

## Chinese High School Graduates' Beliefs About English Learning

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### Abstract

This paper reports on an investigation of a cohort of Chinese high school graduates' beliefs about English learning. A 24-item questionnaire is administered on 171 high school graduates to investigate their beliefs about the nature, difficulty, autonomy and learning environment in English learning. The data are analyzed through frequency statistics. Results show that Chinese high school graduates in general: 1) underestimate the difficulty in learning English; 2) expect communicative language teaching approach; 3) demonstrate a high preference for an English-medium environment; and 4) display a high degree of autonomy in English learning. The findings are beneficial for needs analysis and provide guidance for curriculum design to the University in research and other similar contexts.

**Key words:** High school graduates; Beliefs about English learning; English learning experiences

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### INTRODUCTION

With the shift of research foci in second or foreign language learning from teacher-directed teaching to student-centered learning, learner beliefs have been gaining prominence in applied linguistic studies in the past three decades (Bernat, 2006). Beliefs are defined as a person's psychologically held understandings or propositions about the world that are perceived to be (Richardson, 1996). Since 1980s, a growing number of studies on learner beliefs has been reported and published (Bernat, 2008). These studies have examined learner beliefs from a wide range of aspects, such as learner beliefs within different language, cultural and contextual backgrounds (Bernat, 2006; Daib, 2000; Horwitz, 1987; Siebert, 2003; Wong, 2010), relationships with strategy use (Yang, 1999), anxiety (Tsai, 2004), motivation (Kim-Yoon, 2000); learner autonomy (Chan, 2001; Chang, 2007; Cotterall, 1995; 1999), achievement and language proficiency (Huang & Tsai, 2003; Peacock, 1999; Tanaka & Ellis, 2003), and stability of learner beliefs (Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Bernat 2008; Ellis, 2008; Riley, 2009; Tanaka, 2004; Zhong, 2008). Current literature suggests that learner beliefs may potentially impact language learners' attitudes and motivations for language learning and shape their experiences and actions in classroom (Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005). It is thus significant to further understand the belief systems language learners hold in their language learning. However, previous literature implies that there is paucity in exploring the beliefs about language learning of Chinese EFL learners, in particular the high school students studying in Chinese mainland.

As evidenced in some earlier studies, learner beliefs are related to numerous factors, such as language learners' past learning experiences, situational and contextual

factors (Horwitz, 1999; Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005). To understand university beginners' beliefs about language learning is thus beneficial for universities to conduct needs analysis and thus to provide guidance for curriculum design and language teaching methodologies. Therefore, this study attempts to investigate the beliefs about language learning of a group of Chinese high school graduates who are university beginners at an English-medium university in mainland China.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Learners' beliefs about language learning have been widely researched in various contexts (e.g., Bernat, 2006; Diab 2000; Ellis, 2008; Evans and Green 2007; Horwitz 1988; Peacock, 1999; Ruan, 2007; Siebert, 2003; Tanaka, 2004; Yang 1999; Zhong, 2008). These studies have generated insightful findings for the understanding of non-native English students' beliefs about language learning and provided suggestive implications for second or foreign language teaching. The most commonly investigated areas include learners' beliefs about aptitude, nature, difficulty, strategies and communication, motivation and expectation, autonomy in language learning and other aspects. The present study focuses on learners' beliefs about nature, difficulty, autonomy and learning environment in their language learning.

### Nature in Language Learning

Second or foreign language learners' beliefs about the nature of language learning seem to mainly focus on the learning of vocabulary and grammar. They generally hold that learning a foreign language means mostly a matter of learning a lot of vocabulary and grammar rules (Peacock, 1999). For example, Horwitz (1988) finds in her study that 34% and 29% of the learners believed that language learning is only a matter of learning a lot of vocabulary and grammar rules respectively. There are also similar findings in Kern's (1995) study with 18% and 22% respectively. Chinese learners are reported to agree most strongly with these two beliefs in Peacock's (1999) research: 62% and 64% respectively. It is claimed that the mainland Chinese EFL students encounter more difficulties in their English study than those Chinese EFL students in Hong Kong (Evans and Green, 2007). Similarly, it is revealed that language learners tend to believe that the best place to learn a foreign language is to learn it in the target-language country. For instance, Diab (2000) finds that most of the language learners believe that it is best to learn a foreign language in a country where it is spoken. And they are reported to have a strong desire to learn English by speaking to English-speaking friends (Park, 1995). Such a strong desire is accounted for lacking enough opportunities to get exposed to English in their EFL learning environment (Park, 1995).

### Difficulty in Language Learning

Language learners, especially the EFL language learners, are found to underestimate the difficulty of learning a foreign language. For example, more than 60% students think that English is only a language of medium difficulty to learn in Siebert's (2003) study. 56% of the subjects regard English as a language of medium difficulty in Bernat's (2006) investigation into Asian EFL learners' beliefs about English learning when they are learning English for academic purposes in Australia. And a majority of the subjects believe that English is an easy or very easy language to learn in Diab's (2000) research. The students' underestimate of the difficulty in learning English is also demonstrated in their beliefs about the length of time taken to learn English well. Bernat (2006) reports that a quarter of her subjects believe that it would take one to two years to learn English well and 29% of the participants believe that it would take 3 to 5 years to learn English well if someone spent 1 hour per day learning English. This proportion is even larger in Peacock's (1999) study with 39% and 30% respondents reporting that they believe that it would take 1 to 2 or 3 to 5 years to learn English well respectively. It seems that more than half of the participants believe that one can learn English well within 5 years if one spent 1 hour per day learning English. This indicates that most of the EFL learners are optimistic of learning English well within a reasonable length of time (Bernat, 2006).

### Autonomy in Language Learning

There are mixed results as regards language learners' autonomous beliefs. Asian learners, Chinese EFL learners in particular, are found to be able to become autonomous under proper learning environment (Chan, 2001; Littlewood, 1999). Chinese students show a high readiness to take responsibility for their own learning in Zhu's (2007) study. She investigates the impact of EAP teaching in an English-medium university in China upon Chinese EFL learners' self-learning beliefs and concludes that factors such as the English-medium teaching, learner-centered EAP curriculum, and one-to-one tutoring system contributed a lot to preparing students' readiness in their beliefs for self-access learning. Moreover, there is a disagreement about the role of teacher influences upon students' autonomous beliefs. Siebert (2003) claims that teachers' beliefs may result in students' frustration and their lack of motivation in their study. Evidence for the important role of teachers is also provided in Ruan's (2007) study that Chinese EFL university students do not hold favorable views on the traditional role of the teachers, particularly with regard to learning content. In contrast, Kern (1995) holds different opinions. In order to identify whether students' autonomous beliefs shift as a result of the instructors, peers' beliefs and other learning environments such as textbook, course content and classroom activities, Kern (1995) conducts a 15-week study, and found no

obvious change in students' beliefs.

### Perceived Influence of Learning Environment on the Stability Of Beliefs

Mixed ideas also existed regarding whether a change of language learning environment will lead to a change in language learners' beliefs. In his research Kern (1995) checks students' beliefs twice at the beginning and the end of one semester in his research. He finds that little change was reported by the subjects over one semester. He thus concludes that a change of learning environment would not automatically yield a corresponding shift in learners' beliefs. However, evidence has been provided from more recent studies that learning environment does exert some influences on the shaping and shifting of students' beliefs (Tanaka, 2004; Zhong, 2008). Tanaka (2004) investigates the change of 63 Japanese students' beliefs before and after coming to study in an English-speaking environment at New Zealand through a 12-week period of English class. Though no statistically significant changes are observed in the quantitative data, the qualitative data reveal obvious changes. Students' beliefs about grammar changed after the 12-week period. They come to recognize the importance of grammar in helping them express themselves effectively after they came to study in New Zealand, whereas they have reported to oppose grammar study when they were learning English in Japan. Similar changes are also reported in Zhong's (2008) research. Zhong administers a case study to investigate a migrant Chinese ESL learner at New Zealand over a 10-week period. Results reveal that there is a main change in the subject's beliefs. The subject reports an improvement in her self-efficacy. She becomes more confident in managing her own learning after coming to learn English at New Zealand.

Current literature has presented a holistic picture of

foreign language learners' beliefs to us. However, it is worth noting that the mixed findings reported on previous research need further verification and clarification. Further research is also called for since most of the previous studies focused on university language learners. Few are concerned about high school graduates' beliefs. There has been also paucity in research on Chinese high school students' perceptions about English learning. Therefore, the present study attempts to fill in this gap and to investigate the beliefs about English learning held by a host of Chinese high school graduates who were university beginners at an English-medium university on Chinese mainland. It mainly addresses the following question: What are Chinese high school graduates' beliefs about English language learning?

## THE PRESENT STUDY

### Participants

Table 1 describes the demographic information of the 171 participants who have just graduated from high schools and are about to start their higher education in an English-medium university in mainland China when the present research is conducted. They are from across the country, including 66 girls and 105 boys. 156 participants are from urban areas and only 15 from rural areas. 155 participants have graduated from key high schools at either provincial or city or county levels. They are at their university ages, ranging from 17 to 20. The average age is 18.40. By the time of the study, they have been learning English for about 8.70 years on average. The average English score in the National English Matriculation (Gaokao) is 120.04 out of a total score of 150, which is roughly equivalent to the IELTS scores required for studying in an international university in the West.

**Table 1**  
**Demographic Information of the Participants**

|                           |                       |                 |                                 |                |        |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------|----------------|--------|
| Gender                    | Female                |                 | Male                            |                | Total  |
|                           | 66                    |                 | 105                             |                | 171    |
| Family background         | rural                 |                 | urban                           |                |        |
|                           | 15                    |                 | 156                             |                |        |
| major                     | Arts and humanities   |                 | Social sciences and engineering |                |        |
|                           | 83                    |                 | 88                              |                |        |
| Type of high school       | Provincial Key school | City key school | County key school               | General school |        |
|                           | 86                    | 59              | 10                              | 16             |        |
| Age                       | Minimum               |                 | Maximum                         |                | Mean   |
|                           | 17                    |                 | 20                              |                | 18.40  |
| Years of learning English | 6                     |                 | 15                              |                | 8.70   |
| English scores in Gaokao  | 89                    |                 | 144                             |                | 120.04 |

### Instruments

A self-designed questionnaire is employed to collect the quantitative data about the participants' beliefs about language learning in high school. It includes 2 parts. The first part is about participants' background information, eliciting their demographic data. The purpose is to help understand the results of the study. It includes their age, gender, major, years of learning English, English

score on the National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao), type of high school, and family background. The second part involves the participants' beliefs about English learning. It draws on sources from significant questionnaires in previous research (e.g., Horwitz, 1987, 1988; Cotterall, 1995, 1999; Ruan, 2007). Together with some items designed by the researcher, a final version is yielded for the present research with 24 items. It covers

the following four areas: 1) difficulty in language learning; 2) nature of language learning; 3) learner autonomy in language learning; and 4) learning environment for language learning.

Among the 24 items, the participants respond to item 2, “*the difficulty in learning English*”, using a 5-point Likert scale as follows: 1) *a very difficult language*; 2) *a difficult language*; 3) *a language of medium difficulty*; 4) *an easy language*; and 5) *a very easy language*. Similarly, they responded to item 5, “*If someone spent one hour a day learning a language, how long would it take them to speak the language very well?*” using a 5-point scale as follows: 1) *less than one year*; 2) *1-2 years*; 3) *3-5 years*; 4) *5-10 years*; and 5) *You can’t learn a language in 1 hour a day*. They respond to the remaining 40 items using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5).

The reliability of the questionnaire is measured by means of Cronbach alpha. The Cronbach alpha test shows that its reliability coefficient is 0.8543, suggesting that the questionnaire has a high reliability.

### Data Collection and Analysis

The study is administered in the second week of the 2010 fall semester. With the consent of the English Language

Centre (ELC), the researcher obtained help from 8 ELC teachers. The purpose of the study is explained to the students before they responded to the questionnaires. 200 questionnaires are distributed to the participants. 180 are returned, which means a high return rate of 90.00%. Of the 180 respondents, one is a foreign student; two are from Chinese Taipei; and six do not complete the questionnaires. As a result, 171 of the returned questionnaires are valid, suggesting a 95% valid rate for the pilot study. When analyzing the data, a series of parametric tests on the data are carried out through SPSS 16.0, namely, Cronbach alpha, frequencies.

## RESULTS

The study has produced some interesting findings in relation to the participants’ beliefs about English learning when they were learning English in high schools. The findings are presented by frequencies of responses in Table 2. In order to calculate the participants attitudes towards each item, responses for *strongly disagree* and *disagree* are categorized as *disagree* (D), *neither disagree nor agree* as *neutral* (N), and *agree and strongly agree* as *agree* (A).

### Difficulty in Language Learning

**Table 2**  
**Difficulty in Language Learning—Frequencies of Responses**

| Item |                                                                                                                | D    | N    | A    |
|------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|------|------|
| 1    | It is difficult for Chinese students to participate in group discussion.                                       | 53.8 | 25.7 | 20.5 |
| 2    | English is:                                                                                                    |      |      |      |
|      | 1) a very difficult language                                                                                   | 2.9  |      |      |
|      | 2) a difficult language                                                                                        | 14.6 |      |      |
|      | 3) a language of medium difficulty                                                                             | 60.8 |      |      |
|      | 4) an easy language                                                                                            | 20.5 |      |      |
|      | 5) a very easy language                                                                                        | 1.2  |      |      |
| 5    | If someone spent one hour a day learning English, how long would it take them to speak the language very well: |      |      |      |
|      | 1) less than a year                                                                                            | 5.3  |      |      |
|      | 2) 1-2 years                                                                                                   | 37.4 |      |      |
|      | 3) 3-5 years                                                                                                   | 27.5 |      |      |
|      | 4) 5-10 years                                                                                                  | 18.1 |      |      |
|      | 5) You can’t learn a language in 1 hour a day.                                                                 | 11.7 |      |      |
| 7    | It is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it.                                        | 38.6 | 28.1 | 33.3 |

**Note:** Values represent percentages. D= Collapsed scores for Strongly Disagree and Disagree; N=neutral for Neither disagree nor agree; A=collapsed scores for Agree and Strongly Agree.

Items 1, 2, 5 and 7 concern the participants’ beliefs about the difficulty in learning English. 53.8% of the respondents in Item 1 disagree that it is difficult for Chinese students to participate in group discussion. With reference to the difficulty in English skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing in Item 7, 33.3% of the respondents agree that it is easier to read and write than to speak and understand, however, 38.6% disagree. A further 28.1% are undecided whether reading and writing are easier or not. As regards the general difficulty in learning English, 60.8% of the respondents in Item 2

regard English as a language of medium difficulty. Only 17.5% of them think English is a difficult or very difficult language and 21.5% believe that English is a very easy or easy language. With respect to the length of time taken to learn English in Item 5, the finding is similar to that in Item 2. If someone spent one hour a day learning English, only 5.3 % of the respondents believe that it would take less than one year to learn it; 37.4% believe that it would take one to two years to learn it; 27.5% believe it would take 3 to 5 years to learn it, and 18.1% believe it would take 5 to 10 years to learn it, while 11.7% believe that one

cannot learn English well by one hour every day.

### Nature of Language Learning

**Table 3**  
**Nature of Language Learning--Frequencies of Responses**

| Item |                                                                                                                                                    | D    | N    | A    |
|------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|------|------|
| 3    | Learning English means memorizing vocabulary and grammar rules.                                                                                    | 57.9 | 23.4 | 18.7 |
| 4    | It is more important to extensively read English newspapers, magazines and novels than to intensively read textbooks.                              | 15.3 | 26.9 | 57.8 |
| 6    | It is necessary to know about English-speaking cultures in order to learn English well.                                                            | 8.7  | 10.5 | 80.8 |
| 8    | The best place to learn English is in an English-speaking environment.                                                                             | 2.9  | 2.9  | 94.2 |
| 10   | I used to believe that a better way to learn English is to first think about what one wants to say in Chinese, and then translate it into English. | 66.1 | 11.7 | 22.2 |
| 12   | It was more important to express ideas fluently than to speak English correctly.                                                                   | 18.7 | 28.1 | 53.2 |

**Note:** Values represent percentages. D= Collapsed scores for Strongly Disagree and Disagree; N=neutral for Neither disagree nor agree; A=collapsed scores for Agree and Strongly Agree.

Items 3, 4, 6, 8, 10, and 12 assess the participants' beliefs about the nature of learning English. Item 3 asks about their opinions on the importance of vocabulary and grammar in English learning. More than half of them (57.9%) disagree that learning English means memorizing vocabulary and grammar rules. Similarly, 57.8% of them agree in Item 4 that it is more important to extensively read English newspapers, magazines and novels than to intensively read textbooks, while only 15.3% disagree. As for the role of English culture and English-only environment, 80.7% of them in Item 6 agree that it is necessary to know about English-speaking cultures in order to learn English well. And a higher percentage

(94.1%) of them in Item 8 agree that the ideal place to learning English is in an English-speaking environment, indicating a perceived high value of an English-only setting for English learning. In contrast, less than a quarter (22.3%) of them in Item 10 agree that they used to believe using their mother tongue Chinese to translate what they thought before they spoke in English, while 66.1% deny that they ever believed the importance of using Chinese in English learning. Meanwhile, more than half of them (53.2%) in Item 12 agree that to express ideas fluently is more important than to speak English correctly and only 18% of them disagree.

### Learning Environment for Language Learning

**Table 4**  
**Learning Environment for Language Learning--Frequencies of Responses**

| Item |                                                                                                                          | D    | N    | A    |
|------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|------|------|
| 9    | English was a very important subject in my high school.                                                                  | 5.8  | 11.7 | 82.5 |
| 11   | The learning environment in my high school was helpful for English learning.                                             | 42.1 | 32.2 | 25.7 |
| 13   | I often received feedback on my exercises, homework or exam results from my English teachers.                            | 24.6 | 29.8 | 45.6 |
| 16   | I often felt isolated for not having many opportunities to practice oral English in my school.                           | 21.6 | 24   | 54.4 |
| 18   | There were many wonderful English speakers in my school so that I feel under pressure to speak English in front of them. | 46.2 | 19.3 | 34.5 |
| 20   | English classes that were taught in English in high school helped my English a lot.                                      | 60.9 | 15.2 | 23.9 |
| 24   | My high school provided a lot of useful resources and opportunities for me to learn English.                             | 48.0 | 24.6 | 27.4 |

**Note:** Values represent percentages. D= Collapsed scores for Strongly Disagree and Disagree; N=neutral for Neither disagree nor agree; A=collapsed scores for Agree and Strongly Agree.

Items 9, 11, 13, 16, 18, and items 20 to 24 address students' beliefs about learning environment in English leaning in high school. 82.5% of them confirm that English was a very important subject in their high schools in Item 9. Regarding the benefit of the environment for English learning in high school in Item 11, only around a quarter of them (25.7%) agree that the English environment was helpful in their high schools, while

42.1% disagree. Item 13 asks the feedback students received in high school. 45.6% of them agree that they often received feedback from their English teachers, while 24.6% disagree. When asking whether the participants had many opportunities to practice speaking English in Item 16, 54.3% of them agree that they often felt isolated for not having many opportunities to practice their oral English in high school. As a result, 34.5% express that

they were unconfident to speak English in Item 18. In the same item, 46.2% deny that they were pressurized by the wonderful English speakers in their high schools, but because there lacked opportunities to speak English.

Item 20 asks the role of lectures delivered in English in their English learning. Only 23.9% of the respondents agree that they benefited from their English classes delivered to them in English. By contrast, 60.9% of them disagree that lectures were given in English in their high schools. In fact, many high schools in China did not teach English completely in English, but with a mixed use of Chinese and English. The use of Chinese in class seems to affect the participants' perceived progress in their English learning. In Item 21, 25.2% agree that they used so much Chinese that they made little progress in their spoken English. However, 43.9% disagree. Item 22 enquires

the participants' beliefs about the important others in mediating their English learning. 43.9% disagree that they could often talk to their friends, teachers, or speakers of English about how to learn English in school. Item 23 asks whether the students have a lot of time to learn English. Only 12.2% of the respondents agree that they are so busy with other subjects that they have no time to learn English, while 63.2% say that they invest a lot of in learning English. Item 24 assesses the participants' beliefs about the resources their high schools provide for their English learning. Only 27.4% of the respondents are satisfied with the resources and opportunities their high schools provide for them to learn English. 24.6% are neutral and 48% disagree that their high schools provide a lot of useful resources and opportunities for them to learn English.

## Autonomy in Language Learning

**Table 5**  
**Autonomy in Language Learning--Frequencies of Responses**

| Item |                                                                            | D    | N    | A    |
|------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|------|------|
| 14   | I believe that I should find my own opportunities to use English.          | 6.4  | 11.1 | 82.5 |
| 15   | What teachers do in class play a key role in my English learning.          | 15.8 | 26.9 | 57.3 |
| 17   | In order to succeed in learning English I did a lot outside the classroom. | 28.7 | 37.4 | 33.9 |
| 19   | Opportunities to use English should be provided by teachers.               | 48.5 | 30.4 | 21.1 |

**Note:** Values represent percentages. D= Collapsed scores for Strongly Disagree and Disagree; N=neutral for Neither disagree nor agree; A=collapsed scores for Agree and Strongly Agree.

Items 14, 15, 17 and 19 ask the participants' beliefs about their autonomy in English learning. As an echo to Item 19, 82.5% of the respondents believe that they should find their own opportunities to use English. However, Item 17 shows that there was an almost even distribution in their autonomous behaviors. Only 33.9% of the respondents agree that they did a lot outside the classroom in order to succeed in learning English. 57.3% of the respondents believe that what their teachers did play a critical role in their English learning. However, 26.9% are neutral and 15.8% disagree. This indicates that most of the students somewhat rely on their teachers in learning English but one third of them are ready to take responsibility for their own learning, which is evidenced in Item 19. 48.5% of them in item 19 disagree that opportunities should be provided by teachers.

## DISCUSSION

The present research concerns the beliefs held by the Chinese high school graduates before they come to study in university. Results demonstrate some features in their beliefs about English learning in high school.

### Underestimating the Difficulty in Learning English

The Chinese EFL students seem to underestimate the difficulty in learning English. When asking their beliefs

whether it is difficult for Chinese students to participate in group discussion, over half of the participants (53.8%) disagree. This result corroborates other research findings (e.g., Kennedy 2002; Trent 2009) that Chinese EFL learners are active in participating in classroom discussions. However, it is inconsistent with some other research that Chinese EFL learners are reticent in speaking in group discussion activities (e.g., Jackson 2002; Evans and Green 2007). Their beliefs about participating in group activities in class are somewhat reflected in their beliefs about the difficulty in learning English. 60.8% of the respondents think English to be a language of medium difficulty, which is similar to the finding in Bernat's (2006). Bernat investigates Asian EFL learners' beliefs about English learning when they are studying EAP in Australia and finds that 56% of the subjects regard English as a language of medium difficulty. The students' underestimate of the difficulty in learning English is also demonstrated in their beliefs about the length of time taken to learn English well. 37.4% of the participants believe that it would take one to two years to learn English well if one spent one hour a day learning English, and 27.5% think it would take 3 to 5 years. This indicates that most of them are optimistic of learning English well within a reasonable length of time (Bernat 2006). It could therefore be concluded that the Chinese EFL learners underestimate the difficulty in learning English.

### **Expecting Communication-Oriented Learning and Teaching**

The subjects show their dissatisfaction with the English teaching method in high school. 57.9% of them disagree that learning English means memorizing vocabulary and grammar rules. This finding echoes Gao (2007)'s research. In his inquiry into the Chinese EFL learners' previous English learning experiences before going to study in Hong Kong, he finds that the Chinese EFL students did so much memorization work in their past English learning experience that they are negative to the rote learning method. This could be interpreted that they expected to learn English in a different way, such as the communicative method. It might be confirmed to some degree in Items 4 and 12 respectively. 57.8% of them in Item 4 recognize the importance of extensively reading English over intensively reading textbooks. And 53.2% agree that fluency in English is more important than accuracy. Students seem to gain a linguistic pragmatic awareness for effective communication (Bernat 2006). However, over one quarter (28.1%) of them is neutral about the importance of fluency and accuracy. This could be as a result of deeply-rooted grammar-translation teaching method in Chinese EFL classroom. Rao (2002) researches Chinese EFL students' attitude towards the communicative teaching method and finds some of them are affected by the traditional grammar-translation approach so much that they are still skeptical about the effectiveness of the communicative approach.

### **Expecting an English-medium Learning Environment**

Though 82.5% of the participants in Item 9 agree that English is an important subject in high school, 42.1% believe that the English environment in their high schools was not beneficial for English learning. Correspondingly, 94.1% of the participants in Item 8 agree that the ideal place to learn English is in an English-speaking environment, indicating a perceived high value of an English-only setting for English learning. This is a commonly held belief that an English-medium environment can provide a greater exposure to the target language, its culture and people, which is beneficial for learning the foreign language (Storch, 2009). The finding reveal one of the reasons for the students to choose XJTLU in research is because of their expectation for an English-medium environment at the University and their lack of authentic English environment in their past English learning experiences.

### **Readiness to be Autonomous in Language Learning**

The students seem highly ready to be autonomous in their English learning. Although 57.3% of them in Item 15 believe that what their teachers did in class played an important part in their English learning, 48.5% in Item 19 disagree that opportunities to use English should be

provided by their teachers. This indicates that a certain amount of them are ready to be responsible for their own learning. The finding is evidenced in Item 14 in which 82.5% of the participants believe that they should find their own opportunities to use English. This is consonant with other research's findings (e.g., Chan, 2001; Littlewood, 1999) that Asian learners, Chinese EFL learners in particular, could become autonomous with the right kinds of environment. However, only 33.9% of them say that they did a lot outside the classroom in order to succeed in learning English. This is perhaps due to the fact that high school students have little time of their own to study, which again proves that it is probable for Chinese students to be autonomous under appropriate learning environment.

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## **CONCLUSION**

This study has explored beliefs about English language learning held by a group of Chinese high school graduates who are going to start their tertiary education in an English-medium University in Chinese mainland. The results showed that a majority of the students are from urban families, which mean that they are able to afford to study abroad or in English-medium environment. Their beliefs and motivation to learn English may be different from other students of the working class. A large amount of them are from key high schools, which indicates that they may have better opportunities and conditions to learn English. And their average score in Gaokao is 120.04 out of the 150 in total, suggesting that they are somewhat at a high proficiency level.

The study shows that most of the Chinese EFL students seem to underestimate the difficulty of learning English. They are unsatisfied with their English learning experience in high school. Instead, they demonstrate an expectation for the communicative teaching in their English class, and believe that the most ideal place to learn English is an English-speaking environment. This cohort of students also reveals a high degree of autonomy in their English learning. These findings are implicative for universities to conduct needs analysis and provide guidance for curriculum design and teaching methodology reforms in China and other similar contexts.

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