Chapter 4
Walking the Garden Path Toward Academic Language: Perspectives from International Students in Chinese Higher Education

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Abstract With the increasing number of international students pursuing academic degrees at Chinese universities, it is essential to understand their experiences with academic Chinese language. Employing two focus group interviews with a total of eight students, this study was conducted at a university in Southwest China. The study found that the Chinese language preparatory programs aiming to prepare students for the Chinese language proficiency test (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi, HSK) build a foundation for the continuous learning and use of academic Chinese language and equip students with necessary interpersonal communication skills to support their academic study. However, the language preparatory program mainly taught students language for social purposes, which was one of the key factors contributing to their significant linguistic challenges when they start academic studies. Despite all the efforts and strategies employed by students, some prominent gaps still existed between the students' current academic language proficiency and the desired proficiency in an academic context. Therefore, both the university and the instructors had to take measures to accommodate international students' linguistic challenges, particularly around assessment. Although encountering substantial linguistic difficulties when transitioning into academic study, students reported that their proficiency of academic language gradually developed through their experiences at the university. A Chinese for academic purposes approach with a focus on students' needs in the academic context is desired. Implications for the re-orientation of the focus and content of the Chinese language preparatory program and the language assessment with a practical focus on academic Chinese language were discussed.

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4.1 Introduction

Over the past decade, the number of international students attending Chinese post-secondary institutions has increased substantially. According to China's Ministry of Education (MoE), the number of international students in Chinese universities has more than doubled over the past ten years from 195,503 in 2007 to 459,200 in 2017 (MoE 2008, 2018). During this same period, the Chinese government has launched numerous scholarships to provide financial support for international students. For example, the Study in China Scholarship Program supports international students at undergraduate and graduate levels across a wide range of subjects. More recently, together with the Chinese government's Belt and Road Initiative, new scholarship programs were made available to students from the Belt and Road region including more than 60 countries in Middle and Southern Asia, East Europe, and East Africa. These students came to China for various reasons including short-term (e.g., to study Mandarin, gain cross-cultural experiences) and long-term stays (e.g., pursuing an academic degree; MoE 2018).

To be admitted into an academic program in a Chinese university, non-native Chinese speakers must demonstrate their Chinese language proficiency by taking a standardized test, the Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK; MoE 2009). The threshold for admission into an academic program ranges from HSK Level 3 to Level 5, depending on the institution and the program. Students are either admitted directly, if they have met the required level of HSK, or offered a conditional admission dependent upon achieving the required level of HSK by the end of a language preparatory program. The language preparatory program is offered to help students achieve the required level of HSK for admission. Admission is hence based on the assumption that passing the required level of HSK indicates students' adequate Chinese proficiency to study in academic programs. That is to say, as an admission criterion, the HSK is assumed to be an indicator of students' adequate language proficiency to function properly at university academic settings.

Despite the efforts taken at the policy and institutional level, various researchers have noted international students' significant linguistic difficulties in academic programs (Gao and Liu 2016; Shan 2008; Shan and An 2009; Wang and Curdt-Christiansen 2016). However, while students' challenges with academic language have been commonly recorded, there remains little understanding regarding the processes that contribute to students' linguistic challenges. With such large governmental and institutional expenditure (e.g., financial, manpower, resources), an in-depth understanding of the process that supports international students development of academic Chinese language is critically needed.

4.2 Literature Review

The literature reviewed in this section is intended to situate our study in the academic field and also to familiarize readers with the relevant literature pertaining to the research focus. We first present a brief history of Chinese for academic purposes (CAP) instructional practice in China followed by an overview of the CAP research. We also include a section on assessing academic language, as instruction and assessment function are two sides of the same coin.

4.2.1 CAP Instruction

Following Hyland and Shaw's (2016) definition of language for academic purpose, we use the term Chinese for academic purposes (CAP) to refer to instruction and research that focuses on the communicative needs and practices of individuals working in an academic context through Chinese language. CAP instruction in China started in the 1950s with addressing the practical needs required to prepare international students for academic studies at Chinese universities (Zhao 2015). As early as late 1950s and early 1960s, practical attempts were made to target Chinese language teaching toward students' needs in studying their specific academic areas at Peking University (Zhang 2013). These early endeavors entailed spending one to three months in the language preparatory program on reading materials in students' academic disciplines such as Political Economics and Engineering. In the 1970s at Beijing Language and Culture University, after the first 15 weeks of general Chinese courses, customized courses were offered separately to learners in four areas, namely Liberal Arts, Sciences and Engineering, Western Medicine, and Chinese Medicine (Lv 1990). In addition, instructional materials were published for the teaching and learning of Chinese in specific disciplines, such as <科技汉语教程> (A Course in Scientific Chinese) (Du 1990) and <中医汉语> (A Chinese Course for Chinese Medicine Majors) (Wang and Yan 1999).

In the 1990s, international student population at Chinese universities started to change substantially. Cheng (1992) noted that while the total population of international students at Chinese universities continued to increase, the number in the academic areas of Science, Engineering, Agriculture, and Medicine dropped sharply. The number of international students coming for short-term language programs or degree programs in Chinese Language and Literature increased. Therefore, the needs for CAP in particular disciplines are decreasing. As a result, the distinction between CAP and Chinese for general purposes (CGP) in teaching became less clear (Zhao 2015). After 2000, there has been a shift back on an increasing number of degree-pursuing students registered in various academic disciplines (Zhao 2015). Thus, preparing these students with academic Chinese language proficiency has again become a critical concern for Chinese universities.

4.2.2 CAP Research

The field of CAP research has been dominated by the language-focused approach (Hutchinson and Waters 1987), with a primary focus on analyzing the linguistic features of language used in different subject-specific situations. For example, early works focused on lexical, grammatical, and style features of the Chinese language used in the context of Science and Technology (e.g., Du 1981, 1982, 1988; Huang 1986). In a more recent article, Dong and Han (2014) suggested four major areas for studying CAP. Three of the proposed four areas were centered on the language system and its uses, including examining the lexical and grammatical elements of the language through register analysis, analyzing the linguistic functions and notions in academic setting (e.g., providing definitions and explanation, and categorizing and giving examples), and studying the situations where academic Chinese was used (e.g., in class and at laboratories).

Only the fourth area in Dong and Han's (2014) article, focusing on the relationship between CAP and CGP, touches upon the teaching and learning process of academic Chinese. Unfortunately, the empirical studies examining the process of CAP teaching and learning remained limited. While language-focused studies are of importance, they are not sufficient for a full understanding of CAP, as the CAP research should include study on effective learning, teaching, and assessment, and not solely descriptions of the linguistic and discoursal structures of academic texts, and analysis of the textual practices of academics (Hyland and Shaw 2016).

Shan and An (2009) conducted one of the few studies illuminating the CAP practices in Chinese universities. They investigated 20 universities specializing in Science and Engineering, including participants of administrators, teachers, and students. Through interviews and surveys, they found that less than 1/3 of the universities offered CAP courses. Several conceptual and practical constraints were identified that prevented such courses from being offered. One constraint reported by Shan and An was that university administrators lacked understanding of students' challenges as some administrators assumed that since students had passed the required level of HSK, they would have few linguistic problems and would gradually become familiar with Chinese language in academic settings over time. The lack of understanding about the nature of the CAP courses and their objectives among educators was another conceptual constraint that impeded offering such courses. Practical constraints included the diverse background of students from a wide range of subjects and the lack of instructional materials. In the study, the researchers also ranked students' linguistic needs in the order of: (1) knowing the technical vocabulary in the subject areas; (2) understanding reading materials; (3) understanding lectures; (4) engaging in academic discussion; (5) writing assignments; and (6) writing papers. In general, receptive skills (i.e., reading and listening) were perceived more pressing than productive skills (i.e., writing and speaking).

Wang and Curdt-Christiansen (2016) examined the Study in China Program at a Chinese university and also found tensions around CAP practice in Chinese

universities. By analyzing policy documents, interviewing students and teachers, and conducting classroom observations, their study identified major tensions between policy and reality at both individual and institutional levels. One important tension was found between the actual teaching of Chinese for interpersonal communication and students' needs in academic Chinese language. This tension was revealed in academic instructors' frustrations toward international students' inadequate progress and students' despair about the language preparatory courses. According to the researchers, this tension forced faculty and students to compromise academic studies. The findings of these studies call for further investigations on the CAP practice, particularly from students' perspectives as academic language proficiency derived from practical needs, and are in the center of international students' academic study.

4.2.3 *Assessing Academic Chinese*

In the current path leading to academic programs as presented previously, HSK is used to determine a student's readiness for participating in academic studies and thus plays a critical role in this process. According to the developer of the HSK, Chinese Testing International (CTI 2018), the six levels of the written exam aligns with *Chinese Language Proficiency Scales for Speakers of Other Languages* (CLPS) (Hanban 2009) and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR; see Table 4.1). An independent speaking test (i.e., Hanyu Shuiping Kouyu Kaoshi; HSKK) was required by some universities, dependent upon institutional policies. HSK has a broad scope of uses as specified by the test designer: "It assesses non-native Chinese speakers' Chinese proficiency in their daily, academic, and professional lives" (CTI 2018). As for the academic setting in particular, HSK could serve as "a reference for an educational institution's decision-making concerning recruiting students, assigning students to different classes, allowing students to skip certain courses and giving students' academic credits" (CTI 2018).

Weigle and Melone (2016) noted that as an assessment tool for academic purposes, the test needed to reflect content relevance, which suggests that the content or topics, the nature of the language used in the assessment, and the nature of the

Table 4.1 HSK levels, CLPS, and CEFR

HSK		CLPS	CEFR
Advanced	Level six	Level V	C2
	Level five		C1
Intermediate	Level four	Level IV	B2
	Level three	Level III	B1
Beginners	Level two	Level II	A2
	Level one	Level I	A1

test tasks need to reflect academic settings. Following this line of argument, Zhao (2015) critiqued using HSK in the academic setting and argued that what HSK assesses was not closely related to students' linguistic needs in academic studies. Not only does a test play an important role in recruitment and admission decisions, but washback effects arising from the test have shown to impact how teachers teach and how learners learn (Cheng 2008). Zhao noted that using HSK as an admission criterion tended to narrow the language preparatory program to teach Chinese for general purposes only; however, this anecdotal account has yet to be supported by empirical evidence. Therefore, as an integral component of the CAP practice in Chinese universities, it is vital that we gain a better understanding of the role of HSK.

4.3 Conceptual Framework

Jordan (1997) summarized three approaches to language teaching and learning, including language for general purposes (e.g., school exams), language for social purposes in communicative situations (e.g., shopping, letter writing, and telephoning), and language for specific purposes (e.g., studying or working in a specific discipline). It is noteworthy that what was often referred to as language for general purposes by some other researchers (e.g., Hutchinson and Waters 1987; Li 2011; Zhao 2015) include both language for general purposes and language for social purposes in Jordan's framework, and Jordan's language for general purposes only applies to young learners who use languages for school work.

Language for specific purposes was further divided into language for occupational/vocational/professional purposes and language for academic purposes (LAP; Jordan 1997). Similarly, in Chinese literature, researchers such as Shan (2008) and Li (2011) also specified that the concept of CAP instruction itself falls under a broader framework of Chinese for specific purposes. However, what constitutes LAP as conceptualized by Jordan and Li diverges. Li noted that Chinese for academic subject referred to the language needs in specific subject areas, such as Science, Engineering, and Medicine. However, this subject-specific notion of LAP was merely regarded as one sub-area of LAP by Jordan. For Jordan, LAP was composed of two sub-areas: language for specific academic purposes and language for general academic purposes. This divergence was noted by Gao and Liu (2016) that CAP as conceptualized in Li and by other Chinese scholars actually corresponds mainly to Chinese for specific academic purposes, referring to the language needs for a particular academic subject. What was often missing in the literature was Chinese for general academic purposes, which refers to the needs of Chinese language in all, or nearly all, academic settings (Jordan 1997), including study skills (e.g., note-taking, academic writing, seminars, and discussions) and academic register (i.e., general academic register and formal, academic style). For the purpose of this study, we adopt Jordan's framework of approaches to LAP as presented in

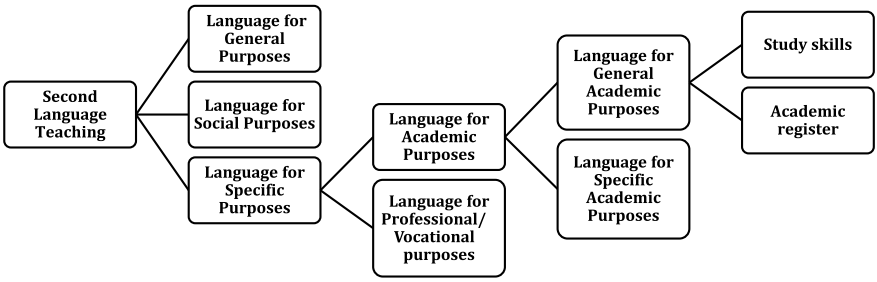

Fig. 4.1 Conception of LAP (adapted from Jordan 1997)

Fig. 4.1 as a conceptual framework to guide the design and interpretation of the study.

4.4 The Study

This study aims to gain an in-depth understanding, from the students' perspectives, about their experiences of learning and using the academic Chinese language in Chinese higher institutions under the current path: from language preparatory program, via admission tests—HSK, to academic studies. In particular, the study addresses the following three research questions:

1. What conditions affect international students' experiences with academic Chinese?
2. What strategies do students employ to navigate their academic study in Chinese language?
3. What are the outcomes resulting from the current path of admission and instruction?

4.4.1 The Site

This study was contextualized at a major university located at a provincial city in Southwest China. When the fieldwork was conducted in early 2018, the university had been accepting international students for over 20 years and in 2017 recruited over 1000 international students. According to the university website, thirty-six percent of these students were degree-seeking students and registered in undergraduate or graduate programs, while 64% were language students and exchange students.

The university offers 4-year undergraduate programs, 3-year master's programs, and 3-year doctoral programs. Most of these programs are taught in Chinese, with some options in English. To be eligible for academic programs taught in Chinese, students are required by the university to pass HSK Level 4. Alternatively, students could choose to take a one-year language preparatory program with pre-admission and promoted into academic programs on the condition of passing HSK Level 4 or a higher level toward the end of the language preparatory program. While the university has specialized in Finance and Economics, programs in other areas such as in Journalism, Laws, and Computer Applied Technology are also available.

4.4.2 Participants

Eight international students participated in the study. The researchers first developed a profile of the potential participants: any degree-seeking students who are currently undertaking academic studies in undergraduate or graduate programs at the chosen university. Networks established from a previous research project brought us the first two participants. The first two participants suggested and helped to recruit others who fit in the profile, representing a process of snowball sampling (McMillan and Schumacher 2009). The recruiting process finished when 10 students confirmed participation. However, due to logistic issues, two students failed to take part in the study. Table 4.2 presents the demographic information of the eight participants (all the names included were pseudonyms). The eight participants came from seven different countries, and seven of them were graduate students and had Chinese government funding, while the only undergraduate student was self-funded. These students were in the different stages of their study, either in the 1st year or the 2nd year of their master's programs, and the undergraduate student

Table 4.2 Demographic information of participants

Student	Gender	Country of origin	Program	Year in the program	HSK level before admission
Wangyang	Male	Uzbekistan	Bachelor in Logistics	4th year	Level 5
Baiyun	Male	DR Congo	Master's in Finance	2nd year	Level 4
Mulan	Male	Ivory Coast	Master's in Computer Applied Technology	2nd year	Level 4
Qiaodan	Male	DR Congo	Master's in Finance	2nd year	Level 4
Aihua	Male	Afghanistan	Master's in International Trade	1st year	Level 6
Liming	Male	Turkmenistan	Master's in Finance	1st year	Level 5
Meili	Female	Thailand	Master's in Business Intelligence	1st year	Level 5
Kehan	Male	Pakistan	Master's in Finance	1st year	Level 4

was in the 4th year of his study. All of them had taken language preparaotry programs. While four students were admitted into the academic program with HSK Level 4, three of them passed HSK Level 5 before admission and one student passed HSK Level 6 before admission.

4.4.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured focus group interviews were employed to increase the quality and richness of data by creating a social environment in which group members are stimulated by one another's perceptions and ideas (McMillan and Schumacher 2009). The focus group interviews were conducted mainly in Chinese, while students were allowed to speak English whenever they felt it was necessary to better express their opinions. An interview protocol with guiding questions was designed to facilitate the exchange of ideas. The questions focused on the knowledge and skills students learned from the language preparatory programs, the relationship between HSK and their academic study, and use of the Chinese language in academic studies. To collect demographic information (e.g., name, age, nationality, first language) and background information (program, year in the program, HSK level and scores and attendance in the language preparatory program), participants completed a Student Information Form. One of the researchers served as the facilitator for the focus group, and a research assistant audio recorded the session, took notes on turn taking, and asked clarifying questions. The eight participants were arranged into two focus groups based on their availability. The first group included Wangyang, Baiyun, Mulan, Qiaodan, and Aihua, and the second group included Liming, Meili, and Kehan. Each focus group interview lasted for about 60 min.

Audio recordings obtained from focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim and prepared for manual analysis. Three stages of coding were performed on the transcripts: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The two researchers first conducted the open coding separately, after reading the transcripts repeatedly to become immersed in the data; phrases and sentences relevant to the research purpose were labeled as initial codes.

For the second stage of analysis, axial coding, the two researchers met to discuss, compare and revise the initial codes. Initial codes that were found to be similar were grouped together and labeled with an initial list of categories. Disagreements related to category names, definitions, and their scope were discussed in-depth and resolved until the 8 final categories were established (Beach 2017):

- Preparing Chinese for social purposes;
- Language for social purposes supporting academic studies;
- Demands and challenges with academic Chinese;
- Making self-efforts;
- Seeking for additional resources;
- Institutional and instructors' accommodations;

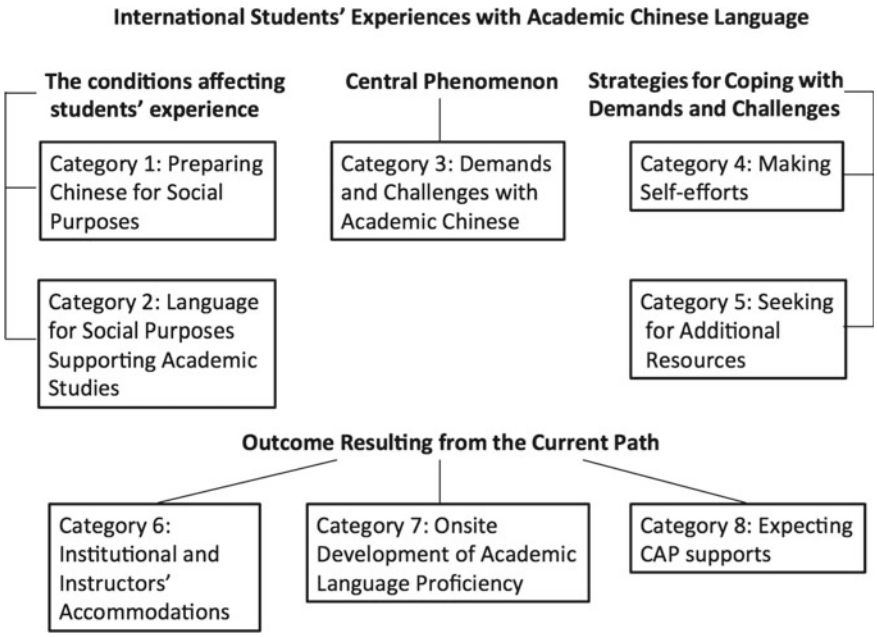

Fig. 4.2 Grounded theory model of international students' experiences with academic Chinese language

- Onsite development of academic language proficiency;
- Expecting CAP supports.

The last stage of data analysis involves selective coding: selecting the core category and specifying relationships between the core category and other categories (Charmaz 2014). The eight categories were organized into the following four components of the grounded theory model: conditions, the central phenomenon, strategies, and outcome (Strauss and Corbin 1998), as shown in Fig. 4.2. Demands and challenges with academic Chinese were deemed the central phenomenon because all other categories could be related to it, and it appeared frequently and consistently in the data (Beach 2017).

4.5 Results

This section reports the eight categories that resulted from the qualitative analysis, organized into the four components of the grounded theory model (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

4.5.1 The Conditions Affecting Students' Experience

4.5.1.1 Category 1: Preparing Chinese for Social Purposes

Since all students had taken the one-year language preparatory program before beginning their respective areas of study, it is important to understand how they were prepared during the program. Students talked about the kind of courses they were offered, a comprehensive Chinese course as the core and an oral course. HSK preparation was an element of the comprehensive course to help prepare students for the test by the end of the year.

During the preparatory program, our data suggested that students were primarily trained in Chinese for social purposes: using the target language for daily communicative situations, such as shopping, ordering food, seeing a doctor, and opening a bank account. As stated by Qiaodan, "In our Chinese class, teachers taught us how to converse with friends, and how to shop." Another student, Kehan, acknowledged his proficiency development in survival Chinese, as he felt comfortable using Chinese in daily situations to make friends, talk to the doctors, and shop in the market.

Since HSK was the sole admission criterion regarding Chinese language proficiency, students reported it as one of the most important goals to achieve in the language preparatory program. Therefore, the nature of HSK had a washback effect on the teaching and learning of Chinese language. Students generally perceived HSK as not closely related to academic settings, as Mulan commented, "HSK 4 is general, very general." Kehan also noted that "after HSK, the first thing we know is how to buy apples." He further added: "According to me, HSK Level 4 makes you being able to speak Chinese; makes you being able to write Chinese on your cell phone; and makes you being able to listen to Chinese; whereas in study, it's of limited use." All of the participants had successfully met the admission criterion on HSK during or after the preparatory program, with the fastest in six months, and others in eight to ten months.

While students learned new vocabulary, sentence structures, and characters along the course, the focus of the course gradually shifted to test preparation and test-taking strategies toward the latter half as the test date was approaching, such as practicing on retired tests. For example, Aihua noted that they were taught various test-taking strategies such as how to compare and choose among various options in multiple-choice questions. He acknowledged that when writing HSK Level 6, he benefited from such test-taking strategies.

4.5.1.2 Category 2: Language for Social Purposes Supporting Academic Studies

After meeting the language admission requirement, students started their academic studies in their respective programs through the medium of Chinese language. Although students perceived the language preparatory program and HSK as not closely related to the actual language used in academic settings, they acknowledged that the language preparation had contributed to their learning of content knowledge study in two aspects. First, it established a solid foundation for learning and using academic Chinese language. Second, it equipped students with necessary interpersonal communication skills to support their academic study.

At the beginning of their academic studies, students believed that achievement of HSK Level 4 indicated a strong foundation in Chinese language. For example, Kehan stated that he learned more than 1000 Chinese words in a relatively short time. These most commonly used vocabularies served as a foundation for the academic study in Chinese and also helped him to learn more new vocabulary on his own. Liming also mentioned that he could read the characters in his textbooks thanks to his study in the language preparatory program.

Furthermore, many of the participants claimed that they had developed interpersonal communication skills that were supportive for their academic study. As Mulan stated,

> In our class, some of Chinese students don't speak English, so if your Chinese is not good, you can't communicate with them. You can't communicate with the instructor, either. When you have questions, you have to ask in Chinese, so I think it's very helpful in this regard.

Another participant Baiyun echoed this point by stating that his proficiency in Chinese helped him communicate with his team members during group work. Wangyang also believed that interpersonal communication in Chinese is essential in academic studies as "Chinese allows us to communicate with the instructor and our peers whenever we ran into difficulties" and "no matter what problem you encounter, you can solve it because you can speak Chinese." These examples clearly indicated that students' interpersonal communication skills developed from the language preparatory program contributed to their academic study.

In sum, what students were prepared at pre-admission stage was mainly Chinese for social purposes, together with some test-taking strategies to pass the required test. The Chinese language skills developed from this preparation contributed to students' academic studies in two ways: It functions as a foundation for students to transit into academic language, and it also equipped students with interpersonal communication skills to support their academic studies.

4.5.2 The Central Phenomenon—Category 3: Demands and Challenges with Academic Chinese

Even though the language preparatory program made every effort to prepare and equip students with necessary Chinese skills, and they had passed the required admission criterion on language, students were still faced with a variety of linguistic challenges as they navigate in various aspects of academic life. The data suggested that students' demands and challenges with academic Chinese were primarily bound to four major tasks, including listening to lectures, academic writing, writing exams, and academic reading.

Listening to lectures is a daily routine for all the students, although its weight varied for students in different stages of study and in different areas. While Liming believed that lecturing is the major channel that knowledge was taught in his program in Finance, Meili studying Business Intelligence had more hands-on projects than lectures. Although there were PowerPoint slides and in most cases they helped students grasp the key points of the lectures, listening to lectures was still a major task for them, as noted by Aihua:

> I think PowerPoint slides are not complete, but a summary. What the instructor said was in fact the most important. We must understand what the instructors were talking about, not the slides.

Various factors were found as impeding students' comprehension of lectures, and vocabulary was reported as the biggest barrier. For example, Kehan mentioned that he wrote down 65 unknown words during the first half of his first few classes. Moreover, this issue was not only a lack of vocabulary in general, but more specifically, a lack of subject-specific vocabulary. As Banhua said,

> Every subject has its own vocabulary, both Finance and Computer. What we've learned for HSK Level 4 was "outside" vocabulary: everybody can use for chatting and shopping purposes. But these are not academic vocabulary, so we had trouble understanding the lecture. Instructors use academic vocabulary in class, so this is the challenge we have for academic study.

Kehan, currently in the first year of his academic study, reported that he was unable to understand the lectures because he did not even have knowledge of the very basic academic vocabulary, such as "plus," "minus," "multiply," "divide," and "percentage" in math. He further explained his difficulty in balancing content comprehension and attending to language during lectures:

> When we are sitting in the class, and when the laoshi (the instructor) says something, we are not able to understand those words. I used to use Pleco to translate the words, and by the time I translated the words, I missed the class content. That's the kind of dilemma we are facing right now.

Other than vocabulary, accent placed another linguistic barrier for students to understand the lectures. In this case, the accent issue relates mainly to the local dialect as a variation of Putonghua (the standard Mandarin). Although the local

dialect differs from Putonghua in various aspects, pronunciation was the most distinct feature. Multiple participants reported that they could not understand instructors' dialects. Aihua commented, "Even Chinese students have difficulties, what shall we foreigners do?" So is the speech rate. Once students were placed into academic programs, they became the minority population among the native Chinese-speaking students, and one of the most obvious changes they experienced was instructor's speech rate. For example, in Meili's class, there were only two international students among 90 students. Therefore, "the instructors speak really really fast, so do the other Chinese students," commented Aihua.

Academic writing is another important task for students. For academic writing, the major challenge that students faced was the formal academic style. Wangyang was actually in the process of writing thesis for his bachelor's degree. He elaborated this challenge as:

> When I sent my thesis to my supervisor, he said he couldn't understand it. I then had to explain my writing to him face to face. I used a lot of spoken language, not written language in my writing, and the meaning was completely different. My supervisor had to help me change a lot into written language.

Vocabulary knowledge is intertwined with academic writing. When talking about writing in a formal style, Aihua made the comment: "Collocation is also very challenging. I think Chinese grammar is not very difficult, but the collocations are. The collocations we use are wrong which is the biggest problem."

Writing exams is another important aspect of academic life for every student. Our data revealed that handwriting characters for open-ended questions poses a special difficulty for international students when writing exams. Unlike typing essays or reports, students have to write by hand at exams. Aihua noted that, "During exams, we are not able to write every character." Wangyang had also commented, "At exams, there are a lot of characters that we don't know how to write."

Academic reading is another major academic situation where students need their Chinese language skills. The various materials they read include course slides, textbooks, and academic papers. Again, academic vocabulary posed difficulties in the process. Subject-specific vocabulary was again mentioned by participants like Aihua, Qiaodan, and Meili as a barrier for comprehending the subject content in the reading materials. Aihua and Kehan also reported having trouble with recognizing the Chinese words translated from other languages in reading, such as people's names in their subject area and Greek symbols translated into Chinese. Reading speed is another challenge that students were facing. Reading efficiently is always desirable for students as they all have a heavy workload and busy schedule. However, students generally found that reading academic materials in Chinese was very time-consuming. Various factors were reported as the reason for slowing down the reading speed, such as encountering unknown words and phrases, facing unknown characters, and the lack of background knowledge in the content area.

4.5.3 Strategies for Coping with Demands and Challenges

In order to alleviate the previously reported challenges, students applied various coping strategies to support their own study, including making self-efforts and seeking additional resources.

4.5.3.1 Category 4: Making Self-efforts

Students usually started with making self-efforts, such as through preview and review. For example, Meili noted: "If possible, I read the course material in advance. No matter in what language I read, it is helpful." Mulan was strongly motivated and worked diligently. He believed reading in Chinese was the way to help him understand the lectures and also a way to improve his language proficiency in academic Chinese continuously: "Reading in English is fast for me, but I want to have myself get used to reading in Chinese. It's tough and a slow process, but I chose to read Chinese materials…otherwise, I will never get the lectures." Mulan also developed a routine to study the academic language: Each day, he summarized all the new words and phrases that he encountered in academic study and read the summary out aloud. Similarly, Qiaodan noted that when he encounters unknown vocabulary at lectures, he writes down the pronunciation, looks them up in the dictionary after class, and memorizes the new words.

4.5.3.2 Category 5: Seeking for Additional Resources

Participants reported two types of additional resources that they commonly relied on: language and personal resources. Majority of the participants reported taking advantage of English language to support their study. Since many of the textbooks were translated from English, instructors would provide the English version to the students as well. Some students, such as Liming, chose to read only in English because "reading in Chinese is very time-consuming." Other students such as Aihua made choices to read in English or Chinese depending on the difficulty of the content: "If the subject content is easy, I would definitely read in Chinese. But if the subject content is difficult, I would read in English."

Seeking additional help from other people is another strategy that students used to deal with the challenges. When there were questions arising from the lectures, international students would first discuss among themselves. As Aihua explained:

> I think it is easier to discuss with international students. When there are questions, it might be difficult to ask Chinese students because you may not have yourself fully understood. If it's between two foreigners, we would use English. It's more convenient. After discussing within us, if we still can't solve the problem, then we go to Chinese friends.

International students were actively seeking help from their Chinese classmates and their instructors. Qiaodan, one participant mentioned that he would ask his Chinese classmates for help after class: "Sometimes I have trouble understanding the content or the instructor's assignment requirements. I ask for explanations or clarifications from my Chinese friends in the class." Another participant Baiyun mentioned whenever he needed to submit a written assignment, he asked Chinese friends to check for grammatical mistakes. International students usually ask questions and discuss with their instructors after class. In the case of thesis, they would ask their supervisor to provide feedback, such as what Wangyang did with his supervisor on writing in a formal academic style.

4.5.4 Outcome Resulting from the Current Path

4.5.4.1 Category 6: Institutional and Instructors' Accommodations

Despite all the efforts and strategies employed by students, some prominent gaps still existed between the students' current academic language proficiency and the desired proficiency in an academic context. Therefore, both the university and the instructors had to take measures to accommodate international students' linguistic challenges, particularly on assessment. For example, Wangyang, the only undergraduate student among the participants, was exempt from examinations in the first two years of his study. It was from the third year of his study, he was required to participate in examinations as other Chinese students.

At the classroom level, most of the participants noted that it was not rare for instructors to allow international students to use cell phones as dictionaries or write pinyin (phonetic system for transcribing Chinese characters) instead of Chinese characters in quizzes. Several participants brought up that some instructors offered international students the option of doing writing assignments and conducting oral reports in the English language.

4.5.4.2 Category 7: Onsite Development of Academic Chinese Proficiency

Although encountering tremendous linguistic difficulties when stepping into academic study, students reported that their proficiency of academic language gradually developed in the process. The gradual accumulation of academic vocabulary while studying different subjects was noted by several students and thus leading to less linguistic difficulties within specific subjects. Qiaodan acknowledged that through writing down unknown words and studying them after class, he gradually enlarged the size of his academic vocabulary. Aihua reported that the first couple of weeks of a new course were usually the hardest due to a large number of new subject-specific vocabularies. However, as he made efforts to learn these new

words, he could more or less follow the instruction after about a month. Therefore, Aihua believed: "Lectures are helpful for learning subject-specific vocabulary… By the fourth week of a semester, the problem becomes much smaller, because your academic language has been improved."

Liming completed his undergraduate study at a Chinese institution, and now he is in the first year of his master's program. He recalled the earlier days when he had major problems with academic language. However, now he has become more competent and he regarded time as the most important factor: "I have experienced what they are experiencing. For me, that time has passed… Time is the most important thing." It seemed that as time passed, students' proficiency in academic language improved and hence the problems became less prominent.

4.5.4.3 Category 8: Expecting CAP Supports

Students reflected on how they could be better prepared in Chinese language for their academic studies. One of the prominent themes emerged among the students was the gap between the kind of language skills they had currently and the actual skills they needed for study. Therefore, students reflected on how they could be better prepared with academic Chinese language and particularly with subject-specific vocabularies. Students believed this could be achieved in different ways, and one of the options was by offering specialized courses. Aihua made the point by stating that they need to be taught the kind of language needed for their academic study in advance, particularly the vocabulary and the context of using them. Even though the kinds of vocabulary they need differ from area to area, the participants found that a big portion of core vocabulary was common in many subject areas. Kehan illustrated this point below:

> Our university has four major disciplines: One is finance, and others are business management, economics, and international relations, I think. So if you ask students in the highest say the 4th or 5th year to give us some hundred words in their subjects, you will get the most basic words… Out of all these words, there are some we use in almost every subject, like plus, minus. If you make students learn these basic and common terminologies, I think it will be much easier. After learning that, I would be able to take my level from 15% to 70%. So it would make a really big contribution.

Another suggestion that students made was to have a better division of time during the preparatory program on the language skills that they needed most. For example, character writing is an important element in Chinese for general purposes. However, while recognizing the importance of reading characters, Kehan perceived differently toward the importance of handwriting characters:

> I would put less focus on writing the Chinese characters, because in the future we will use pinyin to write by mobile phones or computers. So I think we lost a lot of time. I remember we lost a lot of times on writing the Chinese language in the classes. If we just save this time from writing, we can save this time for learning the technical words.

The admission test is another way to bring changes as suggested by students. Many of them believed that it would alleviate their linguistic challenges if the admission criterion were adjusted to HSK Level 5 from Level 4 as HSK at an advanced level include certian formal language that they need. However, others perceived it differently. Aihua who has passed HSK Level 6, the highest level, believed that the key to bring good changes is not the required level on HSK, but the nature of the test. As noted by Aihua:

> I think HSK needs some revisions. I believe no matter which level, 4 or 5, we pass, we will still have trouble in academic study. Because what the instructors use was not the words from HSK 4 or 5, but vocabularies in different areas. So I think there should be a component in the test about the academic studies for us to prepare.

4.6 Discussions and Conclusion

An important finding of this study is that the nature of the language preparatory program actually follows the approach of teaching Chinese for social purposes, which is consistent with Wang and Curdt-Christiansen's (2016) findings drawn from another Chinese institution and also in line with Zhao's (2015) observation that the distinction between Chinese for academic purpose and for general (social) purpose in teaching was not clear. Our data also suggest that since the language preparatory program is directly bound to HSK preparation, the nature of HSK has a close bearing on the nature of the program, suggesting the absence of the academic context in both. Therefore, the misalignment between the context that students were prepared for and the actual contextual demands would be considered as one of the key reasons that have led to students' significant challenges with academic Chinese, especially at the early stages. However, this does not mean that the language preparatory was not beneficial. In fact, students were equipped with the Chinese language foundations that contributed to their learning of the academic language and also the communication skills to seek personal supports.

While HSK test is widely being adopted as the admission criteria, its content relevance (Weigle and Melone 2016) in the academic context is under scrutiny. While a particular test for accessing Chinese in academic contexts is still not available, we suggest re-considering the justification of using HSK Level 4 as the cut-off level for admission. Some of our participants believed that HSK Levels 5 and 6 include certain formal language that they need in their academic study. This observation is in line with the descriptions in the CLPS (Hanban 2009). According to the test developer, HSK Level 4 corresponds to the Band 4 in the CLPS while HSK Levels 5 and 6 correspond to Band 5. Band 4 of the CLPS defines learners' Chinese proficiency as being able to use basic communication skills, describe one's experience, express one's opinions with simple reasons and understand materials with familiar topics; while Band 5 of the CLPS is defined as being able to communicate with various strategies, express one's opinions and attitudes, participating

in discussions in *specialized areas*, and understand and synthesize materials in multiple areas including *specialized areas*. Such descriptions in the CLPS suggest HSK Level 5 and 6 might serve as better criterion for admission into academic programs in Chinese universities. This study also suggests that a language test targeting at Chinese language proficiency used in academic context is pressing to better support the teaching and learning of Chinese for academic purposes.

This study suggests the lack of support on the kind of language skills that are common in studying almost all academic subjects prior to students embarking on the academic study (i.e., what was considered as language for general academic purpose; Jordan 1997). According to Jordan, one core aspect of the language for general academic purposes was the formal academic register, which was needed in academic writing as well as formal speeches. However, participants in this study reported significant challenges with academic writing, for example, the unfamiliarity with the formal collocations. Therefore, we suggest that developing students' command in formal academic language style should be included as one of the teaching objectives in the language preparatory program. Pedagogical tasks were recommended in many of the LAP literature (e.g., Hamp-Lyons and Heasley 1987; Thompson 1994) to help students see how language was used in academic fields distinct from social purposes. Language-focused study had much to offer regarding what features and aspects of language contribute to the academic style. As another core component of language for general academic purposes (Jordan 1997), study skills such as note-taking, referencing, and summarizing and paraphrasing were not reported as major challenges by the participants. Since study skills are transferrable from students' first language (Jordan 1997), our participants of graduate students and undergraduate students at senior years are likely to encounter less difficulty with study skills.

Despite a lack of support on various aspects of academic language, students reported that they gradually accumulated the language needed for specific subjects along the way, especially the subject-specific vocabulary. This supports the previous literature that subject-specific vocabulary could be left for subject teachers to teach (Spack 1988), especially considering the scarcity of instructors who have knowledge in both academic contents and second language teaching. However, an area that could better support students was the core subject vocabulary (Hyland 2006), indicating the most commonly used vocabulary within a subject or among similar subjects. For example, students claimed that the basic vocabulary in math as simple as "plus," "minus," "multiple," and "divide" could hinder their study in academic programs at the early stages. One participant Kehan described "the basic common academic words" and believed that studying these words in advance would significantly advance his future study. Therefore, we call for some supports to equip students with the core subject vocabulary, such as in the broad area of Economics and Finance, considering the specialization of this university. Early endeavors of CAP practice in the 1950s to 1980s could inform such a practice while short-term courses were offered by the university to give students some foundations of the core subject vocabulary in some similar subject areas (Lv 1990; Zhang 2013).

Under the current path, it seems that the institution and the instructors make great efforts to accommodate students' linguistic difficulties. However, it is noteworthy that these accommodations should be made upon the condition of not sacrificing the targeted learning objectives, particularly these assessment accommodations. Some accommodations, such as using pinyin instead of Chinese characters, raise no such concern. However, when international students are exempt from examinations, alternative assessment methods need to be in place so that the university ensures that these students meet the related degree level expectations. When such alternative assessment methods are implemented, such as a written or oral report, the instructors need to take necessary measures to make sure that they assess all necessary learning objectives and both domestic and international students feel the differentiation in assessment methods are fair.

In sum, this study uncovers students' experiences with academic Chinese language under the current path of language preparation, testing, and immersion into the academic studies. Enlightened by the research findings, we suggest re-orienting the language preparatory program to clearly reflect LAP, considering focusing on the common demands across different subjects, such as a formal academic register and a core subject vocabulary. We also suggest a better justification of adopting a certain language test at a certain level as the admission criteria.

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