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Achieving English proficiency:

A qualitative study of Chinese students' language learning strategies while studying in Aotearoa New Zealand

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2026

A research report in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Business Studies

School of Humanities, Media, and Creative Communication

Massey University, New Zealand

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Abstract

Chinese students invest considerable effort in English learning to achieve the required English test scores to enroll in New Zealand universities. However, many of them still struggle to use English effectively in real-life communication. These challenges include language, academic study, social integration and emotional factors. The reasons for students' uneven English skills are complex and involve cultural, contextual, and affective influences. Existing studies have not sufficiently explored how students select and interact with language-learning strategies in real communication contexts, from both students' and teachers' perspectives.

This study employs a qualitative approach to explore the effective language-learning strategies that Chinese students use to address various challenges in real-life contexts. It examines students' perceptions of English proficiency, the challenges they encounter, and the strategies they take and the reasons for those actions. Teachers' perspectives are also included to identify any issues that may be overlooked by students and to provide professional interpretation of the challenges.

The analysis is informed by Oxford's S2R model to interpret how students address these challenges in their lives. Findings show that cognitive strategies are mainly used to deal with language and academic tasks, social interaction is valuable for improving English proficiency through communication with people in the host environment, and affective strategies are used throughout the process to reduce stress and maintain motivation.

Overall, effective language learning requires learners to be flexible, select and combine cognitive, social interaction, and affective strategies to meet individual needs and learning context.

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1. Introduction

English has become one of the most widely used global languages. As of 2025, English is the primary language in 67 countries, and around 1.53 billion people use English as their first or second language for study, work, and daily communication (Doland, 2025). English is widely considered the most important tool for disseminating information, exchanging knowledge, conducting business, and promoting cultural connections worldwide. It boosts economic development through international conversations and collaborations.

In China, proficiency in English is not only a measure of career competitiveness but also a standard for academic success. Mastering English is regarded as a measure of personal competitiveness that enhances career opportunities (Bolton, 2010). Every Chinese student must take two high-stakes exams to continue their further academic studies (Stropkovics, 2019). The first is called “Zhongkao” (the Senior Secondary School Entrance Examination), and the other is called “Gaokao” (the National University Entrance Examination). High scores in these two examinations are the standard for academic proficiency. Based on examination scores, students are entitled to enter their desired high school or university according to their rank (Ruan & Leung, 2012). English, along with Chinese and maths, is one of the three major compulsory exam subjects in both examinations. To graduate, university students must pass the National College English Test (CET) to earn their bachelor’s degree (Jin & Cortazzi, 2002; J. Li, 2021; Ruan & Leung, 2012). Thus, excelling in English and passing various mandatory exams is a process each Chinese student experiences throughout their school life. However, focusing heavily on English learning does not necessarily lead to mastery of the language.

Chinese students encounter various language challenges when studying overseas. Research shows that these challenges includes listening (Campbell & Li, 2008; Z. Li et al., 2017), speaking (Holmes, 2005; Wolf & Phung, 2019), writing (F. Zhang & Zhan, 2020; Zhu & Strauss, 2025), and social skills during their studies (Campbell & Li, 2008; Z. Li et al., 2017; Wolf & Phung, 2019). Even if they invest time and effort to pass an English exam such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), or the Pearson Test of English (PTE), the score cannot guarantee their satisfaction with studying abroad.

Providing language support to international students is crucial for ensuring their satisfaction while studying abroad. While taking a foundation course before university helps students adapt to the linguistic environment and new study methods (Zhu & Strauss, 2025), students who are

unable or not required to attend such courses may face greater challenges in their academic studies. Chinese students are the largest source of international students, accounting for 34% of enrolments at New Zealand education providers (Education New Zealand, 2025). Raising awareness of students' language challenges can encourage national and institutional efforts to provide them with greater support, thereby enhancing their life satisfaction (Haugh, 2016). Exploring effective language-learning strategies can help Chinese students improve their English skills and better manage the challenges they encounter while studying abroad.

This study aims to examine Chinese students, particularly those who have pursued traditional Chinese English education, and currently living and studying in New Zealand. It focuses on identifying language-learning strategies that support the development of English proficiency and facilitate adaptation to academic life in an English-speaking country. Grounded in interpretive perspectives, this study examines Chinese students' language proficiency, the contextual factors influencing it, the challenges they face while studying abroad, and the strategies they employ to overcome these challenges. Semi-structured interviews are conducted to gather students' experiences and the strategies they employ, while perspectives from English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers are included to provide additional insight. Therefore, the combined perspective provides a comprehensive, holistic understanding of language-learning strategies in a real intercultural context. The study is guided by the following questions:

Question 1: How is good English proficiency perceived by students living and studying in New Zealand?

Question 2: What challenges do students encounter when they study and live in New Zealand?

Question 3: What strategies can help students to improve their English proficiency and address study and everyday-life challenges?

2. Literature review

This literature review begins by discussing the English proficiency of Chinese people in global rankings, followed by an overview of the contextual background of English learning in China. It then discusses the validity of the existing English proficiency assessment and the practical challenges Chinese students encounter during their studies overseas. This review subsequently focuses on language-learning strategies, covering the development of Oxford's theoretical framework. It starts with a brief introduction to Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), the representative measurement tool, followed by its widely discussed limitations, particularly its vague definition of language proficiency and its failure to account for the influence of intercultural contexts on strategy use. After that, the following section introduces Oxford's (2011) Strategic Self-Regulation (S2R) model, which is Oxford's response to the critique and also the analytical frame for the present study.

2.1 English proficiency for Chinese

This section discusses how Chinese students invest substantial effort in English learning, yet their learning outcomes appear imbalanced across different language skills.

2.1.1 Time investment in English learning

English learning in China is a lengthy with a compulsory set of course that lasts from primary school through to university. In the 1980s and 1990s, English was offered in primary schools, and since then, it has been continuously expanded nationwide in China (Ruan & Leung, 2012). In 2001, the Chinese Ministry of Education announced that English became a required school subject from third grade through college and graduate school (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2001). This reinforcement is intended to improve the nation's foreign language proficiency to meet the increasing need for multinational corporations' investment following China's accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO). With this curriculum reform, English has become one of the three compulsory subjects in the Chinese nine-year compulsory education system, along with Chinese and mathematics. Schoolchildren, including those in the city and rural areas of China, are required to start learning English in public primary schools at the ages of 8-9. Although some private or international schools start English courses early (Pan, 2015), most public schools still follow this policy today. For university students to graduate, non-English majors must pass the College English Test (CET Band 4), a national standardised test of College English, while English majors must pass the CET Band 6 (Jin & Cortazzi, 2002; J. Li, 2021; Ruan & Leung, 2012). Students who fail the test will be ineligible to get their

bachelor’s degree. Chinese students who have completed full-time compulsory education will have studied English for at least ten years before enrolling in university.

2.1.2 Low proficiency in global ranking

Focusing heavily on English learning does not necessarily lead to mastery of the language. EF, a worldwide English education organisation, provides language courses for people of all ages. Each year, it publishes the English Proficiency Index, ranking countries by their English proficiency. The data come from the 2.2 million tests of the EF Standard English Test (EF SET tests), which thoroughly assesses reading, listening, speaking, and writing skills. In the latest ranking, China ranks 86th among countries and is grouped in “low proficiency” (EF, 2025). According to the proficiency bands explanation, “low proficiency” refers to “navigate an English-speaking country as a tourist, and engage in small talk or understand simple emails from colleagues” (EF, 2025, p. 48). This test is proactively taken by the population who want to learn English or are curious about their English skills. Although the representation might be limited, the rank still serves as a reference for Chinese people’s limited English proficiency in an English-speaking environment.

Official IELTS data also indicates uneven English proficiency among Chinese speakers. According to the latest test-taker performance data (IELTS, n.d.) from the IELTS groups, in the academic module results by first language, Chinese speakers' overall band score was only 5.9, the second lowest among all groups. The speaking band score is average at 5.5, the lowest among the four skills. This rank illustrates a common phenomenon: an imbalance in English skills among Chinese speakers, particularly in speaking. Uneven English proficiency among Chinese speakers can be partly attributed to cultural factors, particularly the English learning environment in China.

2.2 The English learning environment in China

This section examines the contextual factors that may contribute to limited English proficiency among Chinese students. These factors are discussed in relation to educational practices, cultural background and emotional influences, including the English-teaching approach, limited teachers’ capabilities across cities, exam-oriented culture, motivation and attitudes toward learning English.

2.2.1 Traditional English teaching

The historical goal of learning English has shaped the teaching approach in China. In China, schools mainly emphasise academic components (reading and writing) rather than communicative skills (speaking and listening). The reason could be that, before the 1990s, English learning objectives mainly emphasised reading and translating English-language materials (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). This focus continues to shape teaching methods and learning focus, which emphasise systematic analysis of grammar, rely heavily on rote learning of vocabulary, and favour literary classics (Liao et al., 2026; Ruan & Leung, 2012). Typically, lessons begin with academic reading material, followed by the teacher providing a detailed analysis of grammar from the reading and extensively using translation in instruction. After class, routine practice relies heavily on rote memorisation of vocabulary and sentences. Occasionally, teachers require students to recite these texts in class as part of regular assessment (Jin & Cortazzi, 2002; Yu & Liu, 2021). The unbalanced approach to English learning is closely linked to exam requirements, which mainly rely on multiple-choice questions in listening and reading to assess understanding (Jin & Cortazzi, 2002; Q. Zhang, 2025). Students tend to do extensive practice and focus on memorising correct answers as part of examination preparation.

2.2.2 Limitations in teacher capability

Limitations in teacher capability may contribute to uneven development of students' language skills. English teachers in China are usually Chinese and teach English using predominantly Mandarin. Some of them may lack fluency in English, which further prevents students from developing natural speech (Liao et al., 2026; Ruan & Leung, 2012; Wright & Zheng, 2016; Wu, 2001). These disparities in the number of qualified teachers are even more obvious between more economically advantaged and poorer regions (Ruan & Leung, 2012; Si, 2019). This shortage of teachers further affects practical classroom activities and learning outcomes. Traditional classes tend to be large, with an average class size of more than 30 and sometimes reaching 60 or more (Jin & Cortazzi, 2002; Wright & Zheng, 2016). This size makes it difficult for teachers to facilitate speaking practice for each student during lessons.

2.2.3 Exam-oriented culture in China and its consequences

Assessment culture further limits classroom behaviours and opportunities to develop English skills. Typically, speaking is not a compulsory requirement in exams (Ezekwe, 2025; Y. Zheng & Cheng, 2008). Consequently, teachers tend to allocate less time to speaking practice and instead prioritise reading and writing skills. In English classes, students often focus on listening

and note-taking without being expected to interact with teachers (Jin & Cortazzi, 2002; Y. Lu, 2024). This contributes to a teacher-centred classroom culture, influenced by China's Confucian system, which prioritises respect for authority (Tang et al., 2024). Influenced by this value, teachers are positioned as the primary source of knowledge and are responsible for helping students achieve high scores on various exams. As a result, students rarely ask questions or express uncertainty, as teachers are usually regarded as authority figures (Holmes, 2005; Y. Lu, 2024). This passive learning approach leads students to see English merely as knowledge, limiting their opportunities to use it as a communication skill.

Exam culture also influences students' affective response to mistakes. China's Confucian-influenced system prioritises and encourages competition in the pursuit of excellence and high achievement (Tang et al., 2024). Within this cultural context, high marks are seen as an indicator of academic success. As a result, students often fear mistakes, which can significantly affect their scores. This emotion might contribute to language anxiety, especially fear of making mistakes during communication (Giang, 2025), and feeling stressed when using limited language proficiency (Ezekwe, 2025; Kim & Kim, 2013), and reduce self-confidence (Ezekwe, 2025; Holmes, 2005).

2.2.4 Students' motivation in English learning

Chinese students' lower motivation to learn English may be attributed to social attitudes towards English, students' engagement in English learning, and the linguistic difficulty in language learning for Chinese students.

The dominance of Mandarin reduces attention to learning English. Although attention to English learning has increased in recent years (Fan, 2023), Mandarin is the official language and remains the most widely spoken, with English primarily taught and learned as a foreign language (EFL) rather than used in daily communication. As English is not widely demanded in daily life in China, some students may feel a lack of urgency to learn it (Liao et al., 2026; Werner & Milyavskaya, 2019). Additionally, given the limited opportunities to use English in real-life contexts, it is difficult for students to set a clear objective for English learning (Andrade, 2009; Ezekwe, 2025). Consequently, the absence of demand and learning goals can negatively affect students' motivation to learn English.

The attention of learning English has increased in China. Many scholars have proposed a revolution in the education system, suggesting a shift in English language instruction from a test-based culture to a student-centred, communicative competence-based approach (Ezekwe,

2025; Jin & Cortazzi, 2002; Pan, 2015; Ruan & Leung, 2012). Similarly, the Chinese Ministry of Education announced policy support to improve the practical use of English learning materials and to incorporate cultural awareness, aiming to enhance overall English competence (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2011). However, education reform is shaped by social and political factors and requires greater support from institutions and English teachers (Liao et al., 2026; Ruan & Leung, 2012). It indicates a positive trend: English education reform is underway, though it is a gradual process.

Low engagement with English affects students' motivation to learn the language. Many Chinese students are accustomed to an exam-oriented culture that mainly aims to pass English exams rather than achieve full language mastery (Bolton, 2010; L. Zheng & Baker, 2022). Additionally, the academic reading materials, which appear less relevant to real-world situations, diminish students' interest and further reduce their curiosity and motivation towards the language (Ezekwe, 2025; Wu, 2001). As a result, students tend to view language purely as knowledge, undervaluing its significance and perceiving it as irrelevant to their future needs (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Ezekwe, 2025; Si, 2019).

The inherent linguistic challenges of learning English may further reduce Chinese learners' motivation to study it. The Chinese language tends to favour inductive modes of expression, where the main point is introduced gradually. This differs quite significantly from the way English expresses ideas (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Lantolf, 2011). For Chinese students learning English, this means learning a new linguistic system with its own rules of grammar and vocabulary, especially since Chinese lacks tense systems and other grammatical features present in English (Lantolf, 2011; H. Wang & Zou, 2018). These learning gaps significantly increase the difficulty Chinese learners face in achieving English proficiency and further reduce their motivation for learning (Boström & Bostedt, 2020).

2.2.5 Impact of AI on language development

AI technology has become a powerful tool in English learning. With the rapid development of AI tools, they have been applied in various learning contexts. Studies have shown that AI can provide a personalised practice context and immediate feedback for correction (H. Al-khresheh, 2024; Żammit, 2025). Flexible support can enhance learners' engagement and opportunities to practice while reducing language anxiety (Żammit, 2025). However, AI tools also raise concerns, such as bias in AI-generated content, risks of academic integrity violations, and overreliance that can lead to skill deterioration (H. Al-khresheh, 2024; Raine, 2025). Especially

in the context of language learning, AI translation has developed considerably, greatly improving accuracy and effectiveness compared to traditional dictionaries (Ssemugabi, 2025). However, studies indicate that the overreliance on machine translation may reduce learners' motivation to develop independent language skills and limit their cultural awareness when using language in real-life contexts (Klimova, 2025; Raine, 2025). Thus, there are still concerns about how AI influences learners' motivation and effectiveness in language learning, particularly whether it supports skill development or primarily facilitates task completion.

2.3 Defining and measuring English proficiency for L2 learners

To better understand how to improve English proficiency, it is important to know the standard for language proficiency. Language proficiency is a complex concept that requires consideration from multiple perspectives. According to Lessow-Hurley (2003), the primary purpose of language is communication. However, language proficiency is not limited to communication competence. Language proficiency is a multicomponent concept which combines both language-related knowledge and the person's ability to use language (Leclercq et al., 2014). From an assessment perspective, it can be further divided into general or specific, single skills or overall components, or even across different contexts. The multiple dimensions of evaluation make the definition of assessing proficiency significantly challenging.

Defining English proficiency for Second Language (L2) learners is challenging. While a standard can be set and used as a target for learners aiming for language proficiency, there is no universally accepted standard for English proficiency (Gass et al., 2020). From Gass et al.'s (2020) perspective, language proficiency in bilingual dimensions refers to the degree of control an individual has over the rules of a language. Common measurement approaches often focus on assessing specific linguistic knowledge, such as grammar and vocabulary, within specific contexts. Therefore, such methods may not fully capture learners' communicative competence. Additionally, language proficiency is a multi-construct. Individual dimensions of language, such as vocabulary, pronunciation, functional use, or syntax, reflect only part of a learner's language ability, but cannot fully or fairly measure overall proficiency. Thus, language proficiency cannot be assessed by a single measure but needs to be measured comprehensively across multiple dimensions.

Measuring English proficiency is a challenge. Relying on a single, static, universal standard for a language proficiency test is unfair and non-inclusive. Davies et al. (2003) argue that international English standards, which favour native-speaker norms in examining non-native

speakers, disadvantage users of other varieties of English (A. Davies et al., 2003). Farhady (1982) highlights that learners from diverse educational backgrounds have different language-use needs and weaknesses, which current language proficiency tests do not take into account in their design (Farhady, 1982). Therefore, these tests may not accurately assess the learner's true language abilities, which could result in the learner being misassigned to English as a Second Language (ESL) classes or failing to meet university entry requirements due to low language test scores. Johnson (2024) further points out that the rubric-based scoring structure reinforces stereotypes and neglects the communicative role of language, potentially harming students' academic success and self-esteem (Johnson, 2024). Since the definition of language proficiency is shaped by theory, educational systems and the social context (Leung, 2022), assessment standards need to be flexible and multidimensional rather than static. The lack of consensus and comprehensive definitions of language proficiency raised concerns about whether existing research adequately captures overall language proficiency and whether current learning strategies are truly effective. However, in practice, contested measures of language proficiency remain widely used as indicators.

For Chinese students who wish to study in New Zealand, language proficiency is a basic requirement. According to the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) University Entrance Requirements, IELTS, TOEFL and PTE scores are the internationally recognised English proficiency outcomes for international students. However, achieving the required scores in IELTS or TOEFL does not necessarily indicate that students can effectively apply English in real-life contexts (Holmes, 2005; Shannaq, 2020; Zhu & Strauss, 2025).

2.4 Challenges for Chinese students studying overseas

As discussed above, achieving the required IELTS score does not necessarily guarantee effective communication in an English-speaking environment. Chinese students encounter several challenges when studying abroad. These challenges include not only language-related and academic difficulties, but also issues related to social integration and affective factors.

2.4.1 Language and academic factors

Research has highlighted challenges in four key English skills, including listening, speaking, reading and writing, as well as the significant differences in learning approaches between China and Western universities.

a) Listening: Students struggle to understand various accents and to keep pace with native speakers, which further affects their ability to fully understand the lecturer's

content (Campbell & Li, 2008; Huang et al., 2022; Z. Li et al., 2017). Additionally, unfamiliar slang or vocabulary further influences understanding, even leading to misunderstanding (Huang et al., 2022; Z. Li et al., 2017; Wolf & Phung, 2019).

b) Speaking: Speaking skills are always regarded as complex and challenging for ESL students, as they require pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension (Kashinathan & Abdul Aziz, 2021). The challenges may further affect students' interactions with classmates and supervisors in academic settings (Holmes, 2005; Wolf & Phung, 2019). It may become more difficult in daily communication because conversations are more open and lack context support, whereas academic communication tends to be more manageable with specific context (Wolf & Phung, 2019).

The reason could be a lack of confidence, which is due to insufficient vocabulary or fear of making mistakes (Giang, 2025; Kashinathan & Abdul Aziz, 2021). Additionally, teacher-centred instruction and limited opportunities for authentic learning, which closely align with the Chinese teaching approach, could further increase speaking anxiety (Deep et al., 2025; Y. Lu, 2024). This speaking barrier further affects their performance in presentations (Wolf & Phung, 2019) and reduces their engagement in group discussions (Holmes, 2005; Lai et al., 2023).

c) Reading: Reading difficulties are mainly focused on low reading speed (Giang, 2025; Y. Zhang & Mi, 2010), and limited reading comprehension, which is usually associated with misunderstanding (Huang et al., 2022; Y. Zhang & Mi, 2010). Difficulties in academic reading may not be limited to language proficiency but also to the inherent complexity of academic vocabulary (Chauke, 2025), which is challenging for domestic students (Shi, 2023). However, reading difficulties may be the least challenging of the four English skills, as they may benefit from prior reading experience and can access various resources (Wolf & Phung, 2019).

d) Writing: The difference in writing style between China and the West poses a significant challenge for Chinese students. Since not all Chinese students are trained in Western writing styles, most lack the academic writing skills, especially critical thinking and idea organisation (Giang, 2025; Huang et al., 2022; Zhu & Strauss, 2025). Furthermore, limited vocabulary, especially academic vocabulary (Zhu & Strauss, 2025), and issues with grammar make it difficult to express ideas accurately (Huang et

al., 2022; Y. Zhang & Mi, 2010). These challenges can be worsened by influences from the first language and the Chinese writing style (Wolf & Phung, 2019; F. Zhang & Zhan, 2020), which may result in unclear or incorrect expression. As a result, unclear writing may impact their academic performance (Henze & Zhu, 2012) and further undermine students' confidence in their writing (Zhu & Strauss, 2025).

2.4.2 Approaches to learning factors

Chinese students are accustomed to the traditional Chinese education system, which is teacher-centred, and students usually follow the teacher's instructions (Y. Lu, 2024; Tang et al., 2024). This is completely different from the Western dialogue mode, which emphasises interactive and cooperative communication strategies (Holmes, 2005; Y. Lu, 2024). This significant difference could confuse students about teachers' expectations, leading teachers to misinterpret students' behaviour as less self-motivated during self-study (Vaccarino & Li, 2018). This communication gap could lead to a misunderstanding of expectations between students and teachers. Teachers may misinterpret students' behaviour as less self-motivated during self-study, while students might perceive teachers' feedback as unclear.

2.4.3 Social integration factors

Challenges related to social integration, particularly those arising from significant cultural differences and negative experiences of discrimination, also affect Chinese students studying abroad.

Although Chinese students tend to integrate into the local community, they still find it difficult to build friendships with people from other cultures. Chinese culture tends to emphasise social homogeneity and collectivism, which significantly differs from the more individualistic cultural style commonly found in New Zealand (Liu et al., 2015). This difference leads Chinese students to experience difficulty developing a deep connection with host-country students. This is reflected in conversations often stopping at the superficial level, making it hard to develop deeper relationships, while opportunities for out-of-class interaction are limited (Holmes, 2005; Xu, 2024). Some studies report that language barriers hinder Chinese students' willingness to engage in intercultural communication, thereby impeding their social adaptation and integration (Holmes, 2005; Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017; Wright & Zheng, 2016; Xu, 2024). However, studies observed that students from other cultures also prefer to build friendships with people from similar cultures. This suggests that cultural factors may play a more significant role than language barriers in social integration (Henze & Zhu, 2012; Vaccarino &

Dresler-Hawke, 2011). Cultural factors include not only language but also common topics, values, perceptions, and ways of thinking.

Cultural differences may intensify discrimination, further impacting Chinese students' social integration. Discrimination involves unfair treatment, such as being ignored, isolated or looked down upon by host-country students during social interactions (Hu, 2025; Xie et al., 2019). However, these experiences are associated with stereotypes formed from prior negative impressions of Chinese students (Xie et al., 2019). This may create a vicious cycle that negatively affects Chinese students' sense of belonging and domestic students' willingness to be inclusive. Besides challenges with other cultural groups, differences within the Chinese student community also highlight potential integration issues.

Within-group divisions influence satisfaction with social integration. Some existing studies have found differences among Chinese students, including differences in language proficiency (Cao & Newton, 2019), attitudes toward language improvement (Cao & Newton, 2019), and expectations of social integration (Ho et al., 2007). These varieties may influence students' social experiences and social adoption (Ho et al., 2007; M. Li, 2016). Such differences can shape their social network preferences, involvement in local communities, and perceptions of belonging. They may also contribute to social distance, exclusion or tension within Chinese communication. Thus, social integration is influenced not only by interactions with host-community students but also by variation within the Chinese student community.

2.4.4 Emotional factors

In addition to social integration challenges, language and academic challenges can also create emotional difficulties, particularly language anxiety and academic learning pressure.

Language anxiety is often associated with limited proficiency in English in daily communication and interaction. The emotional anxiety, including feelings of embarrassment due to listening difficulties (Wolf & Phung, 2019) or fear of making mistakes that hinder being understood (Giang, 2025; Huang et al., 2022). This language barrier might be exacerbated by Chinese students' unfamiliarity with the new educational and social environment, as well as cultural norms and behaviour (Holmes, 2005; Huang et al., 2022), which can make communication more challenging and increase emotional pressure.

Academic learning challenges in their studies are another source of pressure for Chinese students studying abroad. These emotional challenges are deeply linked to Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC), which highly values hard work and high academic expectations from parents

and students. Under this cultural influence, Chinese students tend to put high pressure on themselves to meet these expectations. (Y. Lu, 2024; Tan & Yates, 2011). These high expectations are linked to deep anxieties about academic competition and future career prospects (X. Wang, 2024). Additionally, the power distance between teachers and students in China makes students feel hesitant to ask for help (Giang, 2025; Y. Lu, 2024). As a result, students often try to solve problems on their own, which further increases the pressure when facing unfamiliar academic challenges.

2.5 Reevaluating the traditional way of measuring English proficiency

Existing research has highlighted a range of challenges that Chinese students face when studying abroad. It suggests that a common language proficiency test may not fully assess the abilities required in real English-speaking contexts. Two aspects that are often underrepresented in traditional assessment but are closely associated with language proficiency are the context of language occurrence and intercultural competence.

The standard of language proficiency is dependent on context. Although there is a lack of agreement among theories about the definition of proficiency, Lessow-Hurley (2003) points out a minimum agreement: language proficiency is not fixed, but context-dependent and fluid. In different contexts, the requirements of language ability vary. This could be particularly evident in that being capable in daily interpersonal communication does not equal the same ability in academic study, and vice versa (Lessow-Hurley, 2003). Similarly, other studies note that language proficiency evaluation depends on testing objectives and the context in which it is conducted (Benson, 2021; Leclercq et al., 2014). Therefore, language proficiency is not understood simply as language skills or performance, but also as the comprehensive ability to use language effectively for communication in context.

Intercultural competence is also an important ability related to language proficiency. When students are in an environment significantly different from their host culture, they need both language ability and intercultural competence. Intercultural competence combines competence, attitude, knowledge, and skills, internalised to help individuals communicate and behave appropriately in a culturally different setting (Deardorff, 2006). Language ability is a supporting component to facilitate intercultural competence (W. Lu et al., 2024; Wilczewski & Alon, 2023), while successful intercultural communication requires cultural awareness and understanding (Deardorff, 2006). Therefore, when discussing language proficiency, intercultural competence may also be considered to provide a more comprehensive perspective.

2.6 Development of language learning strategies

English learning strategies help learners effectively develop their language proficiency. The idea of learning strategies emerged from the cognitive shift in psychology in the mid-20th century (Oxford, 2011). In 1975, Stern (1975, as cited in Kölemen, 2021) and Rubin (1975, as cited in Kölemen, 2021) introduced the concept of "good language learners" (GLL). This concept suggests that identifying the strategic behaviours and characteristics of more successful learners can assist less successful learners to improve and facilitate their learning (Kölemen, 2021). In general educational psychology, O'Neil and Spielberger (1979, as cited in Oxford, 2011) established a framework for learning strategies that focuses on cognitive, metacognitive, and affective processes.

Afterwards, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) introduced an L2 learning theory that integrates cognitive psychology into the field of language education. Grounded in a cognitive view of information processing, this framework conceptualises the learning process and processes information, thereby improving understanding, retention, and overall comprehension (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). However, while this theory successfully explains language learning in information processing in cognitive and metacognitive perspectives, it places less focus on social interaction and affective strategies.

2.6.1 Oxford's (1990) language-learning strategies and SILL

Oxford (1990) proposed a more inclusive taxonomy of strategies, which highlights the importance of selecting appropriate social strategies during the learning process (Oxford, 1990). She also expanded this work into SILL, a tool designed to systematically assess learners' strategy use. This tool has become one of the most widely used and influential in quantitative research on language-learning strategies (Kölemen, 2021; Zare, 2012).

Oxford's theory provides a comprehensive understanding of language-learning strategies. According to Oxford (1990), language-learning strategies are "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (Oxford, 1990, p. 9). Oxford (1990) divided learning strategies into direct strategies and indirect strategies. Direct strategies involve learners actively engaging their mental faculties to process new language directly, encompassing memory, cognitive, and compensatory strategies. Indirect strategies provide indirect support for learning, including metacognitive, affective, and social strategies (Oxford, 1990). These six strategies work together as a support group and, through collaboration, enhance the effectiveness of

language learning. In a later study, Oxford and Hsiao (2002) place particular emphasis on affective and social strategies, viewing them as part of the "whole learner" (Hsiao & Oxford, 2002). Her approach highlights the importance of individuals' independence and social interactions, moving beyond the purely cognitive turn (Zare, 2012).

2.6.2 The critique of Oxford's (1990) SILL

Despite Oxford's SILL providing a pioneering standard for assessing the effectiveness of learning strategies, it cannot fully cover all aspects of complex learning phenomena. As a result, its practical application has attracted substantial criticism, which can be grouped into the following categories.

2.6.2.1 Conceptual ambiguity of terminology

Conflicting or vague definitions of strategies may limit the effectiveness of research on learning strategies. Tseng et al. (2006) argue that the broad definition of learning strategies categories makes it difficult to distinguish between strategic behaviours and ordinary learning behaviours (Tseng et al., 2006). As a result, the SILL, a frequency-based measurement tool, may count frequently used learning behaviours as effective strategy use, potentially leading to misleading outcomes. Furthermore, Cohen and Macaro's (2007, as cited in Oxford, 2011) review highlighted that inconsistent terminology and conflicting typologies have long been a problem in learning strategies research, affecting how strategies are interpreted and measured. This raises concerns about the reliability of research findings. If key concepts are not clearly defined, the validity of the results may ultimately be undermined (Oxford, 2011). This ambiguity can also be found in the conceptualisation of learning outcomes, such as language proficiency, which may indirectly affect the effectiveness of learning strategies.

2.6.2.2 Intercultural context and language-learning strategies

Language-learning strategies cannot be understood independently of the sociocultural context in which they occur. Locastro (1994) highlights that learners' goals may shift depending on the learning context, which in turn influences their choice of strategies. For example, in school contexts, learners may prioritise passing the test and favour memorisation, whereas in university contexts, learners may aim to improve their communication skills. This perspective aligns with the earlier sociocultural theory proposed by Vygotsky (1987, as cited in Oxford, 2011), which views learning as a social behaviour rather than a solely individual cognitive activity. In his study, learning is shaped through interaction with others and mediated by culture or language to achieve learning outcomes. Building on this perspective, Oxford (2011) further

refined the SILL framework, integrating and simplifying six original categories into three dimensions: cognitive strategies, affective strategies, and sociocultural-interactive strategies.

2.6.3 Oxford's (2011) Strategic Self-Regulation (S2R) Model of Language Learning

Oxford's (2011) self-regulation model addresses earlier criticisms and refined learning strategies by offering a more comprehensible framework within real communication contexts. Self-regulated learning strategies involve learners deliberately and actively managing and controlling their emotions, behaviour, and cognition during the learning process to achieve their goals (Derakhshan & Zare, 2024; Oxford, 2011; Y. Wang & Sun, 2024). According to Oxford (2011), the model includes learning strategies across three dimensions: cognitive, affective, and social interaction. Each dimension has a separate meta-strategy that guides learners in managing and adjusting their efforts and strategies to meet specific needs in different learning contexts. The integration of these three strategies facilitates a smoother, more productive, and more satisfying learning experience for students, meeting their individual needs and providing a positive, long-lasting learning experience in a wide range of sociocultural settings (Oxford, 2011). Oxford's (2011) S2R model highlights that language learning is developed and constructed through social interaction, not only a process of dealing with information. This framework is particularly relevant to the present study, as it focuses on Chinese students learning in a real English-speaking environment.

2.6.3.1 Cognitive strategies

Cognitive strategies refer to how learners deal with the knowledge of the English language. It helps learners to process, understand, remember, transform, and apply language knowledge across listening, speaking, reading and writing (Oxford, 2011). These strategies include using senses to understand and remember, reasoning or conceptualising knowledge to facilitate understanding, activating knowledge to deeply memorise, and applying knowledge to support language learning (Oxford, 2011). Cognitive strategies are a foundational component of learning because they influence how learners handle unfamiliar information and complete the learning task effectively (Donker et al., 2014).

In self-regulated learning, cognitive strategies are associated with meta-cognition, which is responsible for managing the learning process by planning, organising, monitoring, and evaluating (Oxford, 2017). Meta-cognitive can be considered higher-order strategies for setting goals, checking comprehension, analysing, and adjusting cognitive strategies to improve performance (Donker et al., 2014), thereby helping learners use cognitive strategies

appropriately across different learning situations (Rivas et al., 2022; L. J. Zhang, 2008). By combining metacognitive and cognitive strategies, learners can gradually accumulate linguistic knowledge through consistent language input, thereby improving fluency and automaticity in language use (Hattie & Donoghue, 2016). Therefore, an expert learner is adaptable in using metacognition to enhance learning outcomes and can utilise a broader range of strategies across various learning settings (Rivas et al., 2022; L. J. Zhang, 2008).

2.6.3.2 Affective strategies

Affective strategies refer to how learners handle their emotions, attitudes, and motivation during language learning. Affective strategies in self-regulation help learners activate positive emotions and maintain motivation throughout the learning process (Oxford, 2011). Meta-affectives further support learners in becoming aware of and regulating their emotions in general (Oxford, 2011).

Affective strategies are flexible, occurring throughout the learning process and interacting with cognitive and social-interactive strategies (Bown & White, 2010). Before learning, affective strategies help establish learning goals and create emotional preparedness for potential difficulties (Bown & White, 2010). Clear and achievable goals may further support learners in selecting learning strategies more carefully and realistically (Seker, 2016). Learners with strong motivation and achievable goals are also more likely to use strategies flexibly (L. J. Zhang, 2008), and are also more likely to engage in learning tasks, which may contribute to good learning performance (Rezaeyan et al., 2025).

During learning, affective strategies influence learners' use of cognitive and social-interactive strategies. For example, when learners feel frustrated during learning, they may stop practising or modify their strategies inappropriately, thereby slowing improvement. In contrast, positive feedback may encourage them to continue engaging in learning. Similarly, learners might seek emotional support through social interaction when they encounter difficulties. Positive affective regulation can help learners evaluate and reflect on adjustments to their learning strategies, thereby enabling a smoother learning process and improving language performance (Bown & White, 2010; Rezaeyan et al., 2025; T. Zhang, 2024).

2.6.3.3 Social-interactive strategies

Social-interactive strategies help learners to deal with issues of context, communication and cultural competence through interaction with others in language learning (Oxford, 2017). These strategies focus on language learning happening during communication, enabling learners to

use language and develop language proficiency simultaneously. During communication, learners can acquire both linguistic knowledge and its functional meaning in contexts, while also having opportunities to use this knowledge in real communicative situations (J.-L. Li, 2026). Through this process, learners can facilitate better understanding and connection between linguistic choice and contextual characteristics (J.-L. Li, 2026; Taguchi, 2018).

Social-interactive strategies are significantly important when learners realise a change in the learning context. Different language-using contexts might require different communication skills and norms. Learning through authentic interaction enables learners to observe local interaction norms, learn and reflect on immediate feedback, and gain exposure to variation in speaking styles and social situations (Taguchi, 2018). These experiences may also support the development of intercultural communication competence (X. Wang & Shen, 2024). Therefore, international students can develop both linguistic and intercultural competence more quickly while studying abroad, as they benefit from exposure to real-world interaction in context (Meng et al., 2018; Taguchi, 2018; X. Wang & Shen, 2024).

2.6.3.4 Fluidity of self-regulation strategies

Learning performance is improved more with a combination of self-regulation strategies than with a single strategy. During practical language learning, these strategies do not function independently. Instead, they work interactively and dynamically together to enhance learning effectiveness (Oxford, 2011). Learners usually flexibly shift between cognitive, affective, and social-interactive strategies according to different communication settings and needs. Meta-strategies in each dimension further support this overall learning process through planning, monitoring, evaluation, and adjustment. Through the collaboration of these strategies, a system emerges that is interconnected and dynamic, effectively supporting language learning in contextualised environments (Habók & Magyar, 2018; J.-L. Li, 2026; Teng & Zhang, 2022). Thus, learners with high engagement are more willing to apply self-regulation strategies flexibly throughout the learning process (Derakhshan & Zare, 2024).

2.7 Key insights

Language learning is a complex process shaped by multiple factors. Chinese students who have long engaged in passive English learning possess basic linguistic knowledge but struggle to apply it in real-world situations. This uneven proficiency might be attributed to multiple factors, such as educational culture and linguistic difficulties.

To improve language proficiency, especially in the first language, which is significantly different from the L2, effective strategies are essential. These strategies required fully considering linguistic knowledge, emotional influences, and the language's context, thereby generating a practical guide to overcoming real-world challenges. This aligns with Oxford's (2011) S2R model, which views language learning as a self-regulated process involving flexible use of cognitive, affective and social-interactive strategies.

Existing studies have quantitatively focused on the frequency of language-learning strategies using the SILL scale. However, few studies have identified specific strategies for language learning from both students' and teachers' recommendations. This study addresses this gap with qualitative interviews to explore the naturally occurring strategies students applied in real life. By reversing the strategies using the S2R framework to understand students' perceptions and experiences of the strategies used. This study also integrates teachers' insights and pedagogically informed strategy recommendations into this conversation. Therefore, to generate practical implications for improving language learning in real-world contexts.

3. Methodology

This chapter outlines the research design applied in this study. It begins by presenting the research paradigm and its understanding of reality and knowledge, followed by a description of the data collection methods and their alignment with the chosen worldview. It then discusses participants' selection and the study's ethical considerations. Next, the materials and procedure for data collection are described, followed by the approach to data analysis.

3.1 Research paradigm

This study employs an interpretive approach to complement and deepen the insights gained from current quantitative studies. The dominance of the quantitative measurement approach limits the ability to fully capture individual differences in language-learning strategies. Current studies tend to focus on objective, score-based measurement and overlook learners' background and experience. A systematic literature review indicates that the majority of research on language-learning strategies employs quantitative experimental methods to evaluate effectiveness (Shurovi et al., 2025). In other words, these studies hypothesise potential factors that could affect language proficiency before the experiment and verify their effectiveness through objective English tests. Other research selects participants based on their English test scores and categorises students as more or less effective groups (Wong & Nunan, 2011; Zha & Liu, 2023). However, this numerical approach fails to account for individual differences, which are a key factor in learners' use of language-learning strategies (Kölemen, 2021; Zare, 2012). While learning strategies are developed from studies of "good language learners" (GLLs), the definition of a good learner encompasses multiple dimensions rather than relying solely on test scores (Zare, 2012). Given that IELTS scores are often used as an indicator of English proficiency, they may not fully reflect a learner's true English proficiency (Holmes, 2005; Shannaq, 2020). Therefore, relying solely on test results for evaluation may offer only a partial understanding of the effectiveness of language-learning strategies.

Quantitative approaches are also limited in short-term experimental studies, which often fail to fully capture learners' learning experience. Language development requires long-term effort, but many experiments are conducted over brief periods. Oxford (1990) highlight that communicative competence is the broad goal for learning strategies, which involves a dynamic process of meaning negotiation between two or more individuals (Oxford, 1990). This process is influenced by environmental change and ongoing interactions and cannot be fully understood in a short time. Research indicates that developing academic English skills generally takes 4 to

7 years, while oral proficiency typically takes 3 to 5 years. These time estimates are approximate, and the actual duration could be longer (Hakuta et al., 2000). Consequently, short-term experimental findings can only provide a partial view of the learning process, not a comprehensive reflection.

This limitation has also been acknowledged in previous literature. Although Woodrow (2005) recognises the SILL as an effective measurement tool in this field, she points out its limitations in addressing the influence of context or cultural background on learning strategy selection (Woodrow, 2005). She therefore advocates applying qualitative approaches alongside solely quantitative methods to gain a deep understanding of how and why learners choose particular strategies in a specific context. Therefore, using solely quantitative measures to evaluate learning strategies might miss inherent factors such as personal differences and cultural influences. To understand the deeper significance of the data, qualitative methods are better suited, as they enable researchers to interact directly with participants.

This interpretivist approach is well-suited for understanding the complex process of language learning. Interpretivism is a qualitative approach that emphasises that reality is subjective and varies from person to person (C. Davies & Fisher, 2018). This approach aims to collect rich, in-depth data from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon and, through interaction between the researcher and participants, to build understanding. Interpretivist methods are useful for understanding participants' social action and the processes behind their experiences (Bell et al., 2022). This approach entails a thorough exploration of the context and developing insights based on individuals' experiences (C. Davies & Fisher, 2018). Through detailed data collection, this approach enables a deeper understanding of Chinese students' experience and responses to language challenges in an intercultural setting.

A social constructivist worldview is adopted to examine language-learning strategies in intercultural settings. Social constructivism is an epistemological framework that understands the world through the social context in which people live and work (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Burr (2015), the world has no objective facts because knowledge emerges from a dynamic, sustained process of social interaction rather than from fixed, objectivist observation. The way we understand knowledge is developing alongside historical and cultural influences. Burr also recognised the subjectivity of the researcher and regarded it as part of the research process. Thus, this approach develops subjective meaning from people's experiences and perspectives, focusing not only on their verbal expressions, but also on their actions in

relation to other, historical, and cultural norms (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This perspective highlights the need to explore language learning strategies from multiple perspectives, including participants' experiences and researchers' interpretations.

Social constructivist can be further divided into constructionism and constructivism. Constructionism focuses on society, especially social context, culture, and social interaction, highlighting how meanings are constructed through social processes. On the other hand, constructivism focuses on the individual, emphasising that people do not merely receive knowledge, but actively interpret it based on their understanding and experiences (Burr, 2015).

This study applies constructionism to explore how Chinese students experience language challenges in an intercultural setting and how they adapt to improve their English proficiency. Language learning takes place in a setting that involves the learner, the target-language speaker, and the social environment (Fillmore, 1985; Lier, 2010). When Chinese students study in New Zealand, they communicate in English not only with local people but also with individuals from other countries. In such a dynamic and complex intercultural environment, meaning-making becomes more intricate than in a homogeneous setting because it is constructed and continuously shaped through interaction. Although the existing literature highlights individual differences in language learning strategies (Kölemen, 2021; Lee, 2010; Zare, 2012), this study focuses on the target group in an intercultural setting, an aspect often overlooked. Consequently, it uses qualitative interviews to gain a better understanding of Chinese students' experiences with language challenges in New Zealand's intercultural environment. This approach also explores how they construct their understanding of improving English proficiency (learning strategies) through their social interactions with the environment and the people in it. Ultimately, this study can construct the meaning of language learning strategies as perceived by the participants.

Methodological integrity is utilised to enhance the credibility of this study. According to Levitt et al. (2017), methodological integrity is the foundation of research trustworthiness, meaning the research findings are thoughtfully considered and convincing. It is based on two fundamental principles: fidelity and utility. Fidelity refers to the researcher's close connection to the study phenomenon and an in-depth understanding of its meaning. This is achieved through openness to participants' responses, rich data collection, and consideration of multiple perspectives. This also includes reflexivity about how the researcher's own experiences may influence the analysis. Utility refers to the research design and methods that are appropriately

tailored to answer the research question effectively. It involves generating contextual, insightful data and meaningful findings that contribute to achieving the study goals. To achieve fidelity and utility, this study adopts an interpretivist constructionist approach and uses semi-structured interviews to explore students' and teachers' experiences with language learning strategies. Thematic analysis is employed to generate practical insights from participants' experiences, providing a transparent and systemic account of the research process.

3.2 Participations

The study employs purposive sampling to effectively achieve its research objective. It is a nonprobability sampling technique in which participants are selected based on the relevance to the research objective and feasibility rather than statistical representativeness (Etikan, 2016). This deliberate selection helps identify the most suitable participants with relevant experience, providing rich, valuable insights into the research topic.

Reflecting social constructivist views of multiple realities, this study examines various viewpoints on the phenomenon, including those of learners and teachers, to ensure data richness and completeness. This approach also supports data source triangulation, which helps to reduce subjective bias in qualitative studies and enhances data validity (Heale & Forbes, 2013). It involves collecting data from different individuals and comparing them to find consistency within the same method (Carter et al., 2014). By collecting adequate data from various sources and analysing potential differences, deep insight can emerge from comparing the inconsistencies between teachers' and students' perspectives (Nowell et al., 2017). This diversity becomes a strength, leading to richer, more comprehensive results (Levitt et al., 2017).

3.2.1 Recruitment

Snowball sampling was the primary approach for recruiting target participants and building relationships effectively. The process begins with purposive sampling to identify initially suitable participants, then effectively extends the sample to other relevant participants through snowball sampling (Bell et al., 2022). This social network-based approach facilitates quick relationship-building between participants and the researcher, and encourages participants to share more genuine opinions (Woodley & Lockard, 2016). This method was used to identify and recruit the appropriate participants for this study.

The researcher started by inviting the researcher's Chinese classmates as initial participants. Subsequently, snowball sampling was used to ask these participants to introduce other Chinese students they know who might be interested in participating in this study. To ensure that

students at various levels were included, the researchers posted recruitment messages on “red notes” (a Chinese social media platform) to meet the sample size requirements. Chinese students currently studying in New Zealand were recruited. They are selected based on the following criteria:

1. They are students enrolled at a university in New Zealand (at least 16 years of age).
2. They have completed 9 years of compulsory education in China, meaning they have graduated from primary school, and have at least 5 years of full-time English education in China.

Teacher participants were recruited initially through the researcher’s personal contacts. Additional participants were recruited through snowball sampling, whereby existing participants referred other teachers they knew. Experienced ESL teachers were recruited and chosen according to the following criteria:

1. They are experienced ESL language teachers who have at least 5 years of teaching experience. According to Berliner (2004), experienced language teachers are more sensitive to social situations when addressing teaching challenges. They can also recognise problems in their experience more quickly and accurately than novice teachers (Berliner, 2004). In general, a newly qualified teacher with 3 years of English teaching experience is considered a novice teacher (Farrell, 2012), while a teacher with a high level of skill might need 5 to 7 years (Berliner, 2004).
2. They have experience in teaching Chinese adult students. Although the length of teaching experience is not the only criterion for assessing a teacher’s experience (Berliner, 2004), other criteria will include related experiences with this research’s target group. Adult learners differ significantly from child learners in behaviour and learning outcomes, as adults tend to be more self-directed than children (Cozma, 2015; Suryantari, 2018). Therefore, teaching adults requires different learning approaches and strategies compared to teaching children.

3.2.2 Sample size

The research objectives of gaining insight from participants’ experience determine the sample size. While data saturation is primarily linked to purposive sampling (Etikan, 2016), it refers to continuing to collect data until no new information emerges, ensuring the depth of inquiry. Saunders et al. (2018) highlight that there is no fixed rule about saturation in practice. The different forms of saturations are often flexibly combined in practice, depending on the research

purpose and the level of analysis (Saunders et al., 2018). To develop a comprehensive, substantial, and in-depth understanding of language learning strategies, this study focuses on the influence of intercultural competence while remaining open to new themes that may emerge. Thus, data collection focuses on capturing sufficient themes, each supported by rich, detailed data, enabling the researcher to gain meaningful insights into the group experience. Studies examining thematic saturation in interview data suggest that overarching themes often appeared within the first 6 interviews, with the thematic pattern becoming relatively stable after 12 interviews (Guest et al., 2006; Hagaman & Wutich, 2017). For participants with a high level of knowledge about the inquiry question, such as experienced teachers, 4 individuals might suffice to complete the study (Guest et al., 2006; Romney et al., 1986). Although these numbers should not be applied mechanically to each study, they are typically sufficient for understanding group experiences. Therefore, to facilitate comparison and capture sufficient variation for developing themes, the study recruited 18 Chinese students. This number is considered close to data saturation (Guest et al., 2006), to ensure broader representation across various study levels, such as undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. In addition, four ESL teachers with different teaching focuses were recruited, including those specialising in academic English and daily communication, for a total of 22 participants. Detailed participant demographics are shown in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1. *Chinese student participants*

Identifier	**Gender**	**Generation**	**Length of stay in New Zealand**	**Study experience in New Zealand**	**Major**
MZ1	Female	1990s	More than 3 years	Bachelor and Master	Art, Construction
MZ2	Female	2000s	More than 1 year	Bachelor and Master	Communication
MZ3	Female	Mid-to-late 1990s	More than 3 years	Bachelor, Master and PhD	Communication
BA1	Female	2000s	More than 1 year	Bachelor	Accounting
BA2	Male	Mid-to-late 1990s	More than 3 years	Bachelor	Accounting

BA3	Female	2000s	More than 1 year	Bachelor	Anthropology
MA1	Female	2000s	More than 1 year	Master	Communication
MA2	Female	1980s	6-12 months	Master	Communication
MA3	Female	Mid-to-late 1990s	More than 1 year	Master	Communication
MA4	Male	Mid-to-late 1990s	More than 1 year	Master	Communication
MA5	Female	Mid-to-late 1990s	0-6 months	Master	Design
MA6	Male	2000s	More than 1 year	Master	Aviation
MA7	Female	2000s	More than 1 year	Master	Communication
PHD1	Female	1990s	More than 1 year	PhD	Communication
PHD2	Male	Mid-to-late 1990s	0-6 months	PhD	Construction
PHD3	Female	2000s	0-6 months	PhD	Anthropology
PHD4	Male	Mid-to-late 1990s	More than 1 year	PhD	Oceanography
PHD5	Female	1990s	More than 1 year	PhD	Music

Table 2. ESL *teacher participants*

Identifier	**Gender**	**Focus**	**Nationality**
T1	Male	Academic English & Everyday English	New Zealander
T2	Female	Academic English	Australian
T3	Female	Everyday English	New Zealander
T4	Male	Academic English	Irish

3.3 Ethical considerations

This research does not use Mātauranga Māori, te reo Māori, or tikanga Māori methods, as the focus is on Chinese students studying in New Zealand and ESL teachers in New Zealand. However, the research will remain mindful of cross-cultural sensitivities and uphold Massey University's expectations for respectful, inclusive, and ethical research practice, including its commitment to the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Massey University, 2017).

All participants received comprehensive written material about the research 1 to 3 days before their interview. This included a brief introduction to the research and the interview guide. Although sharing the interview guide with participants may pose a potential risk of predetermined answers. Haukås & Tishakov's (2024) study reveals that sharing questions in advance brings more benefits than drawbacks. It promotes ethical transparency, empowering participants to make truly informed decisions about participating in the study. Additionally, it gives them time to reflect on their experience and formulate deeper responses. Consequently, participants were able to provide more comprehensive and substantial insights during the interview (Haukås & Tishakov, 2024).

Before participating, all participants signed the informed consent form. The form also specified the researcher's intended use of AI tools (such as Zoom for recording and Otter.ai or Tingwu for transcription) and sought participants' agreement. This document helped participants understand the research and make informed decisions about their involvement (Bell et al., 2022). Participants were also free to leave the interview at any time if they had any concerns, without any negative consequences.

Personal information was collected before recording to minimise privacy risks related to third-party transcription tools (Rosenberg, 2024). Although AI tools such as Otter.ai comply with data security and privacy regulations (Herdiyanti, 2024), privacy concerns remain. To address this, the researcher informed participants and requested personal information before recording to avoid collecting or editing it, and to upload recordings for transcription and translation without any personal information (Rosenberg, 2024).

All participants are identified by code pseudonyms in the research report to ensure their anonymity. The data is used only for this master's study for the research report. After the research is complete, all digital interview data will be permanently deleted.

The research involves only adult participants, such as university students or ESL teachers, with no children included. Participants' internal diversity of values is respected, and they were encouraged to freely share experiences without fear of judgment. Chinese students were interviewed in Mandarin, allowing them to freely share their experiences in their first language without pressure. There was no monetary or gift compensation in the research, as all participants participated voluntarily.

3.4 Data collection methods

Data collection was carried out through individual interviews to gather detailed, interpretive insights into the experience. Individual interviews allow for a deep exploration of rich, detailed personal experiences (O'Leary & Tennent, 2025). They also offer researchers opportunities to explore tangential topics through direct inquiry (O'Leary & Tennent, 2025). The semi-structured interview involves three main questions to be discussed, with flexibility for follow-up with detailed inquiries, allowing participants to respond freely without following a rigid sequence (Bell et al., 2022).

Focus group methods were replaced by interviews after careful consideration. Focus groups, a method that emphasises a more contextualised understanding of behaviour through social context (O'Leary & Tennent, 2025), are regarded as a closer approach to show the actual construction process during real social interaction, because behaviour can be observed in how it is discussed, challenged, and revised (Bell et al., 2022). However, it may also limit participants' behaviour, making them hesitant to discuss freely, especially in unnatural settings (O.Nyumba et al., 2018). This was confirmed in a pilot test where only three out of five Chinese students were willing to share ideas. Consequently, this study uses individual interviews, a manageable approach for the researcher, to enable participants to respond naturally without being influenced by group biases or conformity in group discussion.

3.4.1 Pilot study

Two pilot tests were conducted during the research proposal period to guide the refinement of research proposals. The first pilot was conducted in a classroom at Massey University using a focus group format. The group comprised five Chinese postgraduate students, who are the researcher's classmates, with the aim of collecting diverse opinions within a limited timeframe (30 minutes). The second pilot test was carried out with an ESL teacher at her home, confirming that the questions were clear and understandable. This approach also helps to estimate the time

required for an in-depth discussion of each question. After these two pilot tests, reinforcements for the interview guide are as follows:

1. A vignette was added as the first question to prompt their perception of English proficiency. At the beginning, participants felt unconfident about their English skills, which made them hesitant to share their language-learning strategies. However, after being shown the EF language proficiency ranking, they began to compare themselves with people from other countries they had met in New Zealand. This process fostered deeper reflection on their own learning strategies.
2. Questions were revised to focus on providing detailed accounts of language challenges encountered in academic learning. Participants found it difficult to recall and discuss their English-learning experiences in China in detail. However, they were more willing to share the language challenges they faced after arriving in New Zealand. This shift in focus helped them reflect on and compare the educational and cultural differences between the two countries.
3. Removed some duplicate questions to make the interview guide more concise.

3.4.2 Interview guide

The interview guide includes a vignette and three open-ended questions (see Appendices 1 and 2). It has been refined and validated through two pilot tests with targeted participants. When asked about negative assessments, participants may give a socially desirable response (Andersen & Mayerl, 2019; Furnham, 1986). Due to Chinese cultural values of modesty (Pae, 2020), it is considered impolite to boast excessively about one's own language competencies or to criticise others openly. In this study, the EF English Proficiency Index, a third-party report, served as a vignette to gauge participants' agreement with its ranking and encourage them to explain their reasons. This provides a neutral topic that enables all participants to share their views within the same context, rather than relying solely on their personal views, thereby minimising socially desirable responses (Andersen & Mayerl, 2019; Spalding & Phillips, 2007).

The individual interview was primarily conducted in person, unless the participant was unable to meet in Wellington. The interviews took place in quiet, private spaces to prevent participants from worrying about being overheard (Bell et al., 2022), including a school library, a quiet café, or participants' homes. During the in-person interview, a cell phone was used to record the conversation, while written notes were taken to capture key ideas throughout the process. If an in-person interview was not possible, a Zoom meeting was used for both the interview and

recording. The semi-structured interview lasted approximately 35-60 minutes and included one vignette and three open-ended questions. Follow-up questions like 'why' or 'how' were used flexibly to explore participants' responses more deeply, while allowing them to express their experiences in their own way (Adams, 2015).

3.4.3 AI transcription

AI-based transcription tools were used to transcribe the meeting effectively. Tingwu was used to transcribe Chinese interviews with students, whereas Otter.ai was used to transcribe English interviews with teachers, as these two tools have different strengths in processing Mandarin and English. These tools reduce time spent on manual transcription, allowing the researcher to concentrate more on data analysis, while also serving as a means to double-check the accuracy of notes taken during meetings.

The researcher double-checked all transcriptions against the record again to correct errors, remove unnecessary model particles, and add supplementary remarks based on context for further coding. This practice helps maintain accuracy, allows researchers to become familiar with the data, benefits future data analysis, and ensures rigour (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.4.4 AI translation

AI translation, combined with manual double checks, was used to reduce the risk of losing meaning. In qualitative research, translation is also a key component of the interpretive act (Van Nes et al., 2010), since exact word meanings may not be able to be found due to language differences, especially for culturally specific terms. This loss in meaning can further undermine the validity of the qualitative study (Van Nes et al., 2010). However, with the development of AI translation, the accuracy and effectiveness in translation have increased significantly. The challenges in cultural relevance and emotional accuracy of translations remain (Ssemugabi, 2025). Therefore, to address these challenges, the researcher employed the following approaches: first, using ChatGPT to translate the selected quote for the findings section, second, utilising back-translation to ensure the chosen word in English equivalent aligns closely with the Chinese original; thirdly, if the words is specific in Chinese language, the researcher re-considering word choice to minimise potential misunderstanding (Ozolins et al., 2020), or using descriptions in remark of meaning with various English words, instead of a single fixed translation (Van Nes et al., 2010). By repeatedly checking and adjusting, the researcher aims to minimise implicit speech bias and potential transcription errors (Herdiyanti, 2024).

3.5 Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using a combination of NVivo 15 and Excel, allowing the strengths of both tools to be utilised throughout the analysis process. NVivo 15 is a digital tool that simplifies the time-consuming task of manual coding and data retrieval, making it faster and more efficient (Bell et al., 2022). In this study, NVivo was primarily used for data management, initial coding and effective research interview data, while Excel was used to support the manual refinement and reorganisation of code. This combination of different tools enables a balance between effective data organisation and flexible analysis.

Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyse, and report on Chinese students' language-learning strategies using rich data. It is a method used to organise and describe complex data in detail, and to go further and interpret the relative aspects of the research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). This approach helps generate large amounts of textual data that are challenging to analyse systematically. It does this by breaking the data into different themes and using them as evidence to support the analysis (Bell et al., 2022). According to Braun & Clarke (2006, 2019, 2022), a theme refers to a meaningful explanation of important data related to the research question, reflecting shared experiences or meanings among participants. These themes are identified and defined by the researcher. This method is flexible and independent of any theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022; Wolgemuth et al., 2024). It allows for an analysis that combines both the description of experience and the interpretation of the social construction process.

This high flexibility of thematic analysis raises concerns about inconsistency and a lack of coherence in analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that the lack of clear boundaries of demarcation among thematic analysis can lead to "anything goes", reducing the methodology's precision. This lack of boundaries reflects the absence of a universal standard for defining and conducting the analysis. Similarly, Vaismoradi et al. (2013) highlight that these blurred boundaries are often described as "poorly branded". Differing from grounded theory, which has a clear goal to generate theory through a structured analysis process, thematic analysis's blurred boundaries can lead to confusion with content analysis, which primarily focuses on describing the characteristics and relationships of textual data (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Therefore, Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019, 2022) emphasise that, to apply thematic analysis effectively, researchers need to clearly state their analytical approach and provide a transparent account of their decision-making process. This is particularly crucial, as themes are actively chosen and interpreted by the researcher based on their understanding of the data, rather than

simply “emerging” from the data without any interpretation. Researchers need to clarify their intentions and make thoughtful choices rather than just simply following a set of procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2022).

This study employs Braun & Clarke’s (2022) reflexive thematic analysis process, with the lens of Oxford’s (2011) self-regulation framework. The interviews were transcribed, and the transcripts and translation from AI-assisted were repeatedly reviewed to become familiar with the data. Initial coding was guided by the three main questions of the study while remaining open to unexpected patterns emerging from the participants’ experiences. After initial coding, language learning strategies were categorised according to Oxford's (2011) self-regulation framework into cognitive, affective, and social-interaction strategies. Themes were developed through a back-and-forth movement between data, codes, and the theoretical framework. Both the semantic and latent meanings underlying participants’ experiences were repeatedly considered and compared with the theory during the refining themes process to avoid information being overlooked. Before documenting the findings, the coding was examined and discussed with the researcher’s supervisor to ensure consistency. For an example of the coding process, including initial code, categories, and themes, refer to Appendix 3. As Braun and Clark (2022) noted, interpretation in reflexive thematic analysis may be shaped by the researcher’s assumptions and positionality. As an international student, the researcher brought personal experiences and an understanding of cultural influences to the analysis. This perspective informed particular attention to how cultural factors may influence learning behaviour and strategy selection, and participants’ interpretation of their language-learning.

4. Findings

This chapter outlines the findings from the student and teacher participants' responses to address the three research questions. It begins with their views on good English proficiency, then details the challenges they face, such as language barriers, academic struggles, social integration, and emotional issues, and concludes with their strategies for addressing these challenges.

4.1 Perceptions of good English proficiency

Students provided detailed insights into their perceptions of language proficiency, covering the four main English skills of listening, reading, writing and speaking, as well as cultural competence. Some students also highlighted the importance of overall English proficiency. On the contrary, teachers view communication skills as an integrated ability rather than separate individual skills.

4.1.1 Language skills

a) Listening: Almost all Chinese students regard listening comprehension ability as listening proficiency. Comprehension refers to successfully receiving a message. It does not mean understanding every single word, but it could grasp the overall by catching key words and related context, without relying heavily on guessing.

> *Teachers do not know which words are unfamiliar to us, and they may suddenly use difficult words. So the only realistic approach is to capture what you can understand and focus on the main message. (PHD5)*

b) Reading: For Chinese university students, reading comprehension involves understanding academic literature to complete a study task, ideally "*reading various materials, including journal articles, without translation software*" (MA1).

c) Writing: Writing proficiency is divided into academic and daily writing contexts. In academic writing, students believe proficiency means being accurate and fluent. For example, being able to take notes in English rather than using Chinese and translating afterwards (MA5). Students further noted that while writing, they can be aware of grammar mistakes and know how to correct them. Additionally, they can use academic vocabulary naturally and accurately in writing, demonstrating both the ability to manage its size and proficiency in its application.

> *For me, strong academic English means being able to master academic vocabulary and use it naturally in writing, without it feeling forced. The most direct indicator of good academic English is the ability to write well—you need to first acquire a large amount of academic vocabulary and then use it fluently and appropriately in your writing. (MA4)*

In everyday writing, proficiency refers to the ability to write formal messages "*without major grammatical mistakes*" (MZ3). Students also suggested that using casual language effectively on social media reflects both language knowledge and "*how familiar and comfortable you are with the language*". (PHD3)

d) Speaking: Students demonstrated a significant understanding of proficiency in speaking, indicating their strong value for speaking ability. Fluency is the most mentioned feature in the interview (11 times), followed by effectiveness (eight times) and description (seven times). Students explained fluency as the ability to communicate without "*translating everything from Chinese into English in your head before speaking*" (PHD4), or "*communicating smoothly without constantly getting stuck or pausing with lots of 'um' and 'ah'*" (PHD1).

In terms of speaking style, proficiency includes speaking in full sentences rather than "*one word at a time with pauses in between*" (PDH4). It also includes "*use certain words and expressions to enrich the overall flow of the conversation*", such as "*basically*" or "*somehow*" (PHD6), which shows both completeness and smoothness.

> *He often uses the word "somehow". Whenever he is thinking or trying to describe something in a general way, he tends to say somehow. For example, if I lost something and then unexpectedly found it one day, I could say, "Somehow, I found my rings." (PHD6)*

From a broad perspective, some students regard fluency as applicable in any context and group, because other English speakers might use simple language while native speakers might use complex and varied language. This indicates that language proficiency is required across various contexts, not just in academic or daily ones.

> *If you can only speak fluently with other international students, it may be good, but not the best. I think local English can be slightly more difficult to understand. (BA1)*

Students considered effective in speaking are able to respond quickly with well-organised sentences. They are also being adaptable without struggling to find the right vocabulary or to follow grammar rules strictly.

> *Being able to convey what I need quickly is key. I can't say, "I don't know this word, wait a moment while I Google it." in face-to-face communication, I value efficiency more. (MA7)*

Description is mentioned by students, which refers to the ability to use one's vocabulary to describe an uncertain issue with a logical, organised sentence. It involves explaining even complex issues clearly and ensuring the listener's understanding, whether through short or complex sentences.

> *For example, an object (a small ceramic tray) might not be an ashtray, and it might not be a container—it might not clearly fit into any category. But you can still describe what it is like using language. For instance, if someone is looking for something, you can explain what it looks like or how it is used. So this involves descriptive language. At the same time, it is also related to how you use the language and your vocabulary size. (BA3)*

This view from students' perspectives shows that vocabulary size is not equally related to speaking ability.

One student also highlighted the limitation of judging proficiency solely by exam scores. From BA2's viewpoint, native speakers can not necessarily achieve a perfect score on an English test, but they can still communicate effectively in everyday situations.

> *Many of my friends grew up here speaking English as their first language, even though they are ethnically Chinese. If you ask them to take exam-style tests, they may not perform well. If you gave them a Gaokao paper, they probably would not get full marks. But you would never think there is anything wrong with their English. It's similar to us taking a Chinese exam—we wouldn't necessarily get full marks either. (BA2)*

The finding indicates that the objective exam approach to assessing language proficiency has its limitations and may not fully reflect an individual's practical language proficiency for communication in social contexts (see more on exam-oriented culture in 4.2.4).

Confidence is considered a hidden ability in speaking by students. It refers to English speakers who speak naturally and calmly, without concern for their accent or pronunciation. As MA7 mentioned, "*even when they make mistakes, they don't seem to feel that they have made a mistake*" (MA7).

Although most students believe that accent does not influence language proficiency, they view confident speaking, even with an accent, as indicative of high proficiency. One student mentioned that accents could be a factor in proficiency, as he saw them as a signal of long-term residence in New Zealand.

> *I remember once going to an outdoor equipment shop with a friend. His English seemed very good to me. First, he was confident enough to speak. Second, his accent sounded more like a British, Australian, or even New Zealand accent. That combination of accent and fluency made me feel that his English was very strong … Yes, accent does matter. Chinese speakers often have a noticeable accent influenced by Chinese. But when someone has a more Western-sounding accent, it gives the impression that they have lived in an English-speaking environment for a long time. (PHD4)*

This finding suggests that language proficiency may be linked to the duration of living in an English-speaking environment.

While not addressing the different aspects of proficiency, teachers emphasised communication skills as a crucial competence. Instead of focusing on vocabulary size or grammar, teachers tend to value effectively meeting communication goals with appropriate word choice and confidence. One teacher described communication competencies as the ability to "*communicate the intent of your utterance so that the listener understands it.*" (T2). Another highlighted confidence as essential to "*have a really good conversation*", even when "*it's not perfect English*" (T3).

Comparing with students, teachers generally perceive English proficiency more holistically, focusing on overall skill rather than specific skills. Teachers also regard this question as difficult, since all competencies are important, but they indicated that the main standards vary depending on the student's purpose in using the language.

> *It depends on the students' needs … all are important. If they're retired, it might not be as important to be writing emails… if they're looking for work, then reading and writing is important, but equally, communicating with your colleagues. (T3)*

Although ESL teachers generally remain objective and do not judge students' proficiency, two teachers observed that Chinese students tend to have strong skills in reading, writing, and listening, but are weak in speaking. T1 further support this point by sharing his experience of meeting a professional English teacher in China who was unable to speak English fluently.

> *We all went to the restaurant, and I thought, that's good. I'll meet him. And he couldn't hardly speak in English, but he was the English teacher at school. (T1)*

4.1.2 Cultural knowledge

Cultural knowledge is a key component of English proficiency. It includes both understanding the cultural knowledge and quick adaptation to cultural behaviour. One student described cultural knowledge as "*slang*" and "*culturally based jokes or humour*" (PHD2). While some students regard adaptation as using the local language naturally, such as "*sweet as*" and "*I reckon*" (BA2). MA4 further noted that adoption behaviour, such as accepting praise rather than remaining modest, demonstrates strong observational and acculturation abilities.

> *When someone says, "You look beautiful", in Chinese culture, we might respond modestly, saying, "Not at all, you look beautiful too". But foreigners may simply say "thank you". I think this reflects a difference in mindset. If you can adapt your thinking, then your practical English ability in daily life is already quite high. (MA4)*

This reflects the view that language proficiency includes cultural awareness and understanding as well as linguistic knowledge.

Similarly, from an academic English teacher's perspective, T4 emphasised the importance of cultural knowledge. Although he observed that some "*Asian students are a bit more reluctant*" to engage with cultural content, T4 highlighted the importance of learning cultural knowledge. He suggested that it is related to students' future major studies in the New Zealand context, as it provides a foundation for understanding "*how it affects policymaking at the government level and council level*" (T4). Thus, in turn, this could benefit their future academic studies through assessments or group discussions.

> *Certainly, in a New Zealand context, there's the whole issue around topics of the Treaty of Waitangi, even something like nursing, like Māori health models, that is a big part of what I do in my class. (T4)*

Overall, students offer diverse perceptions of English proficiency across the four skills. Although most students see English proficiency mainly as a measure of communication ability,

some students regard good English proficiency as meaning overall competence rather than focusing on a single aspect. MZ3 defined good proficiency as "*being balanced across all levels*". This finding indicates that students perceive language proficiency through various dimensions and set priorities based on personal needs. On the other hand, teachers view proficiency as a whole ability, focusing on language use in context rather than performance in a single dimension. Language proficiency involves not only linguistic knowledge but also the ability to apply it to meet communication needs across different situations. In the real world, language ability is also closely linked to cultural adoption, which supports effective communication. Therefore, language proficiency is better understood as a context-dependent ability to meet practical communication needs rather than a fixed static measurement.

4.2 English learning in China

Students expressed their perceptions of the limited language proficiency in contextual reasoning from both educational and social-attitude perspectives. Although there are still challenges in China due to limitations in teaching approaches, course materials, learning resources, and an exam-oriented culture, positive trends and improvements in English learning focus are emerging.

4.2.1 English teaching approach

English classes in China are primarily conducted in Chinese. Only three students reported having experience learning English in school from foreign teachers. However, students felt that the limited classroom practice with individual teachers (and their accent) was not enough to prepare them for real communication in an English-speaking environment.

> *And once you get used to one person's accent over three years, it actually becomes quite easy to follow. They would only have fairly simple conversations, and it didn't go much beyond that. (MA5)*

Teachers' perspective also supports the limitations of the English class teaching approach. According to teachers' experience, the English teaching approach in China mainly focuses on "*speak Chinese to teach English*" (T1), "*rote learning*" (T4), and "*grappling with grammar*" (T1). T1 also highlighted the "*opposite*" teaching approach he observed across contexts. In the Chinese context, English teaching tends to segment skills such as speaking, reading, writing, listening and grammar into more separate skills. In contrast, in the New Zealand context, language skills are more integrated into classroom practice, as English is developed evenly throughout learning activities.

> *The focus for me as an ESL teacher here was teaching reading, grammar, writing and just hoping that speaking and listening would come along at the same time. We also did practice … grammar … writing and reading, and the speaking and listening were more or less. It was a component of that because we were speaking in English. (T1)*

4.2.2 English course materials

Students mentioned that Chinese course materials were not overly useful for preparing them to communicate and study abroad. According to students' recall, the reading material focused on popularising science or global topics, such as "*famous topics like the cloned sheep Dolly*" (MA7). These academic readings were not specific to living in an English-speaking country. Similarly, BA2, who learned English entirely in English from primary school to high school, noted that the English learned in class is not sufficient for real-life communication. Although the teacher "*only speaks English*" in class, if the learning content remains closely linked to academic focus, his English skills are still inadequate for social interactions in an English-speaking environment.

> *What is taught in those one or two hours of lectures is mostly academic content. In real life, am I going to use that kind of language in everyday conversations? Not really—they are completely different contexts… does that necessarily mean your English is truly strong? I don't think so. Your strength may only be in a specific area, but it doesn't mean you are genuinely fluent. (BA2)*

Students noted that some everyday language from a textbook sounds odd in real conversation and may not match how locals respond. It highlights the gap between language learned in class and real-life use.

> *Before I went abroad, I had no idea how to respond to "how are you … But I also felt that I couldn't just say "I am fine, thank you, and you" (standard answer from textbook)— it sounded a bit silly. I … observe how foreigners respond. They might just say "good" or "all good". And I realised these are things we never really learned in English studies. (MA4)*

Based on students' experiences, the English educational resource has practical limitations that influence students' uneven language proficiency. Although students typically perceived that Shanghai pays close attention to English education, because it "*starts at a very early age*" (MZZ1) or all the skills are "*taught in a balanced way*" (PHD2), differences in teaching quality and resources across various types of schools remain.

> *I went to an international school for primary school … subjects like Chinese and maths, was still some English input integrated into the classes. However, when I moved on to intermediate school and high school, I attended a normal private school and then a regular public school ... It was mostly traditional teaching focused on tests and written exercises, with almost no real speaking practice. There was some listening practice, but honestly … even the teachers themselves did not speak English very naturally or fluently. (MZ2)*

Unlike the formal content found in Chinese English textbooks, T3, which focuses on teaching daily English, emphasised the importance of teaching topics that students really need. As a result, she selects teaching materials based on students' everyday communication needs.

> *We have a needs analysis at the beginning … what do you want to learn? It could be banking, it could be health. It could be the New Zealand government. So, and then break it down into more specific, like, at the moment, we're doing health (T3).*

The differences in teaching materials suggest that material selection may be influenced by teaching goals, such as exam preparation or everyday communication.

4.2.3 Exam-oriented culture

Most students were in their twenties to forties and viewed the English-teaching method in China as exam-oriented, reflecting a deep-rooted traditional culture. In their memories, the English learning in class mainly emphasised "*how to complete cloze tests*," "*reading comprehension exercises*" (PHD4), and "*memorising vocabulary*" (MA7) to aid reading.

> *The Gaokao requires about 3,500 words, so our vocabulary is limited to that list. For CET-4 and CET-6, there are also specific vocabulary books. We don't really go beyond that—we just memorise the words in those books. (MA7)*

The long-term exam-oriented learning has a significant negative impact on students' ability to use English effectively in everyday situations. Students tend to "*forget very quickly*" (MA5) about knowledge after the exam and lack the ability to "*form sentences in real-life situations*" (PHD5).

> *We only knew what a word meant … Whether in study or daily life, we couldn't apply the language across different contexts. (PHD5)*

Under the exam-oriented culture, teachers tend to focus on content that is included in assessments. Consequently, students' skill development may be unbalanced, especially in some cities where listening and speaking are not included in the examination.

> *In Henan … we didn't practise listening and speaking at all—they weren't even tested, not even in the Gaokao … As a result, people from these regions naturally develop a very fragmented English ability. You can do exercises well and understand written texts, but you don't know how to understand spoken English, and your listening vocabulary doesn't match your reading vocabulary at all. (PHD2)*

Having been shaped by an exam-oriented culture for a long time, Chinese students are accustomed to fearing grammar mistakes, as mistakes can clearly affect test scores.

> *I'm afraid of making grammatical mistakes or spelling errors. This might also be because when we were learning, especially when writing essays, we were always worried about using the wrong grammar somewhere. (MA7）*

4.2.4 Attention to English learning in China

The dominance of Chinese in daily life in China means most people communicate primarily in Chinese. English is only necessary in limited contexts, such as "*working for an international company*" (MZ1) or collaborating with "*foreign students in research groups*" (PHD4). This situation has also fostered the perception that English is not particularly useful within China.

> *Deep down, whether it is from teachers, schools, the government, or individuals, we tend to feel that this (English) is not useful. (PHD5)*

The strong reliance on the Chinese language further reflects a high dependence on "*forcing a translation*" (BA3) in daily life. BA3 noted that the tendency is more apparent than in other countries.

> *In YouTube videos … when Filipinos cook, their subtitles often include many English words in one sentence. For things like spices or technical terms, they just directly use English. (BA3)*

Some participants noted a shift in parents' attitudes towards English learning, with more parents willing to invest time and money in providing an immersive English-learning environment to improve their children's English skills.

> *Nowadays, many parents bring their children to New Zealand for short-term study programmes, such as enrolling them for one or two terms or short study tours. A child might come for just a summer holiday or one or two months, and their spoken English can improve very quickly. (MA3)*

Additionally, MZ3 noted changes in teaching materials, as more "*in-depth*" cultural knowledge appears in "*new English textbooks in China*" (MZ3). It is reasonable to suggest that attention to English learning has increased at both the educational and the parental levels. As a result, the new generation is likely to benefit from advanced English-language learning resources and to have greater English proficiency.

To sum up, English learning in China was largely shaped by traditional teaching approaches until the 2000s. This approach contributes to uneven language skill development and creates additional challenges when students attempt to apply English knowledge in real-life communication contexts. It also increases emotional stress and shapes social attitudes towards language learning. However, educational reform and growing public awareness have gradually promoted more communicative approaches to English learning. Although changes take time, evidence indicates the young generation has more opportunities to access to diverse learning resources to develop practical English proficiency.

4.3 Challenges when studying and living in New Zealand

When students study in New Zealand, they face a range of challenges, including language barriers, academic difficulties, as well as social integration and emotional issues. In section 4.1, students indicated a range of skills that are considered aspects of English proficiency. In this section, specific challenges related to those skills are identified.

4.3.1 Language challenges

Students indicated that language barriers centre on limited English skills in listening, reading, writing, and speaking. Additionally, unfamiliar academic language, specialised vocabulary, and different learning styles can further impact language proficiency.

a) Listening: Listening-related challenges are the most commonly reported issues among participants, impacting both academic and daily life. Accent is the most frequently mentioned barrier (16 times), and it further affects understanding. As MA5 mentioned, the pronunciation they learned in class "*was usually either British or American accents*", but in real life, English speakers' accents are quite different from

"*the one I am used to*". That difference could lead to "*even if I have memorised those words before, I still cannot recognise them when I hear them*". (MA5)

When fast speech is paired with an unfamiliar accent, comprehension becomes even more challenging. The listening barrier becomes particularly noticeable when compared to New Zealanders and other English speakers.

> *From my past experience, when you are talking to people who are also non-native English speakers, their speech is usually slower than native speakers … because English is not their first language, they tend to emphasise key words and explain things more clearly instead of simplifying sentences too much. (MZ2)*

To identify keywords in speech, students usually need full concentration to understand the content. As MA2 noticed, "*I really need to pay attention, otherwise I might miss what they are saying*". These listening barriers further hinder students' capacity to think critically and participate actively in class.

> *I'm still figuring out what a particular word means and trying to infer meaning from context, while others are already analysing the topic more deeply or connecting it to other knowledge and ideas. My classroom experience is often limited to just understanding, rather than deeper thinking. (MA5)*

However, the listening barriers in the class could be reduced over time as students become familiar with the tutor. As MA2 noticed, "*after adapting to it, I feel it's not really a big issue*", suggesting that listening skills can be enhanced through extensive exposure.

When students may not fully grasp the vocabulary in speech, the knowledge gap can cause misunderstandings in daily life.

> *When I was checking out at the supermarket, I didn't understand what the cashier was saying … like New World, you need to register as a member to access discounted prices. When they mentioned it, I immediately associated it with the kind of membership card promotions in China, so I said "no" and left. Later, I realised I had missed all the discounts. (MA5)*

b) Reading: Students reported heavy reading load and low reading effectiveness present major challenges in academic study. University students often need to read

extensively in relevant academic journals. However, MA5 mentioned that she can only read slowly because she usually "*translate[s] it in my head*", which makes the process "*time-consuming*" (MA5). Similarly, PHD3 mentioned that reading English-language journal articles requires full concentration, which can be quite tiring for her, so she can only focus for a few hours.

> *When I read Chinese, I can scan it quickly and understand the meaning straight away, but when I read English, I have to go line by line. I have what I call a "golden hour" each day when my thinking is at its best. If I read during that time, I can read quite smoothly—although still slowly. I can get through it comfortably. But once my mind gets tired, I can no longer process it properly. (PHD3)*

However, some students regarded reading as "*relatively manageable*" (PHD1), as it can be improved once they "*have done a lot of reading*" (PHD1) or get assistance from "AI *tools*" (MA3).

Additionally, students often felt more frustrated when they realised that "*only a small portion is actually useful*" (MZ1) after extensive reading, or when their understanding differed significantly from the translated version (MA1).

c) Writing: Most of the students (11 students) acknowledged that they usually write essays in Chinese first and then translate them into English, even though they realise this approach may affect the accuracy of their language.

> *It does not fully convey my intended meaning. Sometimes this leads to misunderstandings, where the teacher may not fully understand what I mean. (MA4)*

Students also mentioned the difficulties in writing directly in English. The biggest challenge is switching languages, especially for someone who has been using Chinese for writing, studying, and working for a long time. Thinking in Chinese has become a "*habit that is deeply ingrained*" (MA4).

Additionally, even those who are trying to write in English still struggle with grammar, for example, "*unsure whether my grammar is correct*", "*whether my sentence structure is complete*", or "*whether I have expressed my meaning clearly*" (MA3). Even though

students can use tools like Grammarly to correct grammar while writing, they felt that when using this approach, "*writing speed probably drops by more than half*" (MA4).

Writing effectiveness could be worse when students lack vocabulary, as they might "*often need to look up words, then decide whether to use a complex or simple sentence, and think about how to express ideas properly*" (MA5). These challenges show that students need to manage multiple cognitive tasks simultaneously, and they often turn to writing in Chinese because it is familiar and more effective for them.

Students reported feeling confused about disciplinary expectations and writing style. PHD5 noted her uncertainty about the balance between depth of analysis and direct language.

> *If I write in a more "flowery" or elaborate way, they may think it is too vague or overly abstract. But if I write in a very simple, factual way, they then feel it lacks depth. (PHD5)*

These challenges suggest that students are unfamiliar with the expectations of the Western academic writing style.

d) Speaking: Being understood is the most frequently mentioned challenge in speaking (six times). It can occur in various contexts, such as presentations (MA7) or group discussions (MA2), especially when they are trying to express complex ideas. BA1 highlighted that her speaking ability is limited in a specific context and cannot be easily transferred to other situations.

> *Daily communication is fine, but when it comes to more specialised or academic topics, I cannot express myself fluently … If you ask me to explain or repeat something professional, I often cannot do it. (BA1)*

MA5 described the expression difficulties as "*almost like becoming a much younger child*", as the language abilities are limited in expressing "*very basic needs*" and "*difficult to communicate deeper feelings*" (MA5).

The limited speaking ability affects the listener's understanding, often leading the speaker and listener to discuss different topics, thereby reducing communication effectiveness.

> *In discussions or debates, sometimes you try to express your ideas …. but what you convey may not be entirely accurate. The other person then tries their best to understand, but they might misunderstand without realising it … Then when they respond, I end up thinking, "What are you talking about?" It's like we are on completely different tracks. (MA7)*

Lack of confidence in speaking further affects participants' engagement in class. MA7 shared her experience in presenting. Even though she "*had practised reading for an entire day at home*", she was "*still nervous when presenting*" and tended to "*stumble over words*" (MA7), which can make her presentation harder to understand and affect her assessment performance. Similarly, MA2 mentioned receiving comments about her lack of engagement. However, the low engagement is because she needed to take her time to organise the answers she felt confident about. This slow response caused her to miss opportunities and seemed less actively engaged in class.

> *When the teacher asks questions, I still find it difficult to respond immediately without thinking. I usually need to take a moment to think about how I should answer in my mind. But by the time I've thought it through, the moment has already passed. (MA2)*

This behaviour suggests that confidence could potentially influence how students behave in their speech.

e) Limited daily vocabulary: The knowledge gap in a specific context is the most frequently mentioned challenge during participants' daily life (17 times). It involves being unable to understand "*specific technical terms*" in the car maintenance context (MA6), difficulty translating a Chinese-specific term for "*spicy snacks*" in the immigration context (MA1), and difficulty clearly describing the issue of "*toilet was blocked*" to property management (MA1). Even "*really do not want to get sick*" as they struggle to know what to say when going to see a doctor (PHD5). Additionally, MZ2 noted that even if she performs well in a supermarket setting, she will still encounter challenges when transitioning to a pharmacy.

> *Medical and pharmaceutical vocabulary is very specialised, so when you switch environments, you simply do not know how to say those things. (MZ2)*

The vocabulary challenges highlighted that students' struggles were connected to a limited range of context-specific words.

Again, differing from students, teachers didn't focus on specific challenges in any single language skill of listening, speaking, reading, or writing. Instead, they view language challenges from a broad perspective of overall English proficiency and highlight the influence of unfamiliar academic language and learning styles.

Teachers highlighted challenges such as a lack of "*enough knowledge of English*" (T3) or insufficient exposure to English, which could slow learners' progress in improving their English.

> *And just speaking English in the class. It's not enough to help them. And they had the class only last like two or three months, and then it's finished this kind of thing. (T1)*

f) Language linguistics differences: Student participants thought the significant difference between English and Chinese makes learning English more difficult for Chinese people. This idea can be understood by comparing French, which "*shares a lot of similarities with English*" (MA7), with Chinese, which quite differs in its "*grammatical system*" (MA1).

The teacher's perspective further explains the inherent linguistic difficulties. From an education and pedagogy perspective, T2 pointed out that the challenges in English stem from its "*illogical language*" and having "*so many variations*". These difficulties may be even greater for Chinese students, as their first language differs significantly from English in its structural system.

> *Spanish, French and English, they're all kinds of romantic languages, that group of languages from Latin, so that the fundamentals of English are much more familiar to them in the way they pronounce words, where the fundamentals of Chinese are quite different in terms of the pronunciation. (T1)*

4.3.2 Academic study challenges

Students reported challenges in academic study, including difficulties with the inherently complex academic vocabulary and with learning approaches that differed significantly from those used in China.

a) Academic vocabulary: is the most frequently mentioned issue for Chinese students (13 times). It includes the difficulty in understanding the less relevant concept, as they are "*highly theoretical*" and "*disconnected from work and study*" (MA2). It could become more difficult with unfamiliar concepts in certain subjects, as students might try to understand them in two different languages and decide which version makes more sense.

> *When studying subjects like anthropology or film studies, sometimes these concepts don't exist in either Chinese or English in your prior knowledge. In that case, you have to learn them twice. First, you need to understand the concept in your native language, and then map it into English and learn it again. (BA3)*

However, students who study science subjects or have previous experience in the subject regard it as a manageable challenge. BA1, who is a student from the 2+2 programme (two years Bachelor's study in China and another two years overseas), had studied 100-level courses in accounting-related courses in China, felt that "*the actual course content is not necessarily very difficult, especially if translated into Chinese*." Similarly, another PhD participant, PHD2, who has experience in reading and writing English journal articles during his previous master's and Bachelor's studies in construction subjects, felt the difficulties are manageable. Because he is already familiar with the academic vocabulary in these areas.

> *If someone is talking about academic content, and you have previously done some in-depth research in that field, you will often find that you can actually understand many of the terms being used. (PHD2)*

It reveals that academic difficulties can be remedied by accumulating knowledge in study-related subjects.

However, teachers highlighted that students often overlook the fact that academic English is inherently challenging, especially compared to general English.

> *Academic English, which … is very different from general English, so it takes them (students) about two months to get their head around that kind of. In the first week, they probably think about quitting the course. So that's a big challenge for my students. (T4)*

b) Unfamiliar learning styles: Group discussions and exploratory learning approaches left students feeling lost in the class. MZ1 mentioned her observations on brainstorming, the environment is filled with "*small talk, casually sharing ideas*", and teachers tend to guide students through "*conversation rather than giving direct instructions*". This approach is quite different from the Chinese "*task-oriented approach*", in which students usually complete assignments directly. This difference made her "*feel quite uncomfortable*" and made it hard for her to participate.

Additionally, the responsibilities of a teacher are different in China. Teachers in China are usually responsible for managing students, while in New Zealand, the relationship between teachers and students is more open and relies more on students' initiative.

> *Some of these lecturers, especially in creative fields, can also be quite individualistic in their personalities. If they feel that communication with a student is not working, and the student does not actively seek help, they may more or less give up on that student. As a result, that part of the assessment can end up with very poor marks. (MZ1)*

Similarly, another teacher observed that cultural differences might influence Chinese students' classroom behaviour, as they often tend to be serious and prefer an authoritative teacher over a highly interactive one.

> *I go around the class and say, "I come from … I like coffee". Those kinds of very simple things can actually work with more sophisticated language learners by just going back … some of my learners think that I'm funny, and this can be a problem with very serious Chinese students, because they want a correction. They wanted a teacher who is an authority, not a teacher who says, you have to do the work yourself. (T2)*

Additionally, the teacher's observation highlighted a common challenge in critical thinking that students often overlook. Teachers noticed differences in the learning habits of Chinese students, who tend to "*know better the correct answer*" rather than "*how you get to that correct answer*" (T4). This difference could be influenced by a Chinese exam-oriented culture and might further affect students' ability to adapt and develop critical thinking, which is "*a difficult skill, even for native speakers*" (T4).

4.3.3 Social integration challenges

Living in a country that is significantly different from students' home countries presents challenges in social integration, particularly in adapting to a new culture. Additionally, cultural differences can result in limited interaction with other cultural groups or feelings of discrimination.

a) Cultural differences: The different cultural norms made students feel confused and led them to remain silent to avoid mistakes. Some students reported feeling nervous and awkward when engaging in small talk in social settings. PHD1 explained that the reason behind this could be a combination of worry about "*English is not fluent enough*", "*don't know what topics to talk about*", and an uncertain "*background*" of the present person.

Even if the student does not face a language barrier and knows the speaker well, a lack of shared cultural context also impacts her engagement.

> *Once, during a group discussion, a student talked about financial matters … She mentioned something like an "invisible hand". I recognised the term—I knew it referred to economic theory—but I didn't know what it meant in this specific context. I understood the words, but not the deeper meaning, so I couldn't really engage beyond that point. (MA7)*

This suggests that language proficiency is not the only factor affecting social integration, and a lack of shared cultural knowledge may create intercultural communication barriers.

Students found it difficult to build deep connections with others. MZ1 described it as hard to have "*more meaningful, more emotionally expressive conversations*" with local people. She further expressed her understanding of the difficulty of finding people. If friendship is based primarily on language practices, people may feel uncomfortable and less sincere, which may make relationship-building more difficult.

> *If someone in China only wanted to be your friend to practise English, would you be happy about that? (MZ1)*

Although there is a stereotype that most Chinese tend to stay within their own circles, PH2 noticed that this phenomenon is not exclusive to the Chinese community. He once tried actively inviting classmates to cross-cultural socialising, but they declined. Later,

he found that they had gone on a social activity without him. The cultural cycle is also apparent among people from other cultures.

> *I once invited a Japanese student to go out, and they even asked why I didn't go with Chinese students instead. Later, I saw that they had organised their own outing with other Japanese students. (PHD2)*

This finding reveals that people generally prefer to interact with those who share a similar culture. This is not a unique tendency among Chinese students, but a common social behaviour across cultures.

Teachers also support the idea that cultural differences pose challenges. Although all the teachers mentioned that insufficient exposure to an English-speaking environment could influence language development. T1 acknowledged the challenges students face in fully immersing themselves in an English-speaking environment. It includes being hard to "*be friends with this person*", who is happy to help with practising speaking.

> *She is still involved in the Chinese diaspora... It's very hard for them to make that break from their own culture into the New Zealand culture*

Additionally, as T1 was taught English in China for six years, he can recognise the difficulties Chinese students face in fully adapting to a different culture and moving away from their cultural group.

> *The New Zealand culture is so strange to them (Chinese people), or so difficult for them to get, because we have different things. (T1)*

b) Discrimination experiences: The experience of shared ethnic group discrimination also upset some participants. MZ1 had negative experiences with people of Chinese background who grew up in New Zealand. She could clearly sense their avoidance of interaction with international Chinese students, and they even pretended not to understand Chinese.

> *When they saw that your English was not strong, they would deliberately avoid interacting with you, possibly because they didn't want to be asked for help…I initially thought they didn't understand Chinese, but later I saw them working in a Chinese restaurant and speaking Chinese fluently. (MZ1)*

Conversely, BA2 used to have friends with Chinese backgrounds who grew up in New Zealand. He shared another perspective on the same cultural discrimination. The stereotypes might originate from their negative experiences with Chinese students during high school. When young students are not fully mature, they can easily see certain behaviours as representative of the whole group, which reinforces stereotypes.

> *Some international students may display wealth in ways that create stereotypes. In environments like high school, where students are younger and more impressionable, these behaviours can shape how others view the whole group. (BA2)*

This finding reveals that the stereotype is complex and not based on just one perspective, but on a two-way negative experience.

4.3.4 Emotional challenges

Students primarily face emotional challenges related to language, such as anxiety due to limited English skills and difficulty staying motivated for language learning, along with academic pressure.

a) Language anxiety: Limited language proficiency causes stress, which may stem from a "*strong sense of frustration*" (PHD1) when unable to understand an unfamiliar accent or "*didn't dare to speak to people*" (BA3). This feeling can further heighten the mental pressure of attending class.

> *I would feel nervous every time before speaking, even needing to take deep breaths before talking. Sometimes I would stand outside the tutorial room for a long time before daring to go in. (BA3)*

Language anxiety could become significant in an unfamiliar context. MA5 described feeling anxious when applying for a bank card and was quite worried about missing important information. As a result, she tends to "*ask repeatedly*" for clarification, but is still concerned that she might "*overlook some important points*", reflecting a highly anxious behaviour.

The reasons behind stress include worry about their fluency and making the listener "*become impatient*" (MA6), or speaking incorrectly, making people "*misunderstand you*" (BA1). However, MZ3 pointed out that such nervousness can negatively affect actual language performance, as students may struggle in practice to apply what they

"*could understand in theory*". Similarly, MZ1 shared her experience of errors in speaking caused by nervousness during the interview, indicating a vicious cycle in which emotional factors influence language performance, which, in turn, further affects students' confidence and reinforces negative emotions.

> *When I get nervous, I tend to mix up my words and say things in a confusing way … In my last interview, I wanted to say that I was passionate … but I accidentally said "patient" instead. (MZ1)*

Teachers further described language anxiety as a lack of confidence, which stems from fear of making mistakes. T4 found that Chinese students tend to think carefully before writing, which results in slower writing speeds. Conversely, South American students are more confident about starting to write, even if they make mistakes.

> *It might be something related to Chinese students that do a writing test, and you look at them 15 minutes later, and they've written one sentence. They're so afraid of making a mistake, whereas a South American student will have written two pages… 80% of it might be grammatically wrong or technically wrong or whatever, but they're look at the information that they won't worry about making as much as say a Chinese. (T4)*

This behaviour might be due to high expectations, as students may want to perform well and fear making mistakes in English.

Teachers thought confidence could influence language learning effectiveness, but they believed it might vary depending on students' personalities. From T1's previous experiences, he found that students who were "*extrovert, outgoing*," and "*would not be shy about talking*" improved their language proficiency faster. This finding reveals the individual differences in language learning development.

Teachers also observed that Chinese students tend to set higher expectations for language improvement. As teachers acknowledged that language learning is "*a slow process*" and indeed "*takes a long time*" (T1), these high expectations may shape students' perceptions of their language abilities, leading them to believe their proficiency has not improved.

> *I find Chinese students are very hard on themselves, and they don't see the improvement that their teachers see. (T2)*

High expectations may stem from unawareness of inherent linguistic difficulties, especially in spoken communication. T3 highlighted the important fact that could be overlooked: when it comes to listening, the different accents encountered in real life can be difficult for anyone because they are "*not familiar*". (T3)

Similarly, one teacher mentioned the difficulty of speaking, as it is open and full of uncertainty, making it impossible to prepare completely, even though role-play.

> *You've got to go for an interview for a job or something, and you can do the role play many times, but when you get to the interview, maybe the person doesn't say, like the role play another question. So they freak out. (T1)*

b) Motivation in language learning: Most student participants intend to improve their English throughout their study period. However, they recognise that there is a low sense of urgency to improve their English, as their current "*basic level is often sufficient*" for daily communication (BA1), or they can get support from "*tools like translation software and AI*" (MA1). Additionally, when faced with academic demands, MA2 often prioritised academic work over English learning, which slowed her English improvement.

> *During the break, I might try this [English practice] for a while ... But once the semester starts, there are always assignments. You might end up spending the whole day thinking, "I need to finish editing this assignment today." … You just push those things to the back and prioritise coursework instead. (MA2)*

If students mainly socialise with other Chinese and only need English in class, they still use Chinese as their primary language. The language context limited students' need to speak in English, as they usually "*still speak Chinese*" at home (MA2). This could be quite significant for students who come to New Zealand with their families, further limiting opportunities to use English in daily life.

> *If I had come here by myself and had to force myself to socialise with people every day, I do think my English would probably improve more quickly… now that my wife and I are together, speaking English to each other just feels strange. (MA4)*

Exposure to a Chinese-speaking environment for a long time may influence the way of expression, as MA1 describe it as "*deeply rooted in Chinese*". BA3 pointed out that the

heavy reliance on translation increases the difficulty of integrating language and culture. Because *"some concepts exist only in English or only in Chinese, which makes them harder to understand."* (BA3). This view suggests that a strong reliance on the first language may influence the development of the second language.

c) Academic learning pressure: Some students reported that the challenge of highly repetitive assessment tasks, combined with upcoming deadlines, caused stress among participants.

> *Every week, I need to contact people, arrange interviews, conduct interviews, and then write them up. After writing, I need to revise it, and then the next week it repeats again. It feels quite stressful, especially because I have to keep contacting people all the time. If I cannot reach them, it becomes a problem. (MZ2)*

Even when facing difficulties in studying, students felt hesitant to ask for help.

> *At the beginning, you genuinely do not understand many things, but at the same time, you often feel too embarrassed to ask the teacher. (MZ1)*

This behaviour is influenced by Chinese study culture, which emphasises self-effort, while asking questions might indicate a student has not studied hard enough or has not paid sufficient attention in class.

d) Future work anxiety: Different expectations for academic outcomes in New Zealand and the Chinese job market increase participants' stress about an uncertain future of employability. This may be obvious to those who prefer long-term development in China after graduating in New Zealand.

> *Honestly, I often wonder whether I might fail or drop out one day. Unlike in China, this system does not give a strong sense of security…here, there is less emphasis on job outcomes and more on submitting a final dissertation. There is no requirement for smaller outputs, so everything depends on what you produce yourself. (PHD5)*

Overall, students reported challenges across language, academic study, social integration, and emotional well-being. These findings suggest that language and academic challenges are not the only difficulties for Chinese international students studying abroad. In this context, students

are required to live in the host country and interact with people there. Although student participants in this study have a positive attitude towards social integration, they still experience pressure arising from cultural differences, language anxiety, and slow language-learning progress, which are closely embedded in their daily lives.

From the teachers' perspective, they explained several underlying factors that lead to these challenges. The difficulties include the inherent challenges of linguistic influences, as well as cultural and emotional influences on Chinese students. These factors are often overlooked by students. Together, these perspectives provide a more comprehensive understanding of the sources of challenges students face in the New Zealand context. Understanding these underlying factors may also help guide how to select appropriate language learning strategies to address different challenges more effectively.

4.4 English learning strategies

The key focus of this study is to explore the language-learning strategies students used and the teachers' recommendations for overcoming the daily-life challenges they identify, including cognitive, social, and affective strategies.

4.4.1 Cognitive strategies

Students use cognitive strategies to enhance their four English skills: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. They also share the strategies they used to employ at school, but find them less effective in an English-speaking environment.

a) Listening: To practice listening, students mainly found helpful resources in the media related to their hobbies, such as "*American TV drama*", "*English songs*" (MA4), or "*NBA*" (BA2), or just played English content in the background at home as "*ear training*" (PHD2).

BA3 chose to avoid Chinese-language content in entertainment to ensure an immersive English listening environment.

> *I used to mainly watch content on Bilibili (Chinese video platform), but now I've deleted it and switched to YouTube. I mostly avoid Chinese-language content and focus almost entirely on English content now. (BA3)*

These practice strategies are also supported by teachers, who suggested practising learning through media, such as listening to "*songs and watching TV*" (T1) or using mixed resources that the learner prefers.

> *I've got younger learners who prefer watching videos, or playing games or using a mix of resources so that everything's covered, trying not to be too serious strategy. (T3)*

T4 also suggested "*listening to English at home*" (T4) to create an immersion environment for listening practice.

Student participants also carefully assessed whether the listening material was appropriate for effective ear training. PHD 5 prefers to choose content that is more suitable for her current language level, such as familiar "*American accents*" and "*speak more slowly and clearly*", to ensure the listening practice input remains useful.

> *I tend to choose teachers with American accents … almost word by word … if the entry barrier is too high, people don't want to engage. So I prefer content where the pronunciation is more open and clear, rather than more compressed or less distinct styles. (PHD5)*

Similarly, students flexibly adjusted their learning approach after evaluating the effectiveness of their current learning resources. MA5 stopped listening to "*news*" or "*deep discussion podcasts*" after she evaluated news content as filled with "*too many unfamiliar words*", which made her lose concentration and slow her listening improvement. Afterwards, she selected "*short situational vlogs*" covered with daily communication, which better suited her daily life needs and was easier to absorb.

> *For example, videos showing hotel check-ins, ordering in restaurants, or handling things like documents or interviews ... I either shadow them or just listen, and this has been very useful for me—much more useful than listening to podcasts. (MA5)*

During listening, students usually understand by catching key words and conceptualising unfamiliar words through "*understanding with a context*" (MZ3). If it is difficult to fully understand the speaker, students would use "*transcription tools*" (MA5) to have a general idea by reading the subtitles.

> *Sometimes in class, I can't fully understand what the teacher is saying. In those cases, I use online transcription tools. Even though they are not perfectly accurate, they help me quickly get a general idea of what the lecture is about. (MA5)*

b) Reading: To avoid spending excessive time understanding difficult material, PHD3 set priorities for selective reading, treating difficult material as "*won't be able to extract any useful ideas*". If it were in classic literature, she would "*only cite keywords or widely recognised references*" that are generally understandable, making academic reading more efficient.

When reading the article, students typically rely heavily on translating it into Chinese to grasp its meaning and enhance their thinking. MA1 read Chinese literature from "*CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure)*" to help her develop a brief idea of the related topic.

With the advancement of AI technology tools, students often rely on AI to "*translate or summarise*" (MZ2) key ideas to enhance comprehension and make reading easier. While this is a result of technological progress, MZ3, who studied before AI became prevalent, shared her experience of improving her reading skills through extensive reading to deepen her comprehension.

> *Because if you truly cannot understand something, it usually means your input is insufficient … When you already have a certain level of input, it is impossible that you understand nothing at all. (MZ3)*

To address reading difficulties, PHD3 mentioned an approach that goes beyond the immediate data, accepting ambiguity, uncertainty, or even misunderstanding when reading an article, viewing it as an opportunity to create a new interpretation.

> *When I read in Chinese, I may understand it in one way; when I read in English, I may understand it differently. That creates new interpretations, which can actually become innovation points. (PHD3)*

However, teachers shared their strategies that non-students suggested. T4, who is focused on academic English, applied a strategy in class for learners to read aloud without caring about pronunciation. This approach helps learners generally improve their reading fluency and speed through repeated practice.

> *I give them a text or a story … I also get them to read as quickly as possible … I don't worry about pronunciation. It's all about building up reading speed … And we're kind of generating their readings. Generally, increases their reading speed. (T4)*

c) Writing: Some students noted that paying attention to the differences between writing in English and Chinese helps them avoid common writing mistakes and improve the clarity and logic of their writing.

> *In English, they are very particular about what pronouns refer to. For example, in Chinese we often say things like "this" or "that" quite loosely, but in English, when I use "it" or "they", my supervisor would ask: "What does 'it' refer to? What does 'they' refer to?" (PHD3)*

Students reported that academic writing skills training in preparation for learning is an effective approach to improving their writing abilities. The writing course is usually provided by "*university*" (MZ1) or a "*language programme*" (MA5). MZ1 outlined the course's learning content, including not only writing skills but also research- and writing-related knowledge that supports her postgraduate study.

> *There is a specific course that teaches you how to structure your thesis and how to search for academic literature … (the course) actually works as a kind of foundation for the second year (of master's study) … is actually very helpful for my second-year studies. (MZ1)*

During the writing process, MZ1 focused on prioritising their objectives and integrating the course's assessment criteria to create a "*clear*", "*logical structure*", rather than stressing over "*beautiful*" writing, complex grammar, or long sentences.

> *For me, I tend to make the structure very clear. So when the teacher looks at it, they can immediately see that I have answered this question with these points. I write in a more logical and structured way, and that is generally fine. The teachers don't really assess based on how "beautiful" your writing is. Instead, there is a kind of checklist—if you meet the required analytical points, then you get the marks. (MZ1)*

Teachers also support strategies for setting priorities in writing. T4 highlighted the importance of setting properties in writing, like using appropriate words rather than beautiful writing. He would not use too much academic vocabulary to avoid overwhelming, and he regards vocabulary size as something that can be developed through a learning journey.

> *Because the university standards … we do the specific topic. So I was focused on vocabulary fits for those. But slowly … just building up a vocabulary bank, and again, it's just helping them to understand that this is a journey. (T4)*

Although using AI in writing can raise concerns about plagiarism or a lack of originality in academic work, PHD4 regards the appropriate use of AI tools as a way to enhance effectiveness. Since the primary goal of his writing is to study and explain the topic, AI could assist in clarifying the meaning of a sentence translated from Chinese, rather than serving as a tool to generate an entire paragraph.

> *But for us (PhD), we are researching our own topics. Our goal is to understand how a problem arises and what the answer is. So in that process, we don't really worry about whether we use AI or not. AI is just a tool that helps us put our ideas on paper more efficiently. (PH4)*

Writing in Chinese first and then translating into English is an approach students have to take. MA7 regarded it as an effective strategy to improve effectiveness. She wrote in Chinese as a draft, recorded her ideas, and polished the vocabulary and grammar during translation to avoid meaning loss during grammar checking and sentence refinement.

> *The tools may tell me that some sentences are incorrect. But once I revise them, the original meaning of the sentence can sometimes change. If I keep the Chinese version as well, then I can compare the two versions and check whether the meaning is still consistent… In English academic writing, you cannot make it too boring or repetitive. You cannot always use the same expression like "according to" every time, otherwise the reader or teacher will feel it is too repetitive. But if I write in Chinese first, I can gradually refine it. For example, I may first translate "through" as "according to", and later change it to "refers to", or rephrase it depending on context. (MA7)*

PH5 shared her approach to learning writing by analysing the logic of a well-written article to understand how ideas are organised. She first "*breaks it down paragraph by paragraph*", then "*analyses the structure*" and key points of each paragraph. Afterwards, she analysed the "*role and order*" of individual sentences within each paragraph, then composed her own writing through "*detailed imitation*".

> *For example, the first paragraph might introduce the topic, the second describes a phenomenon, the third provides examples … the first sentence might describe the current situation, the second highlights a problem, the third supports it with evidence ... then copy the text into Word and label each sentence as 1, 2, 3, 4 to clearly see how it is organised. (PHD5)*

Additionally, teachers suggested strategies that students did not mention for improving critical thinking. T4 used strategies such as watching current affairs news and deliberately analysing how political rules influence society from different perspectives. After generating learners' ideas, he asked learners to write their opinions in simple language to practice expressing critical thinking in writing.

> *You know what mean by left wing, right wing, center left, center right. These parties start in the political … I've tried to get to think about where they sit on the political, what's important to them is education, if they have older parents. Is it the help? … It's kind of critical thinking opinions ... I would kind of teach them vocabulary to express their opinion in all kinds of even a simple sentence…it's developing an independent thinking then that could go into academic topics. That's the kind of little thing that I find is takes them a couple of months. (T4)*

To improve paragraph ability, T4 used a deconstructed paragraph for students to practice. He suggested developing a well-thought-out plan with critical thinking before writing. While writing, use connecting words and phrases to ensure the flow. And gradually refining the writing through multiple drafts. He emphasises that writing improvement takes time, but it can be achieved through small changes and repeated practice of rewriting compound sentences or synonyms in regular writing.

> *So first draft ... they just get the information down, then … we order it into paragraphs … So I always stress the importance of an essay plan. We do a lot of work on brainstorming essays and things like that … Some students want to produce a beautiful piece of writing, but this is a 20-week course, you only in week eight. There's still 12 weeks to go. So just have some patience … So if you see a compound sentence with "but" rewrite it using "although", do it 50 times … then we're paraphrasing, like with synonyms. I don't even use the Academic Word List because … it's just too overwhelming. (T4)*

d) Speaking: Based on the students' experiences, they developed speaking skills through media, which enhances both listening and speaking abilities. PHD3 considered watching videos as an effective way to acquire natural expression.

> *I feel that through watching TV shows, dramas, stand-up comedy, podcasts, and all kinds of media, these expressions gradually get forced into your brain naturally. It's basically a process of language acquisition through repeated exposure. (PHD3)*

Students regard attending a language program as a preparation strategy to enhance speaking skills. MA2 described her language class experience as "*quite helpful*," noting that she was "*constantly exposed to listening and speaking*" through various "*opportunities to speak*." However, some students' views on speaking practice in language classes are limited and less effective. PHD5 explained that she mainly practised with classmates whose English proficiency was similar to hers, as they tended to rely on the same limited vocabulary and "*make the same mistakes*", rather than being exposed to new language input.

> *After many discussions, I still only use a limited set of words, and they also use the same limited vocabulary. On top of that, we often cannot even hear each other clearly, which makes the communication even more difficult.*

Students view being corrected as an effective approach to improving speaking skills. MA6 shared how he rapidly improved his speaking skills by joining an English-speaking group led by a teacher. In that group, the teacher wrote down his mispronounced words during conversations and provided the correct pronunciation for correction. This finding indicates that students view feedback and correction as an important component in speaking practices.

Some students proactively use familiar vocabulary in speaking to actively acquire new knowledge. MA6 deliberately employed "*just learned vocabulary*" to describe the same thing in daily life, actively applying new knowledge and "*reinforcing memory*".

> *When I describe a feeling like happiness, I would not only say "happy". I would try to use new words I have just learned and repeatedly describe the same idea in different ways … I consciously choose different expressions to reinforce my memory. Then next time, I might be able to use a different word to say it. (MA6)*

Teachers suggested different speaking strategies that students didn't mention. T2 emphasised the importance of focusing on stress and ending sounds in speech, as English relies on stressed syllables, and these sounds carry important meaning.

> *In English, a lot of the important information is contained in the last syllable, the past participle, the ED sound … And also, they look at native speakers, and they say, oh, but the native speakers don't pronounce the end of the words … are not always clear. And that's when I say, yes, but the gap that they leave is exactly the right gap, so a native speaker hears the unvoiced past participle. (T2)*

T4 shared a strategy for improving spoken English by writing down incorrect sentences for correction. This process helped students reflect more carefully on their mistakes and develop a deep understanding of correct word order and sentence structure.

> *They asked me, "what they did mean by that?" I won't answer the question, so I get them to write down the question, fix it, and then ask. Because by writing it down, remember that … the verb has broken for the subject. And doing that a few times, very quickly, they'll start asking, getting the word order correct. (T4)*

e) Less effective strategies: Students noted that some learning strategies are effective when in school but less effective in daily life, like "*doing reading comprehension*" (MA3) or "*memorising vocabulary*" (MA7). MA7 explained that memorised vocabulary was "*hardly used in real situations*", and could sometimes "*sound outdated or unnatural*". However, MA5 adjusted her learning strategies by creating her "*own vocabulary lists*" by collecting expressions from daily situations. These findings suggest that the effectiveness of cognitive learning strategies depends on the learning context and that learners may need to adapt their strategies flexibly to their communicative needs.

4.4.2 Social-interactive strategies

Students switched to social interaction strategies after observing that cognitive strategies yielded limited learning outcomes. PHD4 noticed that the learning gains from cognitive skills, such as reading exercises and accent imitation, were less effective than he had expected in improving his English proficiency. As a result, he actively sought out more opportunities to communicate with native speakers.

> *I now feel that the best way to improve English is to communicate with people who genuinely use English as their native language. The more often you communicate and the longer you spend interacting in English, the more your English will improve. (PHD4)*

This finding suggests that the relatively fixed cognitive learning strategies alone may be less effective at improving language proficiency, whereas effective learning strategies need to be more flexible when combined with socially interactive strategies.

Students provided notable examples of how they work to enhance their English proficiency using socio-integrative strategies. These strategies include their active engagement with their environment, learning through communication with English speakers, and their efforts to maintain smooth conversations in daily life.

4.4.2.1 Proactively engaging with the environment

There are seven participants with clear objectives for planning to improve language proficiency through engaging with the environment. The reason is that they regard this approach as an effective way to improve English skills during interaction compared with the strategies frequently used in school.

> *So I think writing down every single word is a waste of time. It is not useless, it has some value, but the short-term benefit is quite small. It also requires a lot of time investment, and I would rather use that time for other things. For example, attending university activities for two hours, where you can have fun, socialise, do small talk, and meet new friends, which is much more effective. (PHD2)*

PHD2 also views interacting with other English speakers as a way to promote social integration. This suggests that language ability is just one aspect of social integration.

> *Because the goal of learning a language is to integrate into society. Integration is the main goal; learning the language is only the first step, and just learning vocabulary alone will not allow you to integrate. (PHD2)*

MZ3 shared her understanding of learning through immersion in an English-speaking environment. She views teacher instruction and textbook learning as providing a "*very good foundation*" and "*basic framework*" for understanding English, while interacting with native speakers as an alternative learning strategy for continuing to develop language skills outside structured classroom learning.

> *When you are in school, your resources are limited, and most of the learning comes from teacher instruction and textbook knowledge, where you are told what the grammatical logic of English is like. Of course, this gives you a very good foundation, which is a kind of framework, a basic framework. It tells you how English works, how it functions. But when you enter society or go to an English-speaking country, where there are no such structured classes being given to you, you may need to adopt different methods. For example, there are many ways to interact with local native speakers, and I think this is one of the benefits brought by a language environment. (MZ3)*

Once student participants have clear objectives in learning from the environment, they proactively choose an environment that offers opportunities to use regularly, such as MZ3 choosing to live with a "*homestay*" and joining a "*badminton*" club.

> *When I came to New Zealand, I stayed in a homestay with a local family, all of whom were Westerners ... The reason I chose a homestay was also to better integrate into local life, and it really helped a lot. During those years living there, we had dinner together every day. Apart from going to school during the day … most of my time was spent with them, and this immersive exposure to listening and speaking helped me a lot. (MZ3)*

Similarly, actively approaching various contexts is a way to engage with the environment. BA3 views real-life conversation as opportunities to find "*own language barriers*" and build a personal language resource through interaction, therefore improving language proficiency.

> *When I encounter a new situation, and people ask me questions that I have not prepared for, I may not know how to express myself. In that case, I will go back home and research it on my own. The next time I face a similar question, I will already have my own way of expressing it … You need to push yourself to try new ways of expressing things and experience new situations. Only then can you realise where your own language barriers are. (BA3)*

BA3 also used English as the primary language in writing and thinking in daily interactions to create an immersive environment and increase exposure in everyday life.

> *I might list what I need to do this month, or when I go shopping and need to buy groceries, I deliberately choose to write everything in English. I also sometimes use English when chatting with friends. Even though we are both Chinese speakers, we*

> *agree to communicate in English. These are some of the strategies I use to create more exposure and practice opportunities for myself. (BA3)*

Learning English through extensive communication in real-world environments is also supported by all the teachers. Teachers believe this strategy provides practical opportunities for learners to interact "*with people from around the world*" (T3) and become more adaptable to New Zealand's multicultural country. T1 regards it as "*immersion learning*", as he thought that when fully immersed in the English-speaking environment, learners can gain English unconsciously and speak correct English naturally.

> *If you're speaking often enough with English people, the grammar will just sink into your brain. You'll pick it up…It's like osmosis … And you say, oh, that person said it like that. But you might even think that, you start speaking like the other people that are speaking to you. So you will speak like New Zealand English. (T1)*

T1 further pointed out that the passive language learning from TV dramas might be limited in real-life conversation, as it can lead to limited functional words in English, with learners only familiar with the language in specific contexts. He suggested that learners can improve their language proficiency by reflecting on their real-life communication experiences and the challenges they encounter, while continuing interaction with an English-speaking environment.

> *You've got to learn songs and watch TV, and people watch Friends, and they like it, and they can understand everything that's going on. But then, when it comes to maybe talking about it, it's still a problem. (T1)*

Two teachers suggested that learners could improve their language ability by proactively seeking opportunities to practice communication, such as "s*alespeople*" or people in "*churches*" (T1), "*got a job in an English company*" (T1), people nearby like "*dog owners*" or "*neighbours*" (T3). T3 further suggested finding opportunities in culturally related activities, such as pubs or sports.

> *New Zealand culture is, you know, a lot of it is pub culture, alcohol and sports. I would say to the learners that you know that may not be your thing, but we do like alcohol, and we do like pubs in this country, it's a very cultural thing, isn't it? (T3)*

T1 explained how to address limited language proficiency by setting communication priorities. He suggested focusing on the purpose of communication rather than struggling with perfect grammar, as viewed improvement happens during consistent practice.

> *A lot of these people that I know … like 50s, 60s … they don't have perfect grammar. They're Chinese people. Their English is not perfect, but nobody cares about that. Really … because as long as you could communicate and give what you want out of something … then it's it works a bit better. (T1)*

Students evaluate the communication environment to determine whether it aligns with personal needs. MA5 stopped attending language-related social activities held by the university, which she perceived provided limited opportunities for her learning. This was because her major objective is "*to learn new things*" rather than "*to output existing knowledge*".

Similarly, once MA6 realised his friends tended to understand "*Chinglish*", he became aware that this would reduce opportunities to receive constructive feedback and slow his improvement. Consequently, he adjusted his strategies, such as using AI for direct correction and improving his expressions.

> *But I've noticed a problem. When I communicate more with my foreign friends, they gradually get used to my way of speaking. So sometimes when I use what people call "Chinglish", they can still understand me. Because of that, they don't always correct me or tell me a better way to say it. This makes it harder for me to improve. In contrast, AI will point out directly that I shouldn't say something in a certain way and suggest a better expression. (MA6)*

This view indicates that receiving constructive feedback is a learning strategy for language improvement. However, learning from communication does not always mean receiving constant constructive feedback. To effectively use social-interaction strategies, there needs to be a balance between being understood and being corrected.

Similarly, teachers emphasise the importance of monitoring mistakes and deliberately correcting them to foster language development. T2 suggested that learners can proactively ask others for constructive feedback, as locals tend to avoid embarrassing others by correcting them. She also pointed out that even Chinese students can monitor and correct each other's grammatical mistakes during group interaction.

> *I think Chinese learners have to encourage their New Zealand or their other workmates to give them corrective feedback. It's a good point, because they won't do it naturally. They are embarrassed … and they don't want to embarrass the other person … But this*

can be done by a group of Chinese students. If they talk (English) together and one of them recognises, "Oh, she forgot the preposition." (T2)

Her explanation clarifies why native speakers often do not correct non-native speakers, but it also suggests that learners to actively seek correction.

4.4.2.2 Learning through communication

Almost all student participants applied interactive learning strategies to acquire culturally relevant knowledge and improve their language skills in their daily lives. MA3 paid attention to "*different accents in everyday life*" and tries to "*improve ability to identify and understand*".

Similarly, teachers recommend viewing communication from different perspectives in daily interactions. T4 suggested paying attention to locally relevant news, such as weather forecasts, sports, and civil events. This knowledge enables students to build connections with the local communities they meet daily.

I watch the weather forecast, because people always talk about the weather ... Keep up with sports, especially local issues as well. It's really important for students to be aware of what's happening locally, like City Council, things like that, all the issues around the water infrastructure, and last year the council election worked on different candidates. (T4)

T2 suggested paying attention to identify patterns, which means recognising how English behaves in sentences in daily life. This approach enables learners to understand language as an interconnected system rather than memorising words or phrases in isolation.

English speakers, they have learned the patterns. So when they are introduced to a new word that they don't know, but they recognise the patterns. If it's an ED, it's a past participle, or if it occurs before a noun, it's an adjective, they might not know what that word means, but they know that it is describing the noun … when you people meet and say, Hi, how are you? And the pattern in New Zealand is to respond, Oh, fine, thank you, or not bad. And that's a pattern … focus on looking for patterns. (T2)

Imitation is the most frequently mentioned language-learning strategy (seven times). Students often imitate the behaviour and language of English speakers after observing them. BA2 heard other native speakers apply small talk at work and gradually adapted the patterns to daily life. It became a natural behaviour for him, regardless of his personality.

> *My personality is not very extroverted, so at the beginning, I did not understand this kind of small talk culture … my ex-girlfriend worked in a bank helping people with loans, and I could hear how she used small talk at work. Now in meetings, I no longer directly start with the main topic; I still chat a bit first. A few days ago, someone on the street said my shoes looked nice, and we ended up talking for about ten minutes and became friends. (BA2)*

This finding suggests that cultural communication behaviours can be learned through social adaptation rather than being determined solely by personality.

After observing how other English speakers use language, students adjusted their expectations about what effective communication means. PHD3 began using "*simple*" and "*clear*" language in her communication as she learned from her non-native-speaking teacher that he could use "*very basic sentences*" to "*express ideas properly*". Similarly, MA6 considers using simple language "*to explain complex or unfamiliar thing*s" a common skill in daily communication, noting that even native speakers do not always use "*precise vocabulary*".

> *A British guy I met here, I wanted to ask him how to say "strainer" in English ... But even he didn't know the exact word at first. He simply described it as "the spoon with holes". That made me realise that many native speakers … are very good at using basic words to describe things in different ways. Gradually, I noticed that this ability—using simple language to explain complex or unfamiliar things—is actually very common in real-life communication. (MA6)*

This suggests that students' expectations of language proficiency and strategy selection may be influenced by interactions with other English speakers.

When faced with unfamiliar knowledge, students often ask native speakers directly for the correct answer. BA1 considers this method more effective for learning and helps create a stronger impression through the question-and-answer interaction.

> *If what you say is not correct, or if you don't know how to express something, when you describe it to them (English speakers), they will also teach you how to say it properly. They will correct the grammar or explain how it should be used correctly. In this process, you actually learn quite quickly, and you remember things more clearly. (BA1)*

Student participants found significant improvement in English after they were deeply immersed in an English-speaking environment. BA2 improved his language by forming a fixed group of

friends who share the same cultural background but natively speak English. They spent lots of time together, covering study in daily life, enabling him to "*naturally use English in daily life*" and pick up the local language. However, he acknowledged that making friends is not easy and that it depends on "*fate*", "*shared interest*", and "*personality*".

> *Basically, I spoke English from the moment I woke up, unless I was calling my parents. The whole day was an English environment. Whether it was going out, travelling, or even watching movies, everything was in English. The improvement during that period was very noticeable … It was more about shared interests and personality. People had similar humour, similar interests, and I also learned a lot of joking styles from them. (BA2)*

Students reported that the rarity of cross-cultural friendship may boost motivation in English learning. PHD1 explained that to maintain the friendship and interaction with her first friend in New Zealand, she spoke more, which naturally enhanced her fluency and language skills.

> *Because he (my South African friend) was the first friend I made in New Zealand. We met during a dorm activity when I first arrived. So, I wanted to be friends with him and communicate with him, so I tried to speak [to him]. (PHD1)*

MA7 found her English "*improved a lot*" when she worked in a positive environment where "*people are much closer*", as she thinks it provides opportunities to "*communicate with colleagues for several hours every day*" (MA7).

BA3 improved her spoken fluency after joining the university film club. Collaborating with other English speakers to produce a film provides her with significant opportunities to use English naturally in practical situations. Although she found the communication process exhausting, she was genuinely interested in filmmaking and willing to engage in these interactions. Her English improved significantly during the process.

> *But I was able to have so many opportunities to talk with people because I joined the university film society … It is very tiring to socialise, organise things, and go out to shoot … I usually work as the director of photography. Before each shoot, we have to prepare a shot list, and that alone requires meeting up three or four times. We also need to plan what we are going to film, organise locations, and coordinate with different people. It is not just about showing up on the shooting days. Before that, you already*

need to meet many different people and attend multiple planning meetings…Yes, for me, this has actually been one of the most interesting parts of my university life. (BA3)

These experiences suggest that language proficiency may develop naturally when learners are engaged in the activities they genuinely enjoy and communicating with a clear purpose.

4.4.2.3 Increasing the effectiveness of communication

To overcome the knowledge gap in listening, asking for explanations directly during conversation is the most frequently mentioned strategy (11 times). MA5 asked "*detailed questions*" or "*asked again and again*" for clarification when she did not really understand, as she dealt with daily matters in the bank. Similarly, MZ1 asked the tutor about the confusing part of the lecture and required a slow explanation and clarification of the assignment requirements.

After group courses, when the teacher has not left yet, I would go and ask them individually. I would say that I did not really understand the class, and asked them to explain slowly again what I need to do, because I do not understand the purpose of the assignment. Most of the time, they are willing to help and reframe it in a way I can understand. (MZ1)

To overcome the knowledge gap in speaking, students use alternative words or actions to continue communicating effectively. It involves "*gestures and body language*" (PHD3) and "*explaining the idea in different ways*" (PHD4) until the other person understands. Similarly, MZ2 selectively applied this approach depending on whether the topic is really important. If the topic is not important, she just says "*fine*" and does not go into detail, but if it is really important, she would clarify it with a different explanation, even using "*translation*" until the listener fully understands.

I will also adjust depending on how important the situation is. If something is very important and the other person does not understand after I explain it the second time, I will take out my phone and translate it for them … However, if it is not an important matter, I usually will not continue explaining. I will just say "OK, it's fine" and move on. (MZ2)

To reduce the knowledge gap in communication, some students prefer using written resources. PHD1 usually chooses the "*email communication*" approach for online applications, because she can use "*translation*" to help her understand. MA1 noted that she used written

documentation as backup to address the difficulty she had in fully understanding the content of the volunteer training.

> *I once did volunteer work for the Cuba street art festival … I didn't fully understand everything, but they gave us a booklet where everyone's responsibilities were written clearly … Although it was not very detailed, it was still understandable. (MA5)*

Preparing unfamiliar vocabulary before communication in specific situations is one strategy students use to overcome knowledge gaps. For example, MZ1 prepared "*professional terms*" before seeing the doctor. MA5 used AI to simulate role-play to practise potential conversations about "*official matters*", and save key expressions on her phone as backups for communication. She also views this preparation as a way to reduce "*anxious*" feelings in unfamiliar contexts.

> *Yes, especially when dealing with official matters, I get very anxious. So I communicate a lot with AI in advance, simulate the whole process, translate possible conversations and things I might want to say, organise them, and then go to handle the situation … it is hard to memorise everything completely. Then you can save it on your phone and refer to it while speaking, checking what you have written. (MA5)*

These findings suggest that students often combine cognitive, affective and social interactive strategies to address language challenges in daily life.

MZ3 used this preparation method for social activities to address the problem of a lack of shared topics among local native speakers. She researched and prepared the knowledge of the gift she bought from China. During the explanation, she shared insights into Chinese culture and also offered opportunities for further conversation.

> *Yes, I do prepare. For example, every time I go back to China, I bring gifts for them. One time, I brought something like shadow puppetry from Xi'an. Then I need to explain what it is, who the characters are, and why I am giving them this gift. So you need to do more research and understand these things beforehand. (MZ3)*

Students regard informing others in advance as a preparation approach to overcome the knowledge gap. BA3 felt "*really anxious*" at the first film meeting with the director in her film club activities. She chose to explain her limited English proficiency and asked for "*understanding and patience*" as she needs "*time to think*", which could lead to slower responses during the conversation.

I kept repeatedly explaining to them that English is not my first language, and when we discussed the script, I might need quite a bit of time to think before I could respond properly … Fortunately, they were all quite understanding about it. (BA3)

4.4.3 Affective strategies

Students use affective strategies to manage language-related anxiety and stay motivated in English learning while also handling the pressure of academic expectations.

4.4.3.1. Manage language anxiety in daily communication

Self-regulation is one of the most frequently used strategies to help reduce language anxiety. BA3 applied these affective strategies by prioritising communication effectiveness and tolerance of mistakes, focusing on achieving the communication purpose of being understood rather than overemphasising accuracy, thereby reducing anxiety about making mistakes.

I also think that if you say a word incorrectly, but people can still understand you, then it is not really a problem. If communication works, then it works. (BA3)

BA3 further applied self-regulation to recognise her personal limitations and understand that her fear of speaking English in class is acceptable, and that she will not be forced to do so until she feels more comfortable.

I'm quite introverted, and I really don't enjoy speaking in public. I don't see myself doing presentations or public speaking in the future, so I don't feel the need to develop that skill deliberately. I do chat with classmates sometimes, but just briefly and casually … I don't think I have that ability (speak English in front of a group) at the moment, and I'm not going to force myself to do it either. (BA3)

Self-regulation can be used to actively support emotions, helping reduce stress during slow language development. BA1 adjusted self-expectations and allows time for natural language retention.

Sometimes it's like that—you might forget the correct usage of something even after you've looked it up before. Usually, after using it a few more times, it sticks. That's completely normal. (BA1)

Likewise, BA2 applied self-encouragement to build confidence in their language learning. He views failure as a learning opportunity rather than something that might hinder progress.

> *I just want to become the kind of person I admire. So I do not care that much about failure. I have also experienced situations that other international students experience, such as only having a short conversation with a native speaker and then it ends. But so what? I still believe that failure is normal and success is luck. It is like learning to walk step by step. If it works, that is good; if it fails, I still need to continue. (BA2)*

Self-evaluation of language skills helps rebuild confidence. When students have a clear and objective grasp of their proficiency, they tend to reduce anxiety by encouraging themselves.

> *After talking with people or attending tutorials, I would record the entire conversation. Then, when I got home, I would convert the recording into text…When I was listening, I often could not catch the words they were using. But when I read the transcript later, I realised I could actually understand it … it did encourage me at that time. Because I realised that my reading comprehension was fine—I just had difficulties with listening. (BA3)*

Social comparison with other English speakers is the most frequently mentioned (seven times) strategy for activating supportive emotions. MA6 found that accents are highly diverse and even present in native speakers. This approach helps him to avoid over-focusing on accents during daily conversations.

> *Even here, local New Zealanders and Europeans have very different ways of pronouncing things. For example, some people pronounce the "ea" sound differently. I remember an older lady telling me she was a bit deaf, but she pronounced "deaf" more like "diff". That is just how she speaks, and she is completely comfortable with it. So I think it is fine—you have a Chinese accent, and you can just speak the way you do. (MA6)*

When students integrate their findings with self-regulation, it both reduces language anxiety and boosts their confidence in their language skills.

Students view learning from awkward experiences as a way to make a deep impression. MA4 used to pronounce "*feijoa*" as "*fiji*" based on his understanding, and when he received a failed interaction from the vendor, he realised the mistake and checked the correct word later. This embarrassment helped him remember the correct expression more clearly, as he strongly remembers these mistakes.

> *Once we went to a market and wanted to find a place selling jam … we thought "feijoa" might be "Fiji" in English … I went and asked the vendor, but they said they didn't understand what I was talking about and that they didn't have that kind of jam. Later, we checked and found out that feijoa is called "feijoa" in English, and "fig" refers to figs…Sometimes you only realise it after embarrassing yourself once. Then you know. (MA4)*

Teachers further support learning from awkward or failure experiences. T2 emphasised viewing mistakes as constructive feedback and part of the learning process, rather than as criticism.

> *Mistakes are important because they're part of the learning process, and recognising a mistake means you have that knowledge. (T2)*

T3 highlighted approaches for improving speaking skills and confidence through step-by-step speaking practice. This involves focusing on the current conversation, even if it is just one simple sentence, rather than a perfect answer, and gradually saying a little more in future interactions.

> *Start saying hello to people in the street … I think it gives you it's like a stepping stone to the next time. And maybe the next time you might say something extra. Like it's a lovely day today … And then the next time they're at the bus stop, they might expand it further, or in a waiting room. So I think it's a confidence-building exercise. (T3)*

Additionally, students see positive feedback from English speakers as triggering supportive emotions and lessening language anxiety. MA7 felt safer about "*making a mistake*" as her friend offered understanding and encouragement.

> *I have a very good friend now. Every time I make a mistake, he never corrects me. And whenever I ask him, he just says that you are a second language user, and understanding me is his responsibility. I think that is really nice. It makes me feel that when I say something wrong, it is not my fault. (MA7)*

Likewise, to activate more supportive emotions, T2 boosted students' confidence by comparing their current language abilities with hers. This strategy helps learners to recognise their current multilingual skills and reframe English learning as achievable. It also encourages them to view language learning as a manageable process, fostering patience, while gradually adjusting their expectations and reducing the pressure of language learning.

> *Look, you speak more English than I speak any other language. I'm just a very good first-language speaker with a very large vocabulary and understanding of language learning … but many of the Chinese learners are fluent in Mandarin or Cantonese, or sometimes they're fluent in a local dialect. And so, they already have three languages … It is trying to change their attitude towards English so it stops being a mountain and becomes a little bit of a rocky terrain, but something that they can cross. (T2)*

In addition, all the teachers mentioned an educational approach that creates a safe and enjoyable environment for learners and fosters an active, supportive setting. This strategy helps learners stay motivated and reduces their fear of language learning and making mistakes during the learning process.

> *I think some teachers can be quite intimidating because they're quite serious, which can be very intimidating. But my strategy is the complete opposite. Well, I think it's important that learners feel that they can speak up. (T3)*

4.4.3.2. Maintain motivation for English learning

Students used preparation to manage negative emotions related to language challenges. BA2 collected information from classmates who were studying overseas as a form of pre-task mental preparation for practical language difficulties. These strategies help set expectations for upcoming language difficulties, which could reduce fear in an unfamiliar environment.

> *Before I came here, I asked him, and he told me not to worry. Even though he was top of his class in Year 10–11, in his first year abroad, he understood almost nothing. He said he was basically "illiterate" in listening and speaking, even though he could read. (BA2)*

Students maintain their motivation in English learning by setting clear individual objectives. There are eight students who have a strong objective and regard English learning as a long-term endeavour. Further career development is the most frequently mentioned factor (five times), followed by personal English growth and academic improvement. Students regard good English proficiency as beneficial for "*building connections*" (MA5) with others and therefore for "*finding better job opportunities*" (MA6).

However, motivation for language improvement is often linked to other goals and needs across different contexts, particularly academic achievement and future career development. MA5

explained her need for good academic performance, as she views high academic grades as beneficial for pursuing further study and career development.

> *Essay writing matters very little in terms of writing style, but you still want a good grade, especially if you want to do a PhD. Good grades are accumulated through performance, and I don't want to lose marks there, because I will already lose marks in other areas. (MA5)*

Cultural identity is mentioned only by participant PHD 5. She viewed English proficiency as a way to exchange academic knowledge with scholars worldwide and contribute to academic development in China. Her viewpoint might be influenced by her past work experience in China.

> *There was a major international conference held in Wellington before, a kind of world-level summit on music and dance … When I observed scholars from other countries, regardless of whether English was their first language or not, they were actually presenting and speaking to the audience. In contrast, many of our Chinese academics were mostly just reading (from scripts), and often quite poorly, with a lot of hesitation. Some of them even needed a student with better English to translate for them … after sitting through all the presentations by Chinese speakers, I honestly felt quite embarrassed. Because of the language barrier, many of our professors' achievements and high-quality research outputs cannot be effectively disseminated internationally. (PHD5)*

Likewise, teachers emphasised the importance of having a clear objective for learning English, which helps learners maintain motivation and increases their willingness to practice consistently, ultimately improving language proficiency.

> *I had two students from Columbia … they worked very hard… they would always do their homework. They would always ask questions, always practice and try … and then went into university, became a nurse … they continued, and they've been successful in their life in New Zealand, whereas some other ones didn't really want to do that, but they seem to survive some other way. (T1)*

T3 further suggested that learning objectives be achievable and aligned with individual needs in order to maintain motivation. T3 prepared locally relevant learning content that matches learners' daily communication needs while avoiding overloading learners with too much

information. This approach helps learners remain engaged with the content and avoid feeling overwhelmed.

> *If something's not relevant to your life, then you're not going to pay much attention. You're not really interested in it. If you're reading an article about somewhere in Canada or something, then it's not particularly relevant. And I try to get another strategy is to try and keep things local … We're talking about pain and describing severity, that sort of thing … I take out the language focus and vocabulary and try very hard not to do too much in one lesson. (T3)*

Additionally, another teacher pointed out that finding enjoyment in using English can help learners maintain motivation and support more effective language improvement.

> *There was a survey that talked about how motivation to learn was not enough to be successful English language learners … this study … found that you could have students with very high motivation and students who put a lot of time into learning, but unless they had something else that connected them to the language. It's enjoyment … like they were learning English because they were really interested in English literature, or they were able to use their English for English literature. (T2)*

These two ideas of meeting needs and finding enjoyment suggest that having clear learning objectives, along with enjoyment in the learning process, can improve learning effectiveness and help sustain motivation in the long term.

T2 also suggested learning with fun and choosing material aligned with interests to keep motivation and active, supportive emotions.

> *If you want to build your vocabulary. Read a lot … but read for fun. Read things you like. (T2)*

To achieve the learning objectives, students actively stepped outside their comfort zones through self-driven efforts. MA5 objectively identified her weaknesses in communicating with English speakers and "*forcing communication with them*" as important opportunities to shift from passive learning to active language use.

> *When I am in a group with them, I still feel a bit nervous, but I actually want to talk with them … Different countries have different accents, which also helps train your*

listening … when I am forced to communicate with them, they speak more, and that becomes passive learning. It's like human potential gets suddenly activated. (MA5)

4.4.3.3. Manage social anxiety in social activities

In social settings, PHD4 proactively sought opportunities to attend social gatherings, even though he initially felt anxious about social interaction. Repeated participation in social activities and familiarity with them help reduce his stress and alter his perception of them.

When I first arrived, I did feel quite a lot of psychological pressure, especially when it came to small talk and social gatherings … Then I started to actively look for these kinds of opportunities. Gradually, I realised that going to these events doesn't really bring any negative consequences. No one is judging you in the way you might imagine. Besides, there was even free food sometimes, so why not just go? (PHD4)

Similarly, PHD2 applied working with a friend to reduce the nervousness about social activities. He asked other Chinese friends to join social activities to feel more comfortable and avoid awkwardness.

Usually, if I know there are Chinese people attending, I will sign up. But if I am alone, I do feel nervous because I worry that I will not understand what others are saying or will have no one to talk to, which makes me feel awkward. It feels like being alone in a farm. So generally, I prefer to go only if there are Chinese friends with me; otherwise, I would not go. (PHD2)

PH4 chose not to push himself to deepen friendships if he didn't genuinely enjoy them. Instead, he prefers to focus on his personal feelings to maintain a positive outlook.

For me, I don't really enjoy taking the initiative to actively make plans with people or build deeper friendships. I feel like it often comes with extra responsibility, and I have to consider other people's feelings as well. That can feel quite stressful for me. In comparison, I actually feel more comfortable being on my own.(PHD4)

He further distracts himself through activities that help reduce stress and anxiety, such as running, photography, and a variety of other activities.

One way I cope with stress is running. I usually go for a run every one or two days ... I also bought a camera, so I sometimes go into the city on weekends to take photos and walk around … I still try to keep my life a bit more varied and full of activities. (PHD4)

In conclusion, students apply various strategies in language learning to meet their needs in real-life communication contexts. Cognitive strategies are primarily used to address language-related challenges. Social interaction strategies are widely reported to be used in practice, as students perceive them as more effective for improving both language ability and social integration compared with single cognitive strategies. Learning through communication provides authentic English input and a deeper, more immersive learning experience. At the same time, affective strategies are flexibly applied across various contexts in the learning process to manage stress and maintain motivation.

Although most of the strategies students apply are supported by teachers, teachers also mentioned some cognitive strategies in speaking and writing that students did not. The difference reveals the fact that students may have limited knowledge of cognitive strategies. Despite this, students demonstrate their ability to flexibly combine different strategies to address challenges in an English-speaking environment. The following discussion examines how these strategies are chosen, the challenges they tackle, and their integration to promote effective language learning. These findings will be interpreted through the lens of Oxford's (2011) S2R model.

5. Discussion

This chapter discusses the key findings from both teachers' and students' perspectives in response to the three research questions, emphasising their similarities and differences with links to existing research. It starts with English proficiency, then examines the challenges and reflects on their root causes. The section concludes with an overview of learning strategies to overcome these issues emerging from this study.

5.1 RQ1: How is good English proficiency perceived by students living and studying in New Zealand?

For students living in an English-speaking country, English proficiency is seen as both a language skill and a cultural competency. The findings of this study reinforced observations from previous studies, as signalled by cross-references to both the literature review (see 2.3) and findings of this research (4.1).

5.1.1 Language ability

Several studies indicate that there is no universal standard for what constitutes good English proficiency (2.3). Teachers in this study acknowledged that defining proficiency is difficult, as each language competence is important and underscores learners' communication needs (4.1.1). Although the students participating discussed all language skills of listening, reading, writing and speaking fully, they demonstrated different expectations regarding the level of proficiency required for each competence (4.1.1).

Additionally, two students see language proficiency as something to be understood in a comprehensible way (4.1.1). One student even points out that the strict test score is not enough to fully show language proficiency, supporting the view that single, static test results are not inclusive and do not represent all aspects (see 2.3).

Interestingly, student participants provide rich descriptions of their speaking ability, especially their ability to communicate flexibly and effectively across various situations, in 4.1.1(d). This emphasis on speaking may indicate that learners' attention to language proficiency is closely linked to the context in which languages are used, rather than a single standard or assessment dimension. Such findings support the view that language proficiency is based on the need for language use across contexts, rather than being judged in a single dimension (see 2.5).

5.1.2 Cultural ability

Although not all students mentioned the concept of intercultural competence, they do regard the ability to adapt to local language styles and cultural norms, and to integrate into the workplace, as part of English proficiency (4.1.2). This finding reinforces the idea that, in an English-speaking country, both language and intercultural competence are significant and can mutually enhance one another (see 2.5). However, students focus more on practical cultural adaptation, such as the local language and social norms, while the teacher discusses it from a broader social and civil perspective. This difference might indicate that students tend to view intercultural competence through a pragmatic lens.

5.1.3 Reflection on limited language proficiency for Chinese students

Along with existing research, cultural factors affect unbalanced English proficiency. The factors include the limitations of the English learning environment, the influence of a traditional exam-oriented culture, the low attention to English learning, and the linguistic challenges inherent in learning English (2.2).

5.1.3.1 English learning environment

English teaching in China has historically relied on traditional methods, placing less emphasis on speaking skills. According to participants' experiences, English classes were mainly taught by Chinese teachers and focused heavily on reading and writing, with less attention on listening and speaking (4.2.1). As all student participants in this study were born before 2005, these findings indicate that the traditional English teaching approach remained in use in the English education system, while authentic speaking practices remain limited and vary across school types (see 2.2.1). Additionally, although some students had experience learning from foreign teachers, such authentic opportunities are limited to specific schools (4.2.2), consistent with section (2.2.2).

However, students also mentioned that even authentic learning opportunities were still not enough to fully prepare them for real-life communication (4.2.2). The reason might be that classroom learning environments are relatively static and do not fully capture the uncertainty in real-world communication, aligning with 2.4.1 (b), which states that real-life conversations are more open. Additionally, students who had studied English in English-immersion environments also reported that the learning content remained heavily academically focused (4.2.2). This may be related to the initial purpose of English learning, which is to emphasise reading comprehension of English reading material rather than daily communication (see 2.2.1).

This finding reveals a gap between teaching materials and students' communication needs in real-world situations. Although textbooks provide a structured, high-quality foundation for language learning and guide pedagogical objectives (Erkir & Alkhaldi, 2025), they lack a bridge between linguistic knowledge and an intercultural communication context, which may limit learners' ability to apply knowledge in practical language use (Nguyen et al., 2021).

5.1.3.2 Exam-oriented culture and its consequences

Students perceive the English learning experience as still being too exam-focused and recognise that this culture has some negative impacts on their language skills (4.2.3). The impacts include treating language as merely examinable knowledge rather than a practical skill, having limited academic-specific English knowledge, placing too much emphasis on correlation, and fearing mistakes in everyday communication.

This cultural influence affects students' learning approach and negatively impacts their language proficiency. These factors include favouring passive over interactive learning (as detailed in 2.2.1), focusing on compulsory skills and limited language proficiency in specific areas, and addressing language anxiety caused by a high-stakes culture, which can further impact students' emotional responses during real-world language interactions (see 2.2.3).

5.1.3.3 Attention in English learning in China

Although the student participants in this study have a relatively strong desire to improve their English, they point out that attention to English learning in China is low, including limited contexts required for English use, a heavy focus on translation in daily life, and even lower priority in the education industry (see 4.2.4). This finding aligns with the existing study in 2.2.4.

However, some students do find a positive trend in attention to English learning, aligning with studies that found that although attention to English is relatively low in China and may influence low language proficiency, more young generations are gaining access to more authentic and developed resources (4.2.4). It's reasonable to believe that the education system is developing, and language proficiency will improve among the younger generation (2.2.4).

5.1.3.4 Linguistic difficulty in English learning

All the students and teachers participating point out the inherent difficulty of English learning for Chinese people, as it is a completely new language system compared with Chinese, see 4.3.1 (f). An ESL teacher further points out the difficulty of speaking, which is often overlooked by Chinese students, in 4.3.1 (f). These difficulties can be explained by the observation that speaking is inherently uncertain and requires a more comprehensive ability, as noted in 2.4.1

(b). The reason could be students' lack of awareness of speaking difficulties or their high expectations for language-learning outcomes. These high expectations stem from Chinese educational culture and could further lead to emotional challenges (2.2.3). An ESL teacher also noted that personality may influence language-learning outcomes, in 4.3.4 (a). This finding underscores the uncertainty of language learning and highlights the importance of individual differences in language-learning strategies (2.6.1).

However, Chinese students often underestimate the inherent challenges of language learning and may view language difficulties as merely a lack of effort. To help students effectively overcome these challenges, it is crucial to implement targeted learning strategies (2.6).

5.2 RQ2: What challenges do students encounter when they study and live in New Zealand?

Although all student participants meet the language requirements for enrollment or have previously participated in a short-term language program before university, they face various difficulties during their stay in New Zealand (4.3). The following section explores these issues, including language barriers, academic difficulties, social integration problems, and emotional struggles, along with how these challenges are interconnected. The findings for RQ2 once again aligned with the insights gained from existing studies (2.4).

5.2.1 Language and academic challenges

The following section discusses how limited language proficiency creates communication barriers in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. It also highlights the lack of knowledge, especially in academic language, as well as knowledge gaps and different learning styles.

5.2.1.2 Language challenges

a) Listening: Students shared significant experiences with listening difficulties, mainly focusing on identifying various accents and catching fast speech, as discussed in 4.3.1 (a). They also point out that listening in real life is quite different from what they usually learn in class. To understand, students have to pay close attention to listening, which further enhances their ability to think deeply. This could be because English classes in China are heavily textbook-based and offer limited opportunities for real conversation (see 2.2.1 and 2.2.3).

Listening barriers can lead to misunderstandings when encountering unfamiliar words or slang. This reveals that the English knowledge gained in class is limited in an

academic context, and there is a significant lack of knowledge of cultural or everyday language (2.2.1).

b) Speaking: Speaking is the second most frequently discussed challenge after listening, highlighting the significant challenges students experience in spoken communication, in 4.3.1(d). Being understood is the biggest challenge and further influences effective communication when students interact in the classroom. Although students often view speaking difficulties as a matter of limited language proficiency, teachers point out that the inherent complexity of speaking is often overlooked, in 4.3.1 (f). This finding aligns with the observation that speaking is more open-ended and highly context-dependent, see 2.4.1(b).

Students also report low performance in presentations and classroom interaction, mainly due to limited speaking skills, in 4.3.1(d). Although students did not mention it directly, they described feeling nervous even after preparation and hesitated to respond unless they felt confident with their answer. These behaviours support studies that speaking proficiency may be influenced by a lack of confidence, see 2.4.1(b).

c) Reading: Students are dissatisfied with their slow reading speed, which can be more challenging, especially when the reading load is heavy for most, in 4.2.1(b). Unfamiliar academic language also increases the difficulty in reading comprehension. However, students regard the difficulties as manageable, especially since they are accustomed to reading English academic literature or obtaining effective translations or conclusions from AI technology. This finding aligns with 2.4.1(c), which states that reading difficulties are least challenging when students have prior experience or access to various resources.

Some students express their confusion when trying to find valuable literature for their assessment, in 4.2.1(b). This could be explained by writing challenges, as Chinese students often lack academic writing training, and research is one of the skills in academic writing, see 2.4.1(d).

d) Writing: The significantly different writing style is a big challenge for students, in 4.3.1 (c). The main challenges stem from the substantial differences in the logical structures of Chinese and English (2.2.4). Additionally, limited academic vocabulary and unclear grammar rules further influence students' writing effectiveness, in 4.3.1(c). As a result, students tend to write in Chinese and translate into English later, even

though they know it could lead to misunderstanding, they still regard it as an effective approach. This action can also reflect that students lack strategies to improve their writing skills and knowledge of the Western writing style, see 2.4.1(d).

Students also report dissatisfaction with their writing performance and confusion about their tutor's expectations for their writing, in 4.3.1(c). However, these challenges may not be solely related to vocabulary, grammar, or writing style. It may be related to critical thinking and paragraph organisation. This can be attributed to traditional teacher-centred learning approaches in China, as passive learning may limit critical thinking and creative problem-solving (Y. Lu, 2024).

Interestingly, this issue about critical thinking was raised only from an academic ESL teacher's perspective on writing challenges, while student participants rarely mentioned it. This may reflect students' limited familiarity with Western academic writing norms, particularly expectations for writing structure and critical thinking, see 2.4.1(d).

e) Daily vocabulary: The knowledge gap in specific contexts is one of the most frequently mentioned challenges among students. Participants reported that their limited vocabulary was insufficient to handle a wide range of daily communication contexts, in 4.3.1 (e). This finding also aligns with teachers' perspectives that some learners have limited functional vocabulary due to insufficient exposure to various English-speaking environments, in 4.3.1 (e). These findings support the discussion in 2.4.1(b) and 2.5, which suggests that daily communication requires context-based understanding and flexible language use, while students often lack sufficient experience with diverse real-life contexts.

5.2.1.2 Academic study challenges

a) Academic language: Students report difficulties understanding academic language, especially unfamiliar and highly theoretical concepts, in 4.3.2(a). To support comprehension, students may rely on both Chinese and English explanations. This finding aligns with 2.4.1(c) and 2.2.4, which state that the difficulties in academic language may stem from language and complex academic content.

However, students with a strong background in the subject matter regard the challenges in academic language as manageable, in 4.3.2(a). This finding suggests that accumulating knowledge can help reduce difficulties when encountering unfamiliar academic concepts, 2.4.1(c).

b) Unfamiliar learning styles: Students reported feeling confused when faced with different teaching approaches, particularly open-ended classroom discussions rather than direct instruction, in 4.3.2(b). This reflection also aligns with the teacher's observations that Chinese students tend to overemphasise the correct answer and have difficulties adapting to the interactive teaching approach, see 4.3.2(b). As discussed in 2.4.2, this may be related to Western dialogue mode, which emphasises the idea that emerges through discussion and interaction.

Additionally, different expectations regarding the teacher and students' roles may further widen the communication gap between them, in 4.3.2(b). Students may feel the teacher has given up on them and provided limited guidance, while the teacher may perceive students lack initiative. This mutual misunderstanding may further reduce communication opportunities and create a negative cycle in classroom interaction (2.4.2).

5.2.2 Social integration challenges

This section explores how challenges to social integration arise from cultural differences and experiences of discrimination. Although most challenges students faced align with previous research (2.4.3), there are small differences in the discrimination experienced by shared ethnic groups, as noted in 4.3.3(b).

a) Cultural differences: Given the significant cultural differences in social style between China and Western countries, students often feel nervous during everyday small talk, in 4.3.3(a). This emotion may result not only from limited language proficiency but also from a lack of shared cultural knowledge. This was particularly evident among students who did not report major difficulties with their English proficiency but still found it hard to join the conversation because they lacked background knowledge of the local topics. These findings indicate that challenges in social integration are not solely influenced by language skills but are more closely linked to cultural understanding, as discussed in 2.4.3 and 2.5.

Some students reported difficulties building friendships with students from different cultural backgrounds, including both domestic and other international students, in 4.3.3(a). A teacher with deep experience across cultures acknowledges the challenges Chinese students face in fully adapting to the New Zealand community, given the significant cultural differences, in 4.3.3(a). This finding aligns with the discussion in

2.4.3, which suggests that cultural differences may be a factor in building deep friendships, as people often prefer to connect with people from a similar cultural background.

b) Discrimination experiences: Although there is only one student who reported experiencing discrimination that happened eight years ago, she was surprised by the negative treatment from people with a similar Chinese cultural background, in 4.3.3(b). One possible explanation is that the negative impression may have been formed by previous experience with other Chinese international students. This interpretation was also reflected by another student who has friends with a Chinese background and grew up in New Zealand. However, the explanation might be because they used to experience negative impressions with other Chinese international students. These findings align with the discussion about how discrimination is associated with stereotypes stemming from prior negative experiences with a particular social group's behaviour (2.4.3). It also reveals the diversity that exists within a shared cultural group. Although this issue was discussed in early studies, it persists to this day, as discussed in 2.4.3.

5.2.3 Emotional challenges

This section examines how emotional factors influence language anxiety, including their negative effects on language performance and the cultural roots behind them. It also discusses academic pressure and the cultural factors that contribute to this stress. Although most of the emotional challenges are found in the early studies in 2.4.4 and 2.2.3, some stress related to English improvement and future work anxiety emerge from the data, in 4.3.4(b) and (d).

a) Language anxiety: Students' language anxiety is often associated with limited English proficiency, in 4.3.4(a). This anxiety may involve negative emotions toward themselves, such as frustration with listening difficulties or mental pressure to speak in class. This anxiety may become more intense when they face an unfamiliar context, as students might worry about misunderstanding others or expressing themselves inaccurately during conversation (2.4.4).

Another source of anxiety is the concern about how they are perceived by others, such as fears of causing confusion, being misunderstood or encountering impatience during interaction, in 4.3.4(a). However, these concerns may be closely linked to a lack of confidence, as noted by teacher participants, in 4.3.4(a). Teachers observed that Chinese students tend to lack confidence and fear making mistakes, which may stem from their

high personal expectations. This finding also supports the discussion in 2.4.1(b), that fear of mistakes may reduce learning confidence, increase speaking anxiety, and ultimately affect spoken performance.

Cultural learning expectations also shape learners' perceptions of the language learning progress. Teachers highlight the inherent difficulties in spoken language development, which students often do not recognise and tend to regard as a lack of practice or exposure, in 4.3.4(a). Additionally, teachers observed that students' high expectations for language learning progress may also shape their perceptions of learning difficulties. This discrepancy may reflect the influence of how culture shapes learning beliefs. Chinese educational traditions usually emphasise effort and academic achievement, encouraging students to adopt self-effort and practices to improve. As a result, learners may overlook the complexity of language development and view slow progress as personal failure, as discussed in 2.4.4. This finding highlights that perception of language challenges is not only shaped by individual experience but also by broader cultural learning expectations.

b) Motivation in language learning: Maintaining motivation in English learning is difficult. Although existing studies rarely identify motivation to improve English as a major challenge for Chinese students studying abroad, students in this study reported it as a challenge, as they often aim to enhance their language skills. They describe a low sense of urgency and a tendency to rely on translation tools, which may reduce their motivation to engage in active English learning, in 4.3.4(b). Additionally, their living context, which involves living with family and mainly using Chinese in daily life, leads to a low need to use English regularly. As a result, their sense of urgency to improve English is further reduced. This finding supports the discussion in 2.2.4, which indicates that low engagement can reduce students' motivation to learn.

c) Academic learning pressure: Only one student reports experiencing pressure from learning tasks, in 4.3.4(c). This may be because, compared with the heavy academic workload in China, students in New Zealand tend to perceive the learning load as manageable (2.4.4). However, a more obvious issue reported by students is that they feel hesitant to ask their teachers for help, in 4.3.4(c).

These behaviours can be explained by the Chinese learning approach discussed in 2.4.4 and 2.4.2. Teachers are regarded as authoritative figures and maintain a power distance

from students. In this context, students usually follow the teacher's instructions and attempt to grasp the knowledge through self-effort. Therefore, asking questions might signal a lack of self-effort and attention in class, creating an implicit pressure to feel fear or embarrassment when seeking help.

In addition, students often set high expectations for themselves. This finding is noted only by teachers, as students are usually dissatisfied with their language progress, but teachers perceive noticeable improvement, in 4.3.4(a). Similarly, one student also reported anxiety from differing expectations between academic achievement in New Zealand and job requirements in China, in 4.3.4(d). This pressure can be linked to Chinese students' high pressure on themselves and deep anxiety about future career prospects (2.4.4).

To sum up, Chinese students encounter a range of challenges related to language, academic study, social integration and emotional issues. The underlying reasons are complex and influenced by multiple factors. However, some of these challenges may stem from the English-learning environment in China, while others may be related to studying abroad. Figure 1 captures the range of challenges and contextual factors Chinese students studying abroad may experience, as identified in this study and previous research.



Figure 1. Challenges and potential contextual factors

5.3 RQ3: What strategies can help students to improve their English proficiency and address study and everyday-life challenges?

The key focus of this study is to identify strategies Chinese students use to overcome language-learning challenges they experience. This section outlines English learning strategies based on both students' actions and teachers' suggestions. It includes cognitive, social-interaction, and affective strategies. The text highlights different strategies used by teachers and students, analyses their differences, and emphasises the interactions among these three types of strategies.

5.3.1 Cognitive strategies

Cognitive strategies form the foundation of learning strategies that help learners process linguistic knowledge across all four English skills. However, their effectiveness is limited in certain contexts. Figure 2 identifies key cognitive strategies that participants identified as useful for language development. Cognitive strategies are mainly used to process and apply English-related information. As foundational strategies in language learning, they help to improve language proficiency and can be improved through practice and metacognitive monitoring.



Figure 2. Cognitive strategies

a) Listening: Both students and teachers regard extensive listening as the main cognitive strategy, combined with conceptualising meaning to aid understanding, in 4.4.1(a). Meta-cognitive skills are used to assess whether the practice material matches their current English proficiency, ensuring the practice is effective for comprehension development. This approach reflects the combination of cognitive strategies that support information processing, while

metacognition guides the management of these strategies in the listening practice process (see 2.6.3.1).

b) Reading: Students used AI tools to translate or conclude to facilitate reading comprehension and increase reading speed, while using metacognitive strategies to select less difficult reading materials to reduce cognitive overload (2.6.3.1). Additionally, some students also recommended extending reading sessions to strengthen subject knowledge and improve comprehension, in 4.4.1(b). However, teachers applied reading aloud to improve reading fluency through repeated practice, in 4.4.1(b). This difference may indicate that students tend to prioritise effective comprehension, while teachers focus more on developing reading skills through cognitive strategies.

c) Writing: Meta-cognitive strategies for paying attention to different writing rules in New Zealand are an important step in addressing writing challenges (2.6.3.1). This awareness could further guide students to prioritise clear structure over style in their writing, which is also supported by teachers. The priorities further influence students' selection of cognitive strategies, such as analysing and imitating academic literature, or gaining improvement from a language program, see 4.4.1(c).

In cognitive strategies, students heavily rely on translation, including AI translation, to complete writing tasks, see 4.4.1(c). Although they recognise this approach may not fully address the challenges of unclear expression, they still regard it as a manageable and effective way to finish writing tasks on time. In contrast, the teacher who is experienced in academic English systematically applied metacognitive and cognitive strategies to improve writing skills, including finding sources to train critical thinking, paragraph practice to improve structure ability, and highlighting the importance of time and accumulation in writing improvement, see 4.4.1(c).

This could reflect the students' limited academic writing proficiency, particularly among Chinese students who had not received training in English academic writing. It further limited their ability to apply cognitive skills effectively to improve their writing. This aligns with previous research suggesting that Chinese students often lack knowledge of academic writing skills, in 2.4.1(d).

e) Speaking: Meta-cognition strategies are used to find authentic resources for speaking input and practice, while cognitive strategies, such as repeated practice or actively using new words, work together to support the improvement of speaking fluency (2.6.3.1).

From teachers' perspectives, they highlight the importance of paying attention to stress and to ending sounds in speech and suggest writing down incorrect sentences for reflection on mistakes as a meta-cognitive strategy, see 4.4.1(d).

While some students find practising speaking in a language program helpful, others see the improvement as limited, see 4.4.1(d). Students highlighted the importance of receiving corrective feedback and the desire for more extensive authentic language input, both of which are limited in the language programme. As a result, students tend to improve spoken proficiency through interaction with English speakers rather than relying solely on cognitive strategies (4.4.2). This adoption indicates that learners' language needs will vary depending on the context, which will also affect the learning strategies section (see 2.6.3.3). This finding also aligns with research 2.6.3.4, suggesting that learners typically flexibly apply various strategies depending on different communication contexts.

e) Less effective strategies: Some highly frequently used cognitive strategies in schools, such as memorising vocabulary and reading comprehension practices, were identified as less effective strategies when students study in New Zealand, in 4.4.1(e). The reason might be that memorising mechanical vocabulary without a communication context does not effectively enhance language use in everyday life (2.2.3). Consequently, students struggle to apply the language in real-world situations, as described in the challenges they reported in 4.3.1(d).

To enhance language proficiency, students initially relied on the most familiar learning strategies from their previous schooling. However, after studying in an English-speaking environment for some time, they started to realise a gap between the practical language skills needed for real-life communication and their passive learning approach based on fixed materials (4.4.2). This awareness prompts them to adjust their learning strategies and to seek approaches that better match their language-use needs. This finding emphasises the importance of tailoring learning strategies to the specific context in which the language is used, supporting the idea that language-learning strategies depend on context, as explained in 2.6.3.4.

5.3.2 Social-interactive strategies

Social-interactive strategies are the primary approaches, supplemented by cognitive strategies when learners are in an English-speaking country. These strategies begin with the goal of engaging with the environment and developing language skills through ongoing communication, which is supported by addressing knowledge gaps and sustaining effective communication. Social interaction strategies enable students to develop language skills through

communication and engage with their environment. In real-life contexts, social interaction often works alongside affective and cognitive strategies to enhance both learning performance and communication effectiveness (see Figure 3).

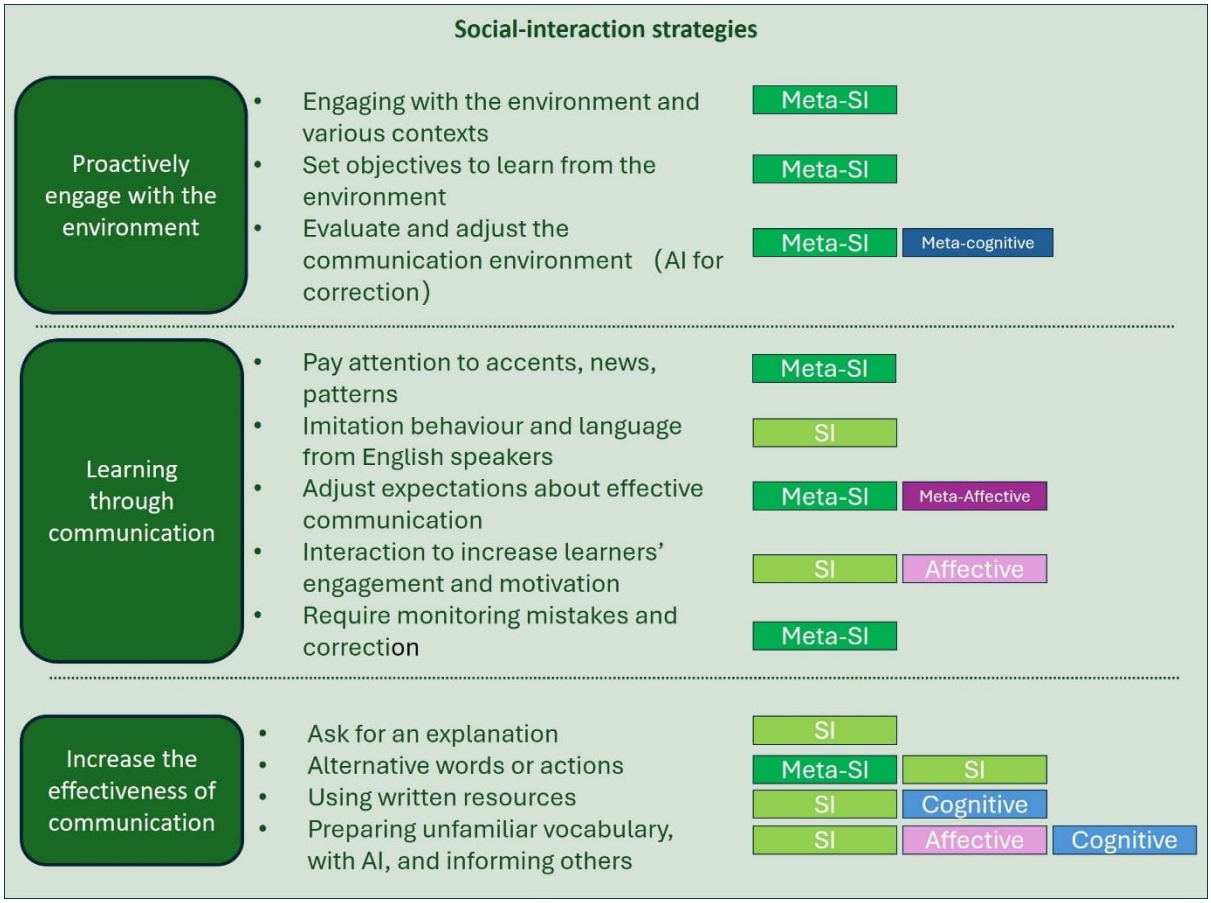


Figure 3. Social interaction strategies

5.3.2.1 Proactively engage with the environment

Students demonstrated a clear understanding of the benefits of social-interactive strategies, regarding them as a more effective approach than cognitive strategies used in school for developing both linguistic and cultural competence through extensive communication with other English speakers (4.4.2.1). In other words, they view cognitive strategies as a foundation for language learning (2.6.3.1), while an English-speaking environment is essential for boosting language development and enhancing long-term impression through practical communication (2.6.3.3). This perspective was also supported by teachers, who noted that language learned through isolated cognitive strategies, such as watching TV dramas, is insufficient to fully cover the various communication situations in daily life (4.4.2.1). Students with a clear objective to improve language proficiency through social interaction deliberately sought or created English-speaking environments, such as living with a homestay or attending

social activities, to facilitate real communication and improve fluency through frequent daily language use (4.4.2.1).

5.3.2.2 Learning through communication

Almost all the students and teachers suggest using social-interaction strategies to develop language proficiency through communication with other English speakers (4.4.2.2). Students focus on being familiar with various accents, while teachers suggest paying attention to local news and how language patterns are used in daily life. Authentic interaction provides learners with an effective way to observe natural expression and behaviour that are not available in textbooks or formal learning materials. Through imitation, reflection on mistakes, and repeated exposure, learners can gradually adopt the local communication norms. Although the improvement was based on students' perception rather than direct evidence, students who have opportunities to speak English extensively with others naturally feel their English proficiency improves significantly. This finding indicates that engaging in authentic communication contexts can promote more effective language development (2.6.3.3), as language is learned when it is treated as an interconnected system rather than passively learned from fixed materials (see 2.6.3.4).

Social-interaction strategies also influence learners' emotional expectations towards language use. When students observed how native speakers use language flexibly without strictly following textbook rules, such as using simple words to explain complex ideas, or making minor grammatical mistakes, they gradually shifted their expectations from grammar perfection to fluent communication (4.4.2.2). This adjustment helps to reduce students' anxiety about limited language ability. Similarly, teachers also suggested that learners focus on achieving communication purposes and allow time for gradual self-improvement through continued interaction and practice (4.4.3.1). It also aligns with the finding that language learning needs change according to the communication context (see 2.5 and 2.6.2.2). These findings suggest that social interaction not only supports language development but also reshapes learners' emotional expectations for language proficiency and further influences their strategy selection, as discussed in 2.6.3.3.

Additionally, social interaction increases learners' engagement and motivation. Building cross-cultural friendships and participating in enjoyable communication activities provide more frequent opportunities to use English naturally (4.4.2.2). These experiences provide encouragement, enjoyment, and motivation for continued language use and contribute to a positive cycle of language improvement. This finding suggests that language development is

supported not only by a clear objective but also by actively engaging in enjoyable interactions (Rezaeyan et al., 2025). When learners are actively engaged in communication, they tend to use English more consistently and improve gradually and subtly compared to task-oriented interactions alone (see 2.6.3.3 and 2.2.4).

However, some student participants also noted limitations in learning through social interaction. Students need corrective feedback to help improve language accuracy (4.4.2.1), but it does not always happen during conversation. As a result, students tend to practice speaking with AI tools (4.4.2.1). Teachers further emphasise the importance of actively requesting corrections when communicating, as native speakers may not correct every time to avoid awkwardness (4.4.2.1). This highlights that while learning from interaction supports fluency, effective language development still needs reflection and correction to improve language accuracy (Değirmenci Uysal & Aydin, 2017; Quiñónez & Corría, 2021). However, to balance the learning outcome and ensure communication fluency, corrections need to be applied in a strategic manner (Değirmenci Uysal & Aydin, 2017).

5.3.2.3 Increase the effectiveness of communication

To facilitate fluent communication, students used various strategies across different stages of interaction. Before communicating, they would use cognitive strategies such as checking and memorising unfamiliar words for preparation (4.4.2.3). This preparation can also be used to manage social interaction, such as preparing topics for social conversation or informing others about their limited English proficiency (4.4.2.3). With the development of AI tools, such preparation has become significantly more convenient in real-world contexts and has helped reduce anxiety during communication, such as role-play (Deep et al., 2025).

During conversations, students rely on non-verbal cues such as body language and alternative language as additional explanations when communication challenges arise (4.4.2.3). At the same time, they continuously evaluate whether the message was important enough to require clarification or adjustments to ensure it is delivered successfully.

Asking for an explanation is applied both in daily communication and academic study. Students regard this interaction as an approach to learn authentic knowledge for English speakers and also as an opportunity for clarity, as reported in 4.4.2.3

In addition, printed materials or written communication were used as a backup strategy to facilitate communication (4.4.2.3). These findings suggest that language learning strategies are not used independently. Although students proactively rely on socio-interaction strategies, they

also flexibly apply cognitive and affective strategies during interactions, activating them dynamically in response to communication demands (see 2.6.3.4).

5.3.3 Affective strategies

Affective strategies are integrated throughout the entire learning process. They help set goals to sustain motivation for learning English. During conversations, these strategies are positive and emotionally supportive, helping learners reduce language anxiety and adjust their learning strategies accordingly. While living abroad, they also promote well-being through ongoing self-regulation. Together, affective strategies often work collaboratively and interact socially to support effective learning (see Figure 4).

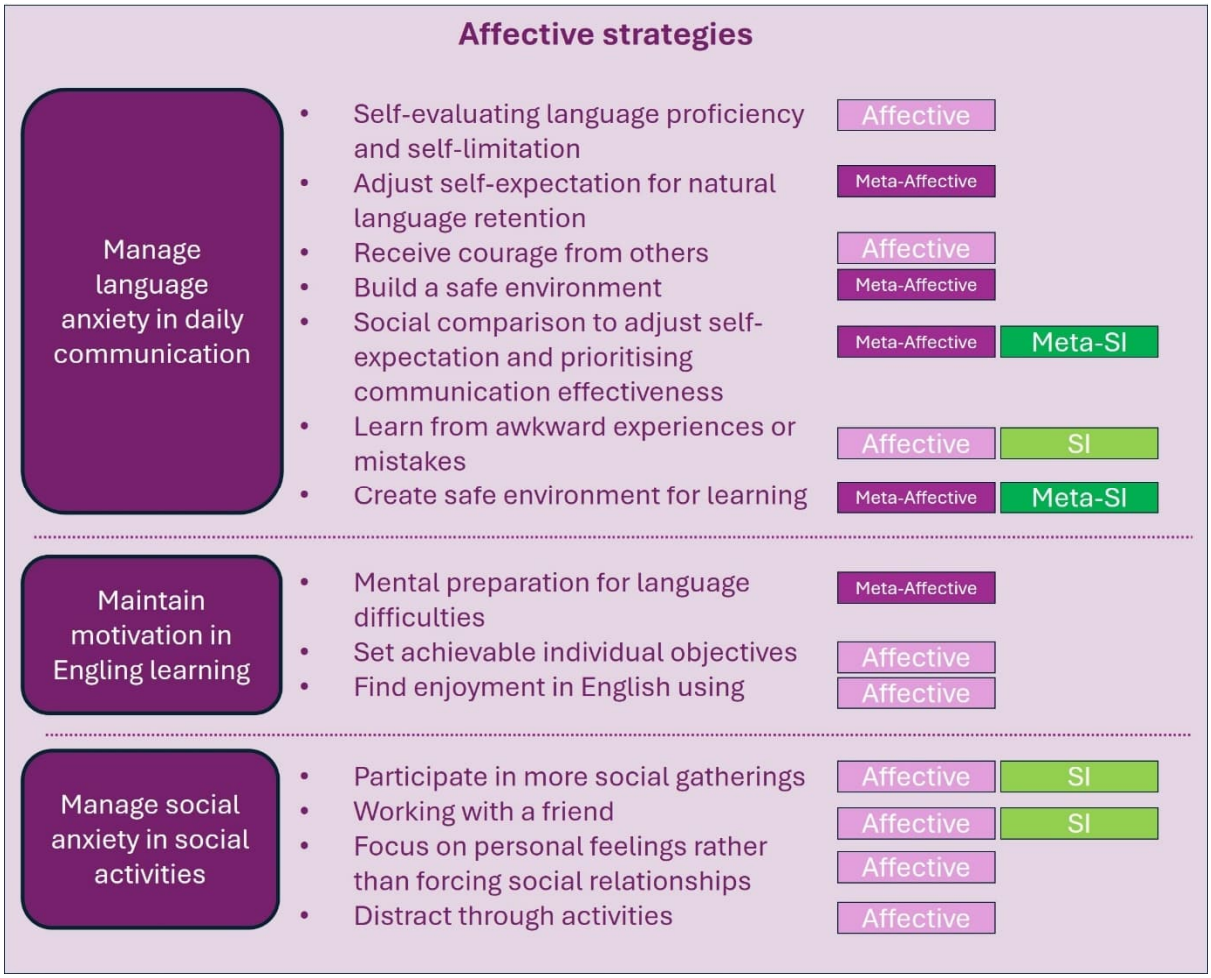


Figure 4. Affective strategies

5.3.3.1 Manage language-related anxiety

Although students did not explicitly mention meta-affective strategies, they frequently use self-regulation strategies to monitor themselves during communication (4.4.3.1). These include recognising self-limitation and avoiding force to speak until feeling ready. During the learning

process, students apply self-regulation strategies such as self-encouragement and adjust their expectations over time. Teachers observed that Chinese students tend to set relatively high expectations for their language progress, even though students themselves may not recognise the tendency, as reported in 4.3.4. This might indicate a discrepancy between what learners hope to achieve and the actual time needed for language development. As English learning requires time (see 3.1), such high expectations may lead students to view slow progress as personal failure, further increasing self-pressure (2.4.4). Through self-regulation, students may become more aware of their specific weaknesses and objectively assess their learning progress, thereby gradually rebuilding confidence (2.6.3.2).

Additionally, when students receive positive feedback from others, it further strengthens their confidence in their learning performance and makes them more comfortable with making mistakes (4.4.3.1). This aligns with the teacher's focus on creating a safe learning environment, allowing students to make mistakes and view them as constructive feedback and opportunities for learning rather than failure (4.4.3.1).

Social comparison is used to observe how other English speakers communicate in real life. This approach enables students to adjust their expectations for language proficiency and prioritise communication effectiveness over perfection (4.4.3.1). This process may help explain why reducing perfectionism helps learners to improve their overall communication performance, as reported in 2.4.1(b).

Overall, these findings suggest that self-regulation plays an important role in reducing language anxiety and shaping learners' emotional response to challenges (see 2.6.3.2 and 2.6.3.4). Some students view learning from awkward experiences as a deep impression (4.4.3.1). The view is also supported by teachers, who encourage students to view mistakes as opportunities for improvement rather than criticism, which, in turn, boosts language development (4.4.3.1).

5.3.3.2 Maintain motivation for English learning

Meta-affective mental preparation helps learners to set expectations for language difficulties in real English-speaking environments (2.6.3.2). It includes gathering information from others with similar experiences, setting individual language improvement objectives, and developing self-regulation to face anticipated challenges (4.4.3.2). This preparation could also guide the selection of language learning strategies, particularly when learners decide to engage in social interaction for language development (see 2.6.3.3). However, despite being regarded as an

effective approach, students still faced the challenges of language and cultural norms, as well as emotional difficulties when applying socio-interaction strategies in practice.

Teachers also emphasise that having clear goals may not be sufficient to sustain motivation, while discovering enjoyment in language use is more important for sustaining long-term motivation (4.4.3.2). This may help explain why some learners have the objective and willingness to improve their language proficiency but struggle to persist because they have not found an approach that can be both frequent language use and enjoyable, as reported in 4.3.4(b).

Moreover, students with strong desires for future development tend to actively seek out interactions and participate in social activities until they find activities that closely align with their interests (4.4.2.1). This finding indicates that goal-oriented learning may encourage learners to engage more actively with a wider range of language-learning strategies, as explained in 2.6.3.2 and 2.2.4.

5.3.3.3 Manage social anxiety in social activities

Affective strategies are applied throughout students' overseas learning experiences. Although students acknowledge the challenges of social activities, especially the fear of unfamiliar situations, they employ social-interaction strategies alongside affective self-regulation strategies to manage these difficulties. These include proactively participating in social activities, enabling students to reduce fear of unfamiliar situations and reshape perceptions of potential negative consequences. Students also seek support from peers, such as attending social activities with friends, to reduce nervousness in unfamiliar environments (4.4.3.3).

Although students recognise the difficulties of making cross-cultural friendships, they also choose to focus on personal feelings rather than force social relationships (4.4.3.3). It includes enjoying being alone or being distracted in personal hobbies to reduce stress. These behaviours indicate that learners flexibly apply affective strategies across a range of situations, including language learning, social activities, and self-care (see 2.6.3.2).

5.3.4 Different challenges, different strategies

This study found that students are usually flexible in applying various strategies to address different challenges in real-life contexts. Although not all challenges are fully addressed, this study suggests that the strategies within Oxford's (2011) self-regulation model are interconnected and mutually influence each other (2.6.3.4). Cognitive strategies help learners process linguistic information, social interaction strategies provide authentic opportunities for

learners to gain linguistic and cultural knowledge, while affective strategies support and foster positive emotion and maintain motivation throughout the learning process (see Figure 5).

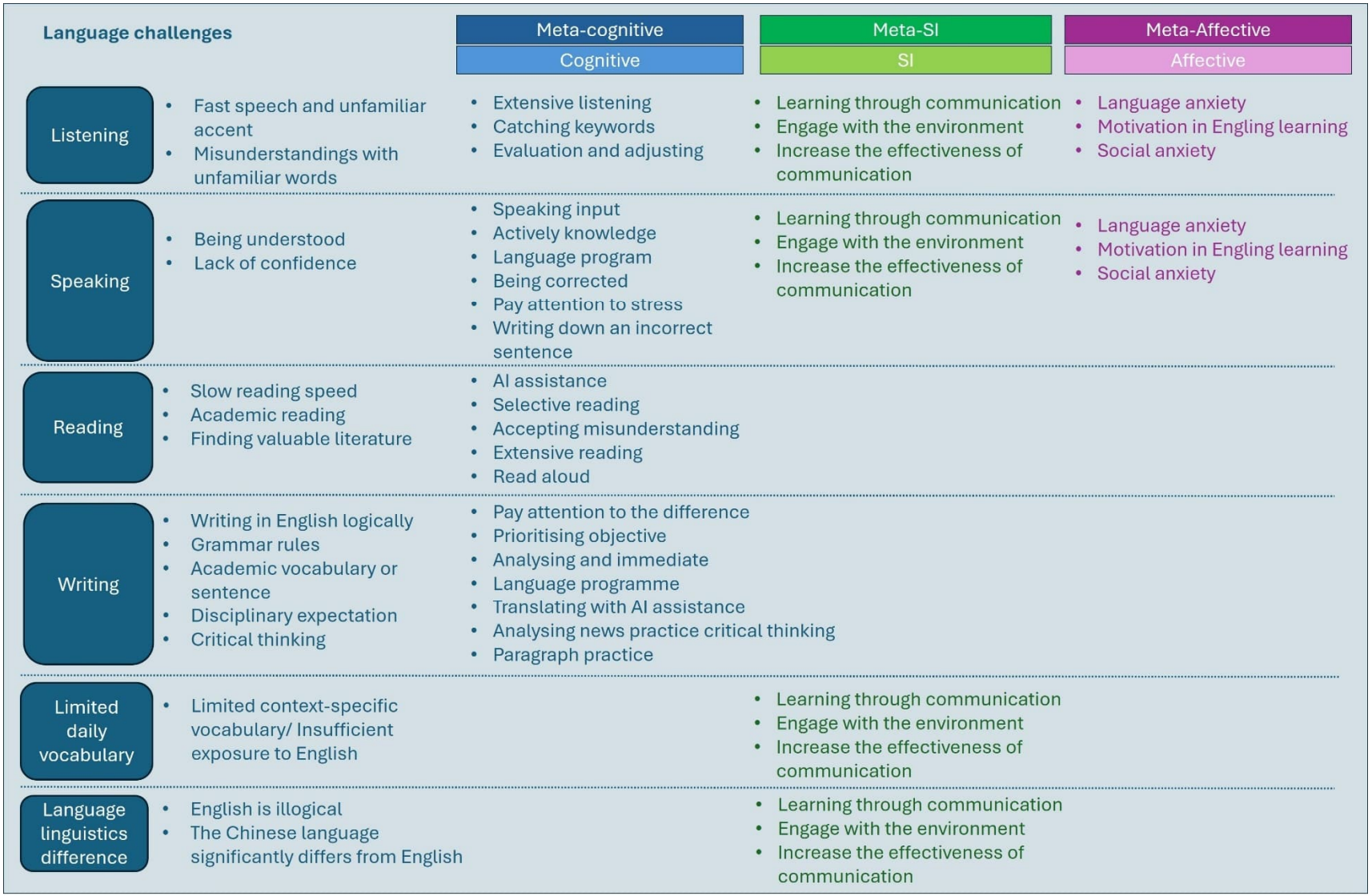


Figure 5. Challenges and S2R strategies

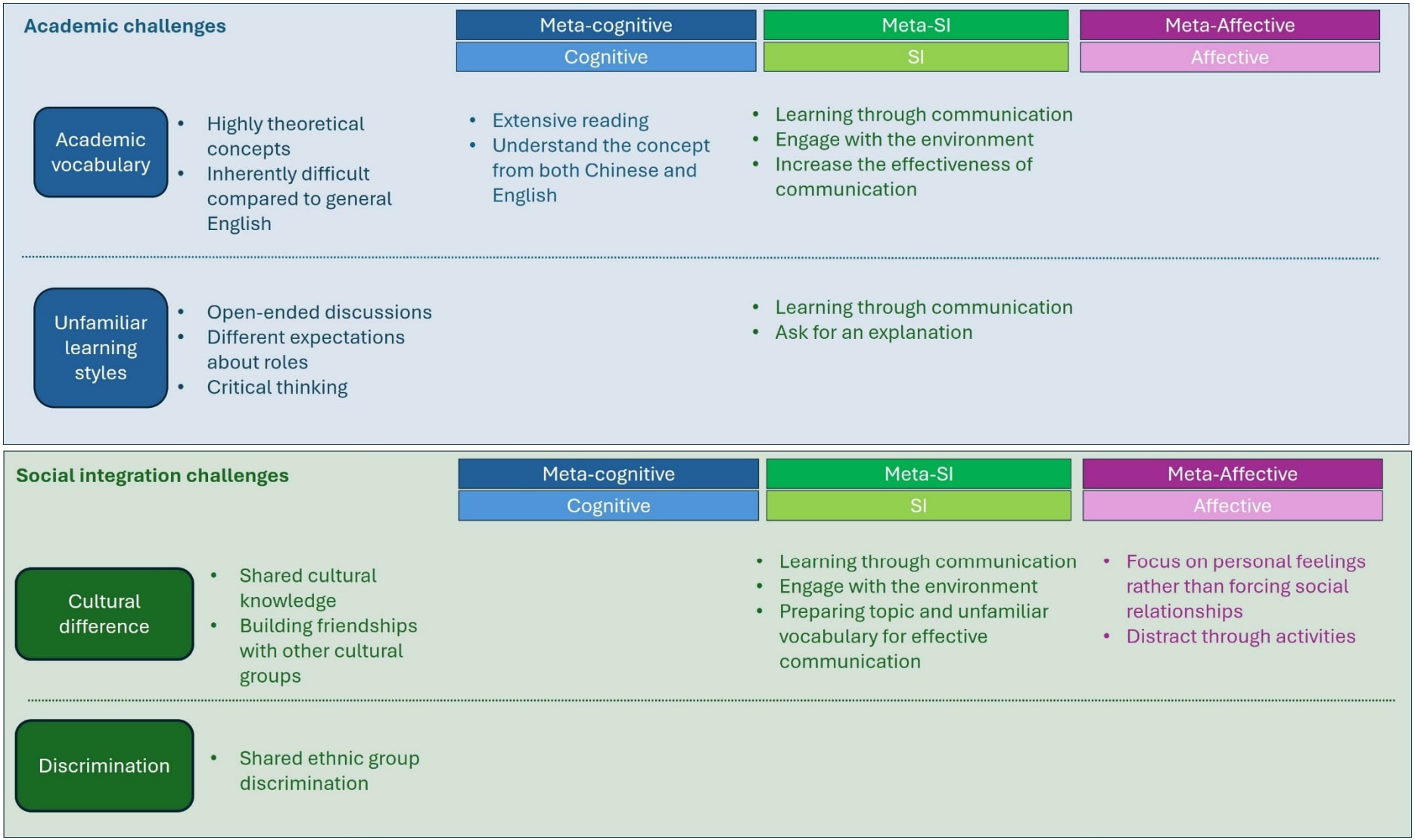


Figure 5. (Continued)



Figure 5. (Continued)

Overall, several interesting insights emerged from the findings. Cognitive strategies are mainly applied to address writing and reading challenges. Although students' knowledge of how to improve reading and writing is limited compared to teachers', they use these strategies mainly to complete academic tasks rather than for enjoyment or to develop language skills.

In addition, less specific strategies are mentioned for vocabulary development. The reason could be that students feel vocabulary memorisation is less effective, and they tend to focus more on developing spoken ability through daily communication rather than through deliberate vocabulary memorisation.

Finally, students reported some challenges, but they appear to lack effective strategies to overcome them. These challenges include academic pressure, anxiety about future employment, and discrimination. This indicates that the complexity of daily life challenges cannot be entirely managed through self-regulation strategies.

5.4 Limitations of the study

Before exploring the key insights emerging from this research, it is important to mention the limitations of the study. The students in this study were generally willing to engage with the English-speaking environment and improve their English proficiency. Thus, the findings primarily reflect one part of students and may not fully represent others who were less engaged in language learning or social integration.

In addition, language-learning experiences are dynamic, especially as the English education system in China continues to develop. As all the student participants were born before 2005, their experiences reflect only partly the issues of a specific educational period. To fully explore the effectiveness of learning strategies, further studies could compare Chinese students across different generations to examine language-learning challenges and strategies that change over time.

Finally, because spoken communication was the primary language-learning objective for most student participants in this study, it yielded rich insights into speaking-related challenges and strategies. While other skills, such as writing and reading, are not fully addressed, this may also reflect students' focus on oral communication and their more limited knowledge of strategies for developing academic literacy.

Despite these limitations, the study findings align with existing research showing that the challenges for Chinese students studying abroad have remained consistent. The identification

of key strategies emerging from this research using qualitative interviews produced rich data that adds useful insights to this research conversation that will be outlined in the next section.

6. Key insights and conclusions

This chapter summarises the main insights from this study. It begins by addressing the conclusions for each of the three research questions. Next, it emphasises insights that set this work apart from previous studies, offers suggestions for future research, and concludes with the study's final thoughts.

6.1 Answers to the research questions

After thoroughly exploring the rich information from participants' experiences, answers emerged that both support the existing literature and add useful insights from the study participants.

6.1.1 Question 1: Perceptions of English proficiency

There is no universal definition of good English proficiency. Students perceive language proficiency through various dimensions and set priorities based on personal needs, while teachers view proficiency as a whole ability, focusing on language use in context rather than performance in a single dimension in speaking, listening, reading and writing. In a real English-speaking environment, language proficiency requires the ability to apply linguistic knowledge appropriately, which requires cultural knowledge to support effective communication. Thus, language proficiency is better understood as a context-dependent ability rather than a fixed set of language skills. It should be evaluated holistically based on how effectively it addresses individual practical communication needs across various contexts, rather than relying on a single static measure.

6.1.2 Question 2: Students' experience of language-related challenges in New Zealand

When Chinese students study abroad, they face various challenges, including language and academic challenges as well as difficulties in daily life. When living and studying in the host country, students are required to interact with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. As a result, cultural differences, language anxiety, and slow language-learning progress, which are deeply embedded in their daily lives, often create additional pressure on Chinese students. Although some of these difficulties may partly be attributed to Chinese traditional teaching approaches, which contribute to uneven language-skill development and hinder students' ability to apply English knowledge in real-life communication contexts. Such experiences may also increase emotional stress and shape social attitudes towards language learning. However,

educational reforms and a changing social attitude towards English learning indicate that the younger generation may benefit from these changes and develop practical language skills.

In addition, teachers identify underlying factors that students often overlook, such as the inherent linguistic difficulties as well as the cultural and emotional. By combining students' and teachers' perspectives, it can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the sources of challenges students face in the New Zealand context. Understanding these underlying factors may also help guide the selection of appropriate language-learning strategies to address different challenges more effectively.

6.1.3 Question 3: Strategies for addressing study and everyday-life challenges

Effective language learning requires employing a range of strategies that are flexible enough to meet learners' needs across different communication contexts. Cognitive strategies are important for addressing language-related challenges. However, students may have limited knowledge of such strategies, but they may benefit from remaining open to learning new approaches or adjusting to others' strategies. Social interaction strategies are particularly valuable because they support the development of both language skills and social integration. By engaging in an English-speaking environment, learners gain authentic English input and opportunities for a more immersive learning experience. Concurrently, affective strategies are flexibly applied across various contexts in the learning process to manage stress and maintain motivation. Positive interactions with others can further support emotion regulation and the development of confidence in language use.

Effective language development depends on a combination of strategies. Learners need to adaptively choose, combine, and modify cognitive, affective, and social-interaction strategies based on their individual learning needs, challenges, and learning contexts, rather than relying on a single approach.

6.2 Interesting insights and further study suggestions

This study's findings closely align with existing research. However, it still addresses topics that were not thoroughly discussed before, such as learners' engagement, the connection between language learning and AI use, and discrimination within the same cultural background.

6.2.1 Students with less engagement in English learning

All the student participants demonstrated a willingness to improve their language proficiency and reported using a range of learning strategies. However, some students reported that Chinese students they interact with or have studied alongside seem less willing to face language-learning challenges. While they continue to live in an English-speaking environment, their responses to difficulties and pressure are not fully explored, especially their negative learning experiences and the reasons they gradually stop using strategies remain underdetermined. Further study of this more diverse group of learners may provide valuable insight into how learners respond differently to language-learning challenges and how their responses relate to long-term learning outcomes.

6.2.2 Language challenges and AI tools

From the students' perspective, academic challenges related to language were reported less frequently than other challenges. This might be explained by the development of AI tools, which students frequently reported using to address challenges across reading, writing, speaking, and listening tasks. As a result, some language-related difficulties may have been seen as more manageable than in previous studies. This suggests that AI is primarily used for problem-solving rather than for developing students' underlying academic skills.

AI technology offers numerous benefits but also presents potential risks in language learning. The development of AI tools has raised the convenience of reducing language barriers, such as providing constructive feedback, meeting personal needs, enhancing engagement and improving spoken proficiency without emotional anxiety (Deep et al., 2025; H. Al-khresheh, 2024; Żammit, 2025). The students in this study strategically used AI tools to support language learning rather than outsourcing tasks to AI in ways that would breach academic integrity. However, the question of whether AI assistance functions primarily as a dictionary or language-learning tool to support skill development, and how to use it properly in educational contexts, remains a significant and unresolved issue for students and schools. Therefore, further research is needed to examine how AI influences language-learning strategies and perceptions of learning challenges.

6.2.3 Shared ethnic group discrimination

Existing studies have extensively discussed the discrimination experienced by Chinese students from members of the host society (2.4.3). However, some students in this study reported receiving unfair treatment from Chinese New Zealanders, an issue that appears to have received

less attention in the existing literature. While the existing literature has paid limited attention to unfair treatment within Chinese communities, this finding is consistent with studies suggesting that social integration may be shaped not only by relationships with host communities but also by differences within a shared ethnic group. Although stereotypes stemming from negative experiences with other international students may partly explain such attitudes (Xie et al., 2019), differences in cultural identity may also lead to social distance within groups with similar backgrounds (Cao & Newton, 2019; K. T. Wang et al., 2024). However, the underlying cultural, identity, and emotion-related processes remain complex and underexplored in the current literature. Interestingly, participants in this study did not identify any strategies for overcoming these challenges, as this may have been their first experience of it.

6.3 Methodological considerations

The findings of this study demonstrate considerable variation in students' perceptions of language proficiency, challenges, and the selection of language learning strategies. Although students shared a common goal of improving their communication skills, their language proficiency and learning experiences differ. These differences indicate that language learning is shaped by individual experiences and contextual factors.

With a qualitative approach, the researcher can gain a deep understanding of students' experiences and perceptions of challenges. Through the interview, participants were able to reflect on their learning experiences and compare the differences between the Chinese and New Zealand environments. This approach not only provides insight into students' actions but also explains their actions, revealing how students shift their perceptions or adjust their learning strategies through social processes. These complex processes cannot be fully captured by quantitative research alone, as they involve reflection, interpretation, and contextual influences. Additionally, teachers' perspectives also helped explain some underlying causes of challenges that students used to overlook and highlighted the gap in students' knowledge of English learning strategies. This additional information offers a helpful guide for choosing learning strategies.

This study aligns with a social constructivist perspective, which views knowledge as constructed through social interaction. Students' understanding of language learning was not fixed but developed through interaction with people and environments. The finding also supports Oxford's (2011)S2R model by explaining how cognitive, affective, and social-

interaction strategies are interconnected and flexible, and how they are combined to address challenges in real-world situations.

6.4 Final thoughts

This study explores Chinese students' experiences with challenges when studying abroad and the language-learning strategies they used to address them. Although the findings largely align with previous studies, they also reveal that the students' challenges go beyond linguistic issues and are closely connected to cultural, social, and emotional factors. The findings further indicate that students can flexibly combine strategies according to their needs, even when they have limited knowledge of learning-strategies theory.

The study aims to provide practical insight into language learning strategies that may help Chinese students navigate challenges effectively when they study in New Zealand. By improving their language proficiency, it may support their social adoption therefore improving their satisfaction during study abroad.

Notably, different strategies appear to support different functions, and these change depending on students' selections during their interactions. Cognitive strategies serve as a foundation for learning and improving language skills and addressing academic tasks. Social interaction strategies support both spoken ability and social integration. Affective strategies help students manage stress and maintain motivation for language learning. These strategies often interact and reinforce each other in the learning process, rather than functioning independently. Some emotional pressure stems from Chinese culture, associated with academic success and self-improvement, but students may not even realise it. Through interaction with English speakers, students gradually adjust these expectations and reduce their unnecessary stress. However, this awareness often emerges through social interaction and comparison with others.

For students new to a different environment, they may benefit from actively engaging with it, exploring their individual learning needs, and experimenting with different strategies to identify the most suitable one to support their goals. At the same time, students should also remain open to learning new cognitive strategies and view language as a means to achieve communication goals, rather than a fixed measure of proficiency. Teachers may play an important role in helping students develop effective learning strategies while also pointing out obstacles students may not realise, such as cultural, emotional, and linguistic factors that may influence learning outcomes.

Ultimately, this study indicates that effective language learning involves the flexible use of cognitive, socio-interactional, and affective strategies to suit individual needs and contexts.

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Appendix 1. Interview guide for Chinese students

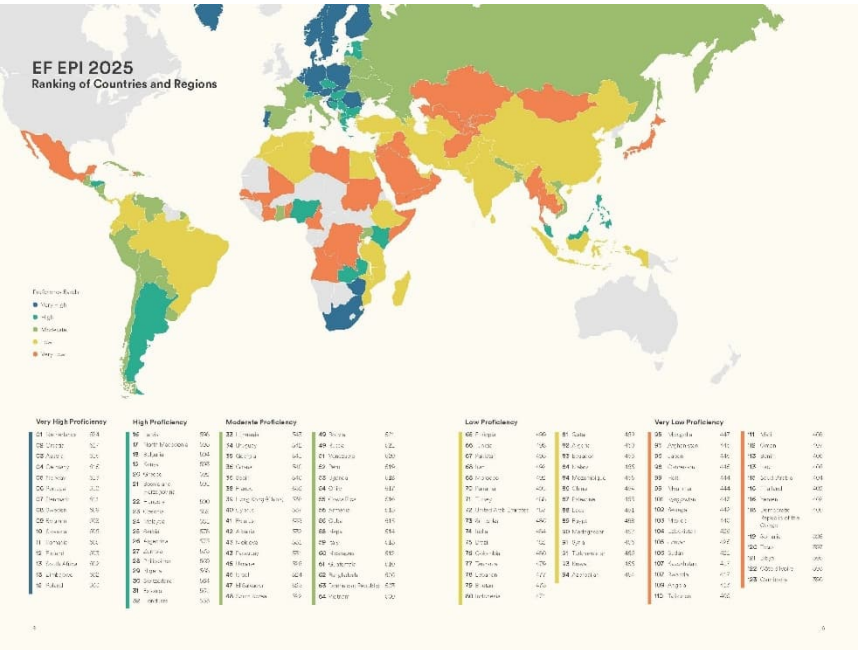
访谈提纲 Interview guide

本次访谈包括一个情境描述（vignette）和三个开放性问题，具体如下 The questionnaire will include one vignette and three open-ended questions, as follows:

情境描述 The vignette

中国学生通常从 8、9 岁开始接受全日制英语教育，有些甚至更早。然而，尽管投入了大量时间和精力，英语能力的发展往往未能尽达人意。许多中国学生在英语国家生活时，仍然会面临较大的语言挑战。Chinese students start full-time English learning at the age of 8-9, or even earlier. However, the considerable time and effort invested in learning English do not yield the expected levels of competence. Many Chinese students may still encounter significant language challenges when living in an English-speaking environment.

根据英孚（EF）最新 2025 年全球英语水平排名（详见如下），中国排名第 86，被归类为“低水平”（low proficiency）。这一类别的定义为：能够在英语国家作为游客进行基本交流，进行简单的日常对话，以及理解同事发送的基础电子邮件。Similarly, according to the latest EF’s language proficiency ranking, China ranks 86th among countries and is grouped in “low proficiency”, which refers to “navigate an English-speaking country as a tourist, and engage in small talk or understanding simple emails from colleagues”.



你如何看待这一排名？你是比较认同，还是不太认同？可以结合你的个人经历说明一下原因吗？What do you think about this rank? To what extent do you agree or disagree, and can you explain your reasoning based on your own experience?

访谈问题 Guide for learners

问题 1 Question 1:

根据你的理解，什么样的英语水平算是**“**比较好**”**的？**你可以**举一些具体例子吗？From your experience, what does good English proficiency look like? Can you give examples?

问题 2 Question 2:

在新西兰学习期间，你是否遇到过具体的语言方面的困难？可以分享一些具体场景吗？ Can you describe specific situations where you faced English language challenges during your academic study in New Zealand?

问题 3 Question 3:

面对这些语言挑战，你是如何应对的？可以具体说说你采取了哪些方法，以及哪些方法比较有效、哪些效果不佳吗？How did you deal with these language challenges? Can you describe what you did and what worked or didn’t work?

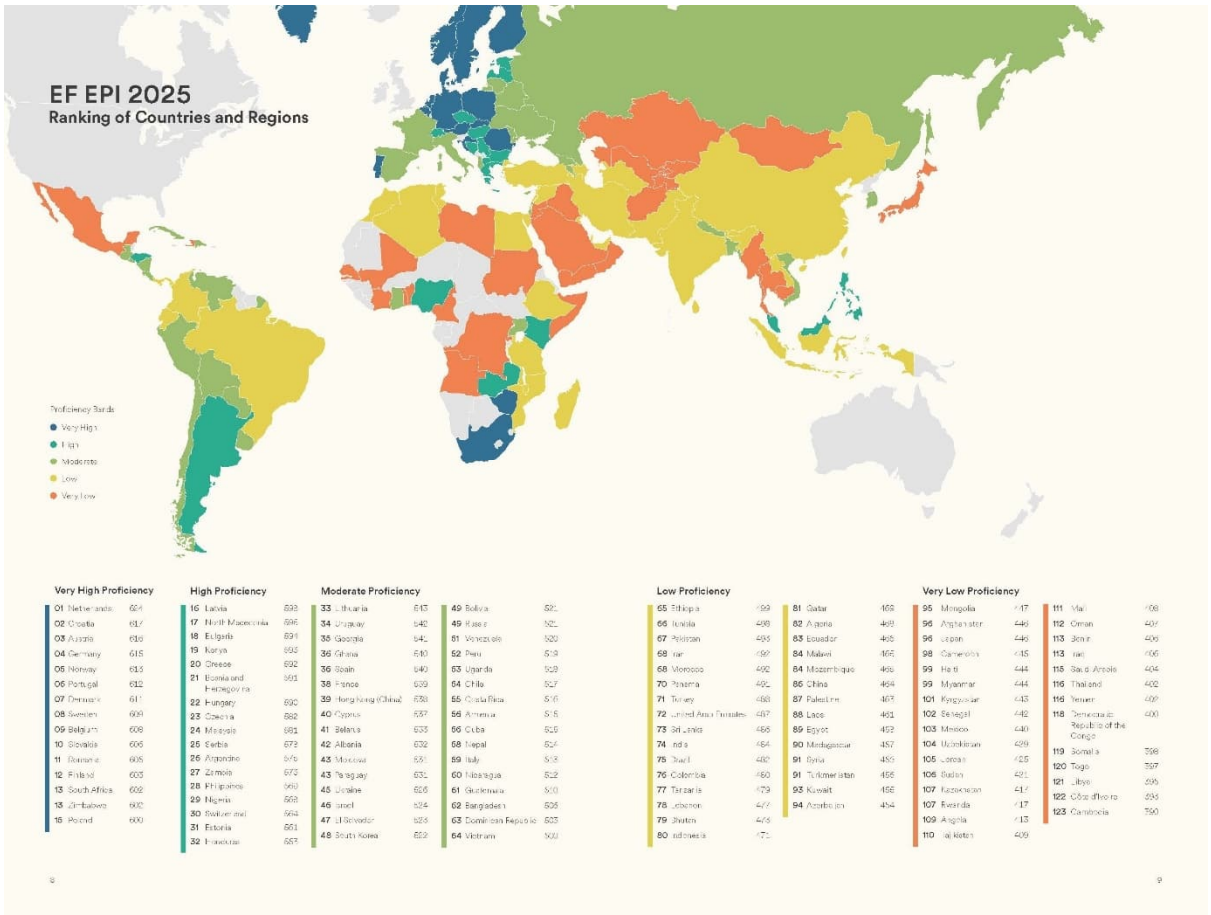
Appendix 2. Interview guide for ESL teachers

Interview guide

The questionnaire will include one vignette and three open-ended questions, as follows:

The vignette

Chinese students start full-time English learning at the age of 8-9, or even earlier. However, the considerable time and effort invested in learning English do not yield the expected levels of competence. Many Chinese students may still encounter significant language challenges when living in an English-speaking environment. Similarly, according to the latest EF's language proficiency ranking, China ranks 86th among countries and is grouped in "low proficiency", which refers to "navigate an English-speaking country as a tourist, and engage in small talk or understanding simple emails from colleagues". What do you think about this rank? To what extent do you agree or disagree, and can you explain your reasoning based on your own experience?



Guide for teachers

Question 1: In your experience, what does good English proficiency look like for ESL students studying at universities in New Zealand? Can you give examples?

Question 2: Based on your experience, what language challenges do ESL students commonly face? Can you describe a range of specific examples?

Question 3: What strategies have you used to help students address these challenges, and how effective have they been?

Appendix 3. Sample of data analysis

Data row ID	Main Category (Theme)	Sub-strategy / Code		# of students		# of mentions		Representative quote	Identifier
	Objective	Strategies	Action/Details	Meta-cognitive	Cognitive	Meta-cognitive	Cognitive		
4.3 Affective	*Grouped based on the researcher's own analysis, with wording refined using ChatGPT*	Strategies follow Oxford's S2R framework	*Grouped based on the researcher's own analysis, with wording refined using ChatGPT*						
4	**Listening**	**1.3 Obtaining Resources**	From media	3		3		Also, I really like listening to English songs. I started listening to English music when I was in primary school. When I listen to songs, I look at the lyrics and try to sing along, so I have to read and follow the words. I also like watching American TV dramas. I think these two things have helped my English a lot. Even my speaking ability—people sometimes say my English sounds quite okay—and I think that's largely because of music and TV shows.	MA4
5		**1.4 Organizing for cognition**	Only watch English vedio	1		1		For input, I also changed my habits. I used to mainly watch content on Bilibili, but now I've deleted it and switched to YouTube. I mostly avoid Chinese-language content and focus almost entirely on English content now. I think this has made a big difference.	BA3
14		**1.8 Evulating**	choose suitable material	1		1		I think everyone has their own accent and speaking speed. That's actually one of the most difficult parts for me — listening in real-life, face-to-face situations. I find it easier to listen online. When I study online, I tend to choose teachers with American accents, who speak more slowly and clearly, almost word by word. It's the same idea — if the entry barrier is too high, people don't want to engage. So I prefer content where the pronunciation is more open and clear, rather than more compressed or less distinct styles.	PHD5
6		**2.1 Using the Senses to Understand and Remember**	Translate & transcription from AI		6		6	Sometimes in class, I can't fully understand what the teacher is saying. In those cases, I use online transcription tools. Even though they are not perfectly accurate, they help me quickly get a general idea of what the lecture is about. We also have both online and in-person options for classes. Even when I attend in person, I still keep the online recording open and use the transcription function. I also go back to the recordings later. This is useful because it not only helps me understand the course content, but also lets me get used to different accents, especially local Kiwi accents. It also works like shadowing material for speaking practice. Since it is both academic content and real local speech, it becomes a very useful combination.	MA5