

Korean Chinese Undergraduates' Preparedness and Learning Outcomes in EFL Classes in China

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중국 EFL 수업에서의 조선족 대학생의 학습 준비성 및 학업 성과

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Abstract This study was executed to be used as the basic data for the improvement of Korean Chinese undergraduates' English proficiency. Descriptive statistics and t-tests were used for data analysis on the differences between Korean Chinese and Han Chinese students' preparedness and learning outcomes of 203 undergraduates at a four-year college in China. Results showed that Korean Chinese students were significantly less prepared and had weaker learning outcomes than Han Chinese students. Analysis on the factors that affected learning outcomes showed significant differences in oral English skills, attitudes toward curriculum, beliefs in their own fluency, and learning strategies. On the other hand, no group difference was shown in learning interests. Based on these findings, implications for the improvement of Korean Chinese undergraduates' preparedness and learning outcomes in EFL class were described.

Key Words : English proficiency, preparedness, learning outcomes, learning strategies, oral English skills

요약 이 연구는 조선족 대학생들의 영어 실력 향상을 위한 기초자료로 활용하고자 시행하였다. 중국 소재 한 대학 203명을 대상으로 조선족과 한족 학부생들의 차이를 분석하고자 위해 기술 통계량 및 t-검정 분석이 사용되었다. 연구 결과는 한족 학생들에 비해 조선족 학생들의 준비성이 현저히 떨어지고 학습 성과도 약하다는 것을 보여주었다. 학습 성과에 미치는 요인들에 대한 분석은 영어 구술능력, 교과과정에 대한 태도, 자신의 영어실력에 대한 신념, 학습 전략에 있어서 그룹간의 유의미한 차이를 보였다. 반면, 학습에 대한 관심에 있어서는 그룹 간의 차이를 보이지 않았다. 본 연구는 EFL 수업에서 조선족 대학생들의 수업 준비성 및 학습 성과를 향상시키기 위한 시사점을 제공하는데 그 의의를 갖는다.

주제어 : 영어 실력, 준비성, 학습 성과, 학습 전략, 영어 구술 능력

*This study was supported by a General Grant on Higher Education and Teaching Reform of the NEAC, China (19080); a General Grant of Occupational and Adult Education and Teaching Reform, Jilin (2018ZCY235).

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Received July 21, 2020

Accepted August 20, 2020

Revised August 11, 2020

Published August 28, 2020

1. Introduction

Owing to the introduction of a market economy in China, as well a national minority policy that gives ethnic minority students the legal right to college admission with lower marks than majority Han Chinese, Korean Chinese have received more opportunities to pursue higher education in recent years. Korean Chinese are widely portrayed as more successful academically than other ethnic minorities in China due to their higher college enrollment rates than for other ethnic minorities (Gao, 2008)[1]. However, in Yanbian, the region of China with the largest population of Korean Chinese in the world, the truth is likely to be different. Korean Chinese in this region who attend less-than-premier colleges may be comparatively weak academically owing to inadequacies in the educational quality of public K-12 schools that these students previously attended (Kim & Kim, 2005)[2]. Korean Chinese in Yanbian face other challenges as well. The different teaching styles used in Chinese institutions is another obstacle that may prevent them from performing as well as Han Chinese. Furthermore, based on our peer observations and surveys, Korean Chinese are likely to become anxious and passive in class.

However, little research has been conducted on the extent to which Korean Chinese students' attitudes toward EFL classes, beliefs in their own fluency, learning strategies, and interest in learning reflect their weaker preparedness and lower expectations about learning outcomes. The present study addresses this issue to improve the efficiency of EFL instruction through the enhancement of Korean Chinese' preparedness and learning outcomes in EFL class.

2. Literature Review

There have been more opportunities for ethnic

Korean Chinese to get higher education outside of their local regions due to the introduction of a market economy in China, such as Yanbian, where the current study was conducted. However, in spite of the higher college enrollment rates, in regions such as Yanbian, it is often held that Korean Chinese college students perform more poorly than their Han Chinese peers in some subjects, owing to the weaker quality of public K-12 schools in Korean Chinese communities (Gu & Jing, 2019)[3]. Korean Chinese parents increasingly wish to see their children study in Chinese K-12 schools since it is felt that Korean Chinese public schools tend to be insufficiently competitive at upper-class levels.

The different teaching style used in major Chinese institutions is another obstacle that may prevent Korean Chinese from performing as well as Han Chinese in academics (Wang, 2016)[4]. Schools in Korean Chinese communities are relatively conservative and traditional. For example, students are expected to be passive and focus on listening to their instructors. Most of the time students are being trained for obtaining higher marks on exams instead of learning English as a communicative medium. However, in higher education settings, speaking and communicative skills are more strongly emphasized, and Korean Chinese may feel uneasy about engaging in communicative activities and group work. Their aversion to group learning methods in college could be a reflection of lack of exposure to small group activities in their K-12 classrooms taking their ethnic background and educational background into consideration (Park, 1997)[5].

With respect to language learning broadly, studies show that having had more experiences with language learning through exposure to and acquisition of more than one language, multilinguals or bilinguals may have certain skills, strategies, or beliefs that enable them to approach the process of language learning more efficiently than people with only one language learning experience (Kyungsim

& Alexandra, 2007)[6]. Cook(1992) believes that they have a multilingual competence presents a view of second language acquisition (SLA) based on that the second language (L2) user as a whole person rather than as a monolingual native speaker[7]. Some studies have also found that their language learning abilities are superior to those of monolinguals (Thomas, 1988)[8].

However, Zhang's (2008) study on 727 Korean Chinese in Yanbian indicates contrary results on multilingual learners' stronger linguistic competence in language learning that these prior studies have indicated. Her study reveals that as bilingual speakers of Korean and Chinese, Korean Chinese students might only show stronger linguistic competence at the beginning stages of learning English due to the complexity and overloaded effect that they will eventually experience. Entering high school and college English learning environments, it is hard for them to show the full extent of their multilingual competence, and some may even show disadvantages in internalizing grammatical knowledge while learning English[9]. Piao's (2013) study also reveals an increase in English learning difficulties for Korean Chinese as multilingual learners[10].

Based on our peer observations and surveys, Korean Chinese students are more likely than their peers to become anxious when being asked questions in class. They seem to lack of self-confidence and tend to become passive or less interested in learning English. Instructors report that they are more easily regarded in a negative sense as "absent-minded," "silent," or "indifferent" owing to their passivity in class and weak learning outcomes. To create lively and relaxing EFL environment to enhance students' willingness and self-confidence is crucial (Fan & Chen, 2017; Lee, Lee, & Hsieh, 2019; Wang, 2019)[11-13].

These peer observations and surveys are consistent with Jin's (2002) finding that there is

no obvious difference between Korean Chinese and Han Chinese in respect of intelligence, but Korean Chinese's self-efficacy and beliefs in their English proficiency are much lower[14]. Jin's finding shows that in spite of having sufficient intelligence, it is harder for Korean Chinese to use proper learning strategies to cope with their academic difficulties in mainstream Chinese learning environments. Qi and Chen's (2014) finding also reveals that in general, the level of Korean Chinese's learning strategy use is lower than that of Han Chinese[15]. Cho's finding (2020) emphasizes the importance to boost students' performance through enhancing their level of learning strategy use in EFL practice[16].

However, little research has been conducted on the extent to which their self-doubt on their English proficiency and learning strategy use, lower interest in EFL classes, and lower satisfaction with the way those classes are conducted can be attributed to their weaker learning outcomes especially under the circumstances that Han Chinese, the ethnic majority has been the reference standard traditionally. The comparison between Korean Chinese and Han Chinese will help clarify the group gap and improve performance and learning outcomes of Korean Chinese students. The present study addresses these issues and the following research questions are addressed:

1. Are there differences between Korean Chinese and Han Chinese undergraduates in preparedness and their self-perceived learning outcomes in English class?
2. Are there differences between Korean Chinese and Han Chinese undergraduates in factors that affect preparedness and learning outcomes in English class (oral English skills, attitudes toward curriculum, beliefs in their own fluency, learning strategies, and interest in learning)?

3. Research Methods

3.1 Participants

The study was conducted in Jilin province, China. In this study, convenience sampling and purposive sampling were used to collect data to ensure the availability and representativeness of the participants (Springer, 2010)[17]. The participants included 203 non-English major sophomore college students currently attending the practical communicative oral English course as their optional course in a comprehensive four-year university located in Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture. Twenty-five percent of them were male, and 75% were female while 87.7% were Han Chinese, and 12.3% were Korean Chinese.

3.2 Analysis Methods

The survey mainly modified from a validated scale (Jin, Dai, Liu, Zhao, & Wu, 2004) consisted of two parts, whose responses were recorded by a research assistant and descriptive statistics and t-test analysis by means of SPSS were used for data analysis[18]. The first part explored students' perceived preparedness and learning outcomes in EFL class. The second part recorded five factors on their respective preparedness and learning outcomes in respect of participants' oral English skills, attitudes toward the curricular environment, beliefs in their own English fluency, learning strategies, and their interest in learning English. The questions were measured with both a Likert-type response scale and a multiple-choice format.

4. Research Results & Discussion

4.1 Participants' Preparedness & Learning Outcomes in EFL Class

The mean scores for learning outcomes and

preparedness for EFL class along with the results of an independent samples t-test comparing the two groups showed that Korean Chinese reported being significantly more poorly prepared and less positive in EFL class than Han Chinese ($M=1.74$ and 1.99 , respectively; $p=.003$). (See Table 1)

Table 1. Participants' Preparedness & Learning Outcomes

Measure	Ethnicity(N)	Mean	Scale	Sig.*
Students' preparedness and learning outcomes	Korean Chinese(25)	1.7431	1-3	.003
	Han Chinese (178)	1.9878	1-3	

Note: * Significant at the 0.05 level ($p < .05$)

A detailed summary of the findings indicated Korean Chinese students' less involvement in practicing English, with 16% describing themselves as actively involved compared to 25% among Han Chinese, but 20% describing themselves as less involved compared to 13% among Han Chinese. Ninety-two percent of Korean Chinese somewhat or mostly disagreed that they got actively involved in curricular oral activities while 72% of Han Chinese somewhat or mostly disagreed.

The findings were similar to the results for participation in extracurricular oral activities, with only 4% of Korean Chinese somewhat or mostly agreeing that they were active in extracurricular oral activities, with 12% of Han Chinese indicating as much. Differences between Korean Chinese and Han Chinese could also be seen in their state of mind while communicating in English. Eight-five percent of Korean Chinese reported being confused or anxious versus 64% of Han Chinese while 15% reported feeling relaxed versus 36% of Han Chinese students.

4.2 Factors on Learning Outcomes for Korean Chinese & Han Chinese Students

Our measures of learning outcomes were based mainly on participants' self-reported preparedness and engagement in EFL class. Five

effects were explored. Significant differences existed between the two groups in oral English skills, attitudes toward the curricular environment, beliefs in their English fluency and their learning strategies, but not in their interest in learning. Briefly, the mean values for Korean Chinese's oral English skills, attitudes toward the curricular environment, beliefs in their English fluency and learning strategies were significantly lower than for Han Chinese (Calculated p values $< .05$). However, the results revealed students' similarly positive responses with respect to students' interest in learning ($M=1.74$ and 1.82 , respectively; $p = .259$). (See Table 2)

Table 2. Means & T-test Results for Six Factors

Factor	Ethnicity(N)	Mean	Sig.*
Students' oral English skills	Korean Chinese(25)	1.44	.006
	Han Chinese (178)	1.75	
Students' attitudes toward their former curricular environment	Korean Chinese(25)	2.47	.011
	Han Chinese (178)	2.97	
Students' beliefs in their own English Fluency	Korean Chinese(25)	2.31	.040
	Han Chinese (178)	2.83	
Students' learning strategies	Korean Chinese(25)	2.05	.050
	Han Chinese (178)	2.34	
Students' interest in learning	Korean Chinese(25)	1.74	.259
	Han Chinese (178)	1.82	

Note: * Calculated p values $< .05$

4.2.1 Results for Participants' Oral English Skills

National College Oral Test is a national test used to evaluate non-English major college students' oral English skills in China. The pass rates for students who took National College Oral Test were 44% for Korean Chinese versus 75% for Han Chinese. Thus, it was likely for Korean Chinese to feel more poorly prepared for EFL instruction, and their actual learning outcomes in

EFL class were weaker as well.

4.2.2 Results for Participants' Attitudes Toward Their Former Curricular Environment

At present, EFL instruction in China is still mainly limited to classroom experiences. Thus, the curricular environment plays an important role in students' learning. Despite the similarity in most students' satisfaction with their instructors' English use in class, 24% of Korean Chinese somewhat or mostly disagreed that they were encouraged to speak English in class while for Han Chinese, the percentage was just 11%. Similarly, 32% of Korean Chinese and 78% of Han Chinese somewhat or mostly agreed that their instructors spoke English mostly in class, indicating that Korean Chinese students had less exposure to an English speaking curricular environment. Similarly, 52% of them somewhat or mostly agreed that their instructors taught cultural differences among Western and Eastern countries in class whereas 64% of Han Chinese responded that way. At the same time, 12% of Korean Chinese but none of Han Chinese mostly disagreed with that statement. These results suggested that Korean Chinese had relatively limited opportunities to learn and to explore English culture in their English classes.

4.2.3 Results for Participants' Beliefs in Their Own English Fluency

Sixty percent of Korean Chinese reported being below average or quite weak in their comprehensive English fluency while only 22% of Han Chinese responded this way. A similar pattern of findings was observed for self-reports of their oral English fluency in particular here, 74% of Korean Chinese versus 41% of Han Chinese rated themselves as below average or quite weak in oral English fluency, a finding that pointed to Korean Chinese students' lower self-confidence and lower self-efficacy.

4.2.4 Results for Participants' Learning Strategies

Despite similarity across the two groups in positive self-encouragement when making progress or achieving goals, Korean Chinese indicated weaker performance and less self-confidence on learning strategy use than Han Chinese. In general, they reported less ability to evaluate themselves and to evaluate their learning strategies. Thirty-six percent of them mostly or somewhat agreed that they knew their own personalities, and weaknesses while the percentage for Han Chinese was 65%. They also reported weaker emotional management and adjustment abilities. They reported getting frustrated and giving up more readily, and they less frequently used positive learning strategies to encourage themselves, especially when experiencing failure on exams. Another apparent weakness was their less reliance on collaborative learning strategies and comparatively more passive performance when facing learning problems. Fifty-eight percent of them seldom or never talked with friends or instructors when facing problems in English learning, while the percentage was 36% for Han Chinese, a finding that revealed lower confidence and a more passive attitude toward using appropriate English learning strategies. It was consistent with Qi and Chen's (2014) finding that in general, the level of Korean Chinese's learning strategy use was lower than that of Han Chinese.

4.2.5 Results for Participants' Interest in Learning

Korean Chinese students' responses indicated no difference in interest in learning, with 92% describing themselves as somewhat or mostly agreed that they were interested in learning oral English, compared to 91% among Han Chinese, while 8% described themselves as somewhat or mostly disagreed, compared to 9% among Han Chinese, a finding that pointed to the participants' positive interest in learning English.

5. Conclusion & Implications for EFL Instruction

The findings of the present study suggest that the issue of Korean Chinese students' preparedness and learning outcomes in EFL class is more complicated than previous research has shown, and that more research on the issue is needed. On one hand, Korean Chinese are widely portrayed as more successful academically than other ethnic minorities in China based on their higher college enrollment rates. On the other hand, Korean Chinese who attend colleges in the local Yanbian region and elsewhere are weaker academically than the majority Han Chinese. Significant differences exist between these two groups in terms of students' preparedness and learning outcomes in EFL class. Compared to Han Chinese, Korean Chinese report weaker preparation and poorer performance in English class.

Consistent with previous research, Korean Chinese are weaker in their oral English skills in part owing to the national minority policy and more multilingual learning pressure, especially for those students who graduated from Korean Chinese community high schools. Fewer chances to communicate in both Chinese and English are given to them.

An additional challenge is that Korean Chinese students' learning outcomes are more related to the college curricular environment where collaborative and oral activities are more strongly emphasized than they are in their traditional Korean Chinese K-12 schools. However, instructors have not given them enough chances to get involved in collaborative activities or provided them with sufficient cultural knowledge or communicative skills.

Thus, more effective EFL instruction for all students will be facilitated by helping both instructors and students understand the value of creating a lively EFL environment so that they can

become more willing to communicate when sufficient opportunities for English use are provided in teaching practice.

Our findings also suggest that Korean Chinese students' attitudes toward English are less positive than found among Han Chinese. Similarly, even though the two ethnic groups do not differ in interest in learning, Korean Chinese students' lower self-efficacy and self-confidence pose obstacles to their involvement in EFL activities. Without the promotion of Korean Chinese' self-efficacy and self-confidence, their interest will not be able to help enhance their actual participation and positive preparedness directly or separately. It is crucial for instructors to create a lively and engaging teaching environment to improve students' self-efficacy and self-confidence.

Another finding concerns Korean Chinese students' different learning style and perceived weakness in making use of proper learning strategies, especially when they face difficulties and failure in class. As our data suggest, they more readily become anxious or frustrated in class and on tests, which further contributes to their quietness or passivity in class. However, EFL instructors should avoid simply regarding them as weak or passive learners because of their weaker K-12 foundation in English, their less positive sense of preparedness, and their poorer learning outcomes in class. Extra English learning experiences and instruction on the use of proper learning strategies might help boost their performance.

The present study reveals useful information about Korean Chinese students' preparedness and learning outcomes in EFL class in China though the study is limited by the restriction of the sample to one university in China. The use of self-report surveys is another limitation of the study, as students may not be fully reliable sources of information about teaching practices. Future research into this topic should include a broader range of ethnic minority undergraduates

located in different parts of China. In addition, future research could probe this issue in a deeper way through other research methods, such as extensive classroom observation and interview.

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