016, p. 95), Levine (2003, p. 358) and Shvidko et al. (2015, p. 26), which previously explore target language use in various foreign language teaching contexts. The questions in this study were adapted to suit the specific situations for business English teaching in the Chinese university. There are both rating and open-ended questions, through which participants self-assessed their target language use and reported those factors that constrained the target language use. They were also asked to provide suggestions to overcome the barriers. As most of the questions are adapted based on existing studies that generated insightful results, this ensures the reliability of the findings for this study.

In addition, while the researcher also delivered the business English courses, participant observation was conducted during class with all of the participants, and class group work was audio recorded from February to May 2016 to better understand participants' language use in class, so as to triangulate the findings from paper-based questionnaires, to ensure the validity and credibility of the findings.

##### 4.2. Participants

This study selected a public university located in Eastern China that offers business English courses to non-English major undergraduates. These include *Business English* (32 teaching hours), *Business English Reading and Writing* (48 teaching hours) and *International Trade Correspondence* (32 teaching hours). These business English courses use different textbooks, including *Further Ahead Cambridge Business English Preliminary* (Jones-Macziola & White, 2003) for *Business English*, *Market Leader Intermediate Business English Coursebook* (Cotton, Falvey, & Kent, 2011) for *Business English Reading and Writing*, and *Up-to-date Correspondence for Import & Export* (Wang, Zhang, & Wu, 2012) for *International Trade Correspondence*. The level of English for these business English courses is intermediate. These business English courses are offered by the School of Foreign Studies in the Chinese university as electives for non-English major undergraduates to enrich their business knowledge and enhance their professional communication skills.

The participant profiles are shown in Table 1. There are 128 participants, who enroll in different academic programs of this Chinese university. Around 70% of the participants are female while 30% are male students. Their average age is 19.84 years old, and the age range is between 17–23 years old. Around 17% are in their first year, 60% are in their second year and around 22% in their third

**Table 1. Participant profiles**

|                              |                 |
|------------------------------|-----------------|
| Total number of participants | 128             |
| By gender: Female            | 90 (70.3%)      |
| Male                         | 38 (29.7%)      |
| Average age                  | 19.84 years old |
| Age range                    | 17–23           |
| By year of study: First year | 22 (17.2%)      |
| Second year                  | 78 (60.9%)      |
| Third year                   | 28 (21.9%)      |

**Table 2. Participants’ academic program composition**

| Program                | Number of participants (%) |
|------------------------|----------------------------|
| Japanese               | 64 (50%)                   |
| Business               | 27 (21.09%)                |
| Nursing                | 8 (6.25%)                  |
| Mechanical engineering | 7 (5.47%)                  |
| Design                 | 6 (4.69%)                  |
| Chinese                | 8 (6.25%)                  |
| Education              | 8 (6.25%)                  |

year. Regarding students’ English proficiency, around two-thirds of the participants had earned the College English Test (CET) Band-4 certificate. A few advanced learners had passed CET Band-6 and wanted to take a higher level test such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), International English Language Test System (IELTS), or Business English Certificate (BEC) for further overseas study.

The participants’ academic program composition is shown in Table 2. The largest group is from the Japanese program and includes half of the participants. Business program participants also account for around 21%. Nursing, Chinese and education programs account for around 6% of the participants, respectively, while the mechanical engineering and design programs account for around 5% of the participants.

Participants’ motivations to study business English are described in Table 3. More than 70% of the participants had a medium level of motivation to study business English. Over 21% of the participants had low motivation while 8.6% of the participants were highly motivated.

Participants’ primary reasons to study business English are summarized in Table 4. Participants’ reasons varied, ranging from job-related incentives to academic study needs. Of the participants, 17.19% gave career development or employment-related reasons for studying business English; 8.59% hoped to improve their professional communicative competence in reading, writing, speaking, or listening. 16.41% sought primarily to improve their English skills; 14.06% of the participants chose to study business English because of their own personal interest; and 7.03% also hoped to gain relevant knowledge, such as to learn business or international trade terms. Around 5% of the participants, mostly from business programs, chose to study business English because of their academic needs. Participants’ other motivations included passing the BEC test, self-improvement and broadening their horizons. A small number of participants may have had pragmatic purposes such as to earn course credit or were simply influenced by their friends.



**Table 3. Motivation to study business English**

|        |            |
|--------|------------|
| Low    | 27 (21.1%) |
| Medium | 90 (70.3%) |
| High   | 11 (8.6%)  |

**Table 4. Primary reasons to study business English**

| Reasons   | Frequency (% of participants) |
|---|-------------------------------|
| Career development                                | 22 (17.19%)                   |
| Personal interest                                 | 18 (14.06%)                   |
| Usefulness/Practical                              | 8 (6.25%)                     |
| Professional communicative competence development | 11 (8.59%)                    |
| Course credit                                     | 6 (4.69%)                     |
| Pass Business English Certificate test            | 4 (3.13%)                     |
| Gain relevant knowledge e.g. business, trade      | 9 (7.03%)                     |
| Improve English                                   | 21 (16.41%)                   |
| Broaden horizon                                   | 2 (1.56%)                     |
| Self-improvement                                  | 3 (2.34%)                     |
| Further study                                     | 1 (0.78%)                     |
| Academic study needs                              | 6 (4.69%)                     |
| University arrangement                            | 5 (3.9%)                      |
| Friends' influence                                | 3 (2.34%)                     |

### 4.3. Data analysis

For the rating questions in the questionnaires, the frequency of the participants' responses to their target language and first language use percentage based on their own estimations of their time in and outside classrooms, and their respective proportions toward the whole participant group were calculated. Means and standard deviations of the participants' responses regarding their understanding of teacher talk and fellow students' discussion in English were also calculated. These ensure an objective understanding of the actual extent of target language use in and outside business English classrooms. From the responses to the open-ended questions in the questionnaires, key themes were identified (Brown, 2014) and typical quotes (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012) were selected, related to the factors that influence target language and first language use, and suggestions to improve language learning environment on campus. Some of the participants provided their responses in Chinese, which were later translated into English by the researcher. In order to protect the confidentiality of the participant identity, pseudonyms are used when presenting these responses. In addition, information gathered from participant observation by the researcher and class group work records complements the questionnaire's results with critical insider perspective to verify the research findings.

## 5. Results

### 5.1. Participants' language use in business English classrooms

The mean for business English teacher's classroom target language use is 90.16%, as perceived by the participants. The rest of the classroom language use is in L1 (Chinese). The business English teacher also reflected that target language use was maximized in the class delivery process. The mean of the percentage that participants can understand what the business English teacher is saying in English is 69.5%, and the standard deviation is 20.71. The mean of percentage that participants can understand what the fellow students are saying in English is 71%, and the standard deviation is 24.26.

**Table 5. Participants' time of English use in classrooms in different communicative contexts**

| Time range (%) | Frequency (% of participants)   |                   |                                |                            |
|----------------|---------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|
|                | Topic-based thematic activities | Grammar and usage | Quizzes, exams and assignments | Administrative information |
| 0–20           | 48 (37.5%)                      | 63 (49.2%)        | 50 (39.1%)                     | 91 (71.1%)                 |
| 20–40          | 17 (13.3%)                      | 26 (20.3%)        | 21 (16.4%)                     | 14 (10.9%)                 |
| 40–60          | 28 (21.9%)                      | 25 (19.5%)        | 21 (16.4%)                     | 9 (7%)                     |
| 60–80          | 21 (16.4%)                      | 10 (7.8%)         | 22 (17.2%)                     | 5 (3.9%)                   |
| 80–100         | 14 (10.9%)                      | 2 (1.6%)          | 13 (10.2%)                     | 8 (6.3%)                   |

**Table 6. Participants' perceived time of using L1 (Chinese) in group work**

| Time range (%) | Frequency (% of participants) |
|----------------|-------------------------------|
| 0–20           | 23 (17.97%)                   |
| 20–40          | 24 (18.75%)                   |
| 40–60          | 45 (35.16%)                   |
| 60–80          | 23 (17.97%)                   |
| 80–100         | 13 (10.16%)                   |

Participants' target language use in different communicative contexts in classrooms is illustrated in Table 5. Among the four contexts, topic-based thematic activities, grammar and usage, quizzes, exams and assignments, and administrative information, the percentage of participants is the highest in the time range category of 0–20%. Of the participants, 71.1% used only 0–20% of their time speaking English for administrative information, and 21.9% spent 40–60% of their time using English in topic-based thematic activities, which is higher than the percentages for the other three communicative contexts. Fewer than 20% of the participants spent much of the time using English to discuss quizzes, exams, and assignments or to discuss English topic-based thematic activities, much higher than the other two communicative contexts. Using English to discuss grammar and usage has the lowest participant percentage, with around 1.6%, who would spend 80–100% of their time in this classroom context, compared to the other three communicative contexts. Through classroom participant observation of discussion-related activities, it was quite often found that students switched to their L1 in task negotiation.

Participants' perceived time of using L1 (Chinese) in group work in class is summarized in Table 6. 35.16% of the participants spent 40–60% of their class group work time using L1 with other group members. Only 10.16% of the participants chose to speak L1 during 80–100% of the group work time. However, in analyzing the class audio during group work activities, the researcher found that participants mostly relied on L1 in group discussion.

### 5.2. Factors influencing language use in classroom

Participants have also indicated their views on the factors influencing language use in the classroom. Around 50% of the participants felt comfortable speaking the target language (English) in class. They considered it necessary to use English in class, as the teacher also taught the course mostly in English. Wang demonstrated strong willingness to improve English in and outside class.

Because of TOFEL test, I must improve my English and I love English very much although I am not the active girl during the class. But I always practice my English especially oral English after class. (Wang)



However, participants also explained the difficulties that constrained their classroom target language use, which are explained in the following two sections.

#### *5.2.1. The influence of L1 and other languages*

Around 5% of the participants mentioned that the use of L1 (Chinese) could influence their English use in class. 6.25% of the participants from the Japanese program also mentioned the adverse effect of this third language on their English use in class.

I still stay in the Chinese mode, think in Chinese and then translate into English. (Translation, Lin)

Since I studied Japanese, it became more difficult to use English, as the vocabulary and grammar will be affected. (Translation, Xu)

It's difficult to transfer from Japanese and Chinese to English. But I think it is necessary if I want to improve my English. (Zhang)

#### *5.2.2. Low English proficiency*

Around 24% of the participants indicated that inadequate English communicative competence constrained their target language use in class. There are various forms of the inadequacy. Li and Zhu gave the following explanations.

As pronunciation varies from person to person, it will create barriers to understanding. (Translation, Li)

Many times, I cannot distinguish written and oral expressions. English use is too stiff. (Translation, Zhu)

### **5.3. Participants' language use outside the classroom**

Participants' target language use outside the classroom is described in Table 7. The time span of outside classroom target language use is based on participants' own estimation and learning experience. Of the participants, 71.1% spent only 0–20% of their time outside the classroom using or speaking English. The percentages of participants decrease as the percentages of time spent in English use outside of class increase from 20 to 100%. However, 1.6% of the participants used English 80–100% of their time outside the classroom. The percentages show that participants' target language use outside class is still inadequate.

### **5.4. Factors influencing language use outside the classroom**

#### *5.4.1. Study environment*

For factors influencing target language use outside the classroom, around 32.8% of the participants indicated that lacking English use environment could be a major constraint factor. Participants would consider it natural to use their L1, Chinese, outside class as it is easier for their daily communication. The following two participants further explained the impact of the Chinese environment and their academic study.

The Chinese environment. The friends. We don't use English as frequently as possible and we also don't have friends who speak foreign language. Because we live in an environment which require us to speak Chinese to communicate with others. We don't have a chance to practice our oral English. And this English class has limited time and we don't make better use of time. Although I'd love to practice my English. I still do not practice my English. (Zhou)

Because of majoring, we don't have much more time to practice English and have little chance to speak English. Because we are living in a Chinese speaking country environment leads to speaking Chinese. (Wu)

**Table 7. Participants' time of English use outside classroom**

| Time range (%) | Frequency (% of participants) |
|----------------|-------------------------------|
| 0-20           | 91 (71.1%)                    |
| 20-40          | 26 (20.3%)                    |
| 40-60          | 7 (5.5%)                      |
| 60-80          | 1 (0.8%)                      |
| 80-100         | 2 (1.6%)                      |

Participants also mentioned their university friends or classmates, as elements of the study environment could influence their language use outside class. According to Tang, it depended on “whether partners outside class use English.” Jia and Gao had the following views.

Though it is natural to communicate in English among classmates, the English oral communicative competence is not that high. (Translation, Jia)

In my eyes students can't speak English. The biggest reason is that they haven't a foreign class. (Gao)

#### 5.4.2. The influence of L1 and other languages

Around 35% of the participants mentioned the influence of L1 (Chinese) in their use of English outside class. Around 2% of the participants from the Japanese program also indicated that learning this third language could also affect their English learning outside class. Liu and Xing had the following observations.

Most non-English major students will not attempt to communicate in English. (Translation, Liu)

The fellow students and other people around us use Chinese. My first reaction is Chinese... There will be fewer cases in which people cannot understand each other. (Translation, Xing)

#### 5.4.3. Low English proficiency

Around 19.5% of the participants explained that it is because of their low level of proficiency which lead to less use of English outside classrooms. Zheng and Cai had the following elaboration.

Because they can't understand English very well. Only can understand some simple English. It is difficult to speak English. Students prefer to use Chinese if they want to express something clear. English is still a barrier for many students. (Zheng)

The barriers include vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, convenience and expressions. (Translation, Cai)

#### 5.4.4. Personality factor

Around 3% of the participants mentioned the personality factors, such as being shy or feeling ashamed to speak or use English outside class. Tao explained as follows.

Shy and they don't know how to start in English. (Tao)

#### 5.4.5. Limited resources

Participants also mentioned inadequate resources for English learning. Shao had the following detailed explanation.

Limited by academic study, there are fewer opportunities. Lack of relevant videos or multimedia resources and routes for learning. (Translation, Shao)

### 5.5. Improving English language learning environment on campus

Based on the researcher’s observations, the English use learning environment for this study tended to be constrained by the extensive mother tongue use in the Chinese university. However, there are resources that participants can utilize such as the large number of foreign teachers and exchange students from different countries with whom they can communicate in English, the special public lectures introducing Western culture and knowledge offered by representing foreign teachers and various English activities organized by the international office. There are online English learning resources such as history documentaries and lectures by famous scientists for students to download from the university website. However, it depends on students’ own initiative to make good use of the resources, which are not yet compulsory parts of the curriculum. The researcher thereby suggests that participating in these international communication activities and online learning can be incorporated into the curriculum, as they bring enormous benefits.

Participants also gave their own suggestions on improving English language learning environment on campus. Their suggestions are summarized in Table 8. Of the participants, 28.1% hoped to have more relevant activities organized, such as English salons, debate, speech, lectures, etc. to generate their interest in English learning. 27.3% desired more communication with native speakers, such as foreign teachers and students. 16.4% of the participants indicated that morning reading or English corners could help them practice English more often. Participants have indicated the roles played by English songs and radio in their learning process and the importance of instruction by foreign teachers either as a part of the formal curriculum or co-curricular arrangement. While stressing interest, participants also mentioned that English exams could motivate them to practice English more frequently. Yu and Chen had the following explanations.

If there are the needs of society, English certificate test or communication with foreign friends, I probably will speak more English. (Translation, Yu)

The main factors are examination, such as intermediate interpretation, CET Band 4, 6, society e.g. English corner and teaching, which will drive them to use English outside class. (Translation, Chen)

It seems that some of the suggestions raised by the participants have already been accommodated by this Chinese university. However, the researcher found that participants are not active enough to use the available resources to improve their English communication skills. In this situation, while teachers are suggested to follow participant suggestions to design more effective activities for a better English learning environment, it is also important to enhance learners’ motivation to further engage in the learning process creatively.

**Table 8. Participants’ suggestions to improve English language learning environment on campus**

| Participant suggestions   | Frequency (% of participants) |
|---|-------------------------------|
| Organize more activities, such as salon, debate, speech, lectures, etc. | 36 (28.1%)                    |
| Oral communication with foreigners                                      | 35 (27.3%)                    |
| Create English use environment in and after class                       | 14 (10.9%)                    |
| Play English songs or radios  | 4 (3.1%)                      |
| Morning reading and English corner                                      | 21 (16.4%)                    |
| Foreign teacher instruction   | 2 (1.6%)                      |
| English exams   | 3 (2.3%)                      |

## 6. Discussion

For the ratio of target language use in teacher talk, which is approaching 90% and the mean at around 70% and standard deviation at about 20 for students' understanding, the situation is considered natural, as even EMI does not necessarily mean English only. The teacher has to take into account students' proficiency level (Madhavan, 2016). In a similar Chinese tertiary EFL context, Tian and Macaro (2012) confirm that for second language vocabulary acquisition, teacher codeswitching has better effects than only using L2. The results confirm previous research.

For target language use in the classrooms in various communicative contexts, it can be summarized that participants' target language use occurs most in the 0–20% time range, which is considered insufficient. In a similar context, Cheng (2013) uses semi-structured questionnaires to investigate 32 Chinese English teachers' beliefs and attitudes toward codeswitching in EFL classrooms. Cheng (2013)'s study supports the view that students' language proficiency constrains target language use in EFL teaching in China and that L1 should be applied to explain difficult language points such as grammar and abstract concepts. However, as target language use exposes students to an authentic language use environment, it should be maximized. The results of this study agree with previous research that though classroom target language use is constrained, the teacher still should encourage the use of authentic target language to ensure better learning outcomes.

For group work in classrooms, it can be summarized that the discussion time to speak L1 (Chinese) is much higher than target language use. Previous research confirms that the use of both target language and L1 use is necessary. For example, Hird (1996) studies codeswitching between English and L1 in group work in a Chinese context based on a recorded tape script of group discussion. He argues that to force the use of target language in group work may not be effective in realizing the learning objectives and points out that the purpose of group work should be to acquire collaborative learning strategies for learning the content rather than to develop communication skills in the target language. In another context, Chen and Hird (2006) study codeswitching in EFL group work in China based on the tapescripts of group work and interviews with students. Their study argues that though codeswitching fulfills various functions in group work, it may limit the development of English communication skills. They suggest that teachers should encourage higher frequency and greater variety of English use in the group work while codeswitching should not be prohibited. The results of this study confirm those of previous studies and suggest that teachers of business English courses should offer timely guidance on the group work by setting up activity guidelines while not completely restricting the use of L1.

The two major constraint factors affecting in class target language learning identified in this EFL case are the influence of L1 and other languages, and low English proficiency which are also found in other educational contexts. In the study of Evans (2008, p. 495), the extensive use of the local language and students' limited proficiency are making EMI unrealistic. Similarly, Lo (2015) indicates that students' target language level and academic competence could constrain EMI in CLIL courses. Hedge (2002, p. 25) also mentions that whether “classes are monolingual or multilingual” could be one of the key factors constraining target language learning.

Regarding the outside class context, this study finds that the percentages of students decline with the increases of percentages of time in target language use. This result is similar to that of Evans (2017) in the Hong Kong context based on questionnaires and observations, where students and lecturers tended to use more Cantonese than English in their interaction and communication outside class. Factors affecting outside classroom target language use, which include the influence of L1 and other languages, low English proficiency, personality and limited resources, are also partly identified in the study of Shvidko et al. (2015). It seems that the factors of L1 and other languages, and low English proficiency influence target language use in both inside and outside classroom contexts. Moreover, Hedge (2002) indicates that the absence of active target language use in students' daily living and positive social attitudes could influence English language teaching outcomes. It

mainly relies on teachers to think out English activities in and out of class to increase students' productive output.

For improving English learning environments, while various resources are available on campus, participants have suggested various routes such as English activities, and international communication with expatriates. Previous literature also suggests that establishing a healthy learning environment is an essential element of effective learning practices. For example, McCombs (2015, p. 61) identifies these domains for the higher education context, which include cultivating healthy relationships and learning environments, meeting learning needs and engaging learners in the learning process. Moreover, Nunan (2001, p. 105), in his work on learner-centered curriculum, indicates the key role of the "community as resources" which could encourage learners to use target language outside the classrooms. He states that only "simulation in the classroom" cannot cover every aspect of the real world and suggests that "guest speakers" from outside the classroom can be invited into the teaching process. Thus, to maximize target language use and communicative competence development, students should engage in learning activities both in and outside classrooms.

## 7. Conclusion

This article investigates the actual use of target language (English) and first language (Chinese) in business English courses inside and outside of classrooms in a Chinese university context based on participants' perceptions, learning experiences, teacher's participant observations, and class records. The results of the study support previous research by providing statistical estimations that target language use in various communicative contexts and group work in the classrooms is inadequate. Out of class target language use is also inadequate. Participants tend to use more L1 than the target language in the classrooms and daily communications. This study extends previous research by identifying those factors that constrain the target language use in and outside classrooms. These include the intervention of L1 and other languages such as Japanese, English proficiency constraints, study environment limitations, personality problems and constraints in resources. It seems that there are not great disciplinary influences found on the results of the study, except for the participants from the Japanese program, whose target language learning is affected by their third language. Various routes to enhance the English learning environment are identified by both the participants and the researcher, including various campus English activities, communication with foreign teachers and students and English corners. Students should be encouraged to explore and create the opportunities themselves for better learning outcomes.

This study serves as a critical reference for theoretical development in the related areas of classroom language use, codeswitching, and language learning environment, etc. through the provision of real-world evidence. The study also informs business English teaching practices and curriculum design. It provides an important case for the College English Teaching reform and new curriculum implementation in China. Moreover, this study provides critical understanding for language policy development, particularly in reviewing the MOI guidelines for the higher education context. Methodologically, although the study is conducted in only one Chinese university context, the research process can be replicated in other cultural environments. The study also has educational significance for the international context by indicating pathways to create better communicative competence development outcomes. Future research can consider how various project-based and communication-centered interventions can be introduced into the English classrooms to enhance target language use and communication skills development. Future research can also further investigate the influence of students' disciplinary studies on target language use and English language teaching.

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## Appendix 1

### The use of English in and outside classroom

Questions 2–12 adapted from Yan et al. (2016, p. 95), Levine (2003, p. 358) and questions 13–14 adapted from Shvidko et al. (2015, p. 26)

1. Your name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_ Academic program: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Please mark the best/primary reason for you to learn business English: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. Please rate your level of overall motivation to learn English as \_\_\_\_\_ (high/medium/low).
4. Business English teacher uses English to communicate with students about \_\_\_\_% of the time the classroom. This includes time spent on activities and time spent between activities.
5. I use English to communicate within topic-based or thematic activities about \_\_\_\_% of the time we spend on this type of activities.
6. I use English to communicate about grammar and usage about \_\_\_\_% of the time we spend on this type of activities.
7. I use English to communicate about quizzes, exams, and other assignments about \_\_\_\_% of the time we spend on this type of discussions.
8. I use English to communicate about administrative information (e.g. course policies, attendance, office hours, etc.) about \_\_\_\_% of the time we spend on this type of discussions.
9. While working with a partner or group in my English class, I switch to Chinese as soon as we are through with a particular activity about \_\_\_\_% of the time we spend on this type of activities.
10. I understand about \_\_\_\_% of what my English teacher is saying in English.
11. I understand about \_\_\_\_% of what my fellow students are saying in English.
12. I spend \_\_\_\_% of my time outside classroom to use or speak English.
13. What factors, from students' perspectives, affect their decision to use Chinese or English outside the classroom? Based on your observations or your own experience, why do students speak Chinese to each other?
14. Do you feel comfortable to speak English in class and why?
15. What can be done on campus to improve its English language-learning environment and to help students speak English?



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