



Language Attrition for Chinese Engineering Freshmen in Chinese Context

ZHANG Yuhuan^{[a],*}

^[a]School of Foreign Languages, China West Normal University, China.

* Corresponding author.

Supported by the College Students' Cognitive Strategies and Their Language Attrition (No.13D036).

Received 28 November 2014; accepted 9 March 2015

Published online 25 April 2014

Abstract

This paper focuses on the common phenomenon that English attrition has taken place among Chinese engineering freshmen. It displays the reality of Chinese students learning English in Chinese context on the one hand and calls for teachers and students had better recognize the law of English and both make efforts to make learners reach the critical threshold in order to stop attrition on the other hand. Meanwhile, it points out that English language teaching in Chinese context will benefit from the researches on language attrition.

Key words: Language attrition; Engineering freshmen; Chinese context

Zhang, Y. H. (2015). Language Attrition for Chinese Engineering Freshmen in Chinese Context. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 10(3), 129-132. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/6870> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/6870>

INTRODUCTION

English is regarded to be the most useful language in the world and it becomes a worldwide language so it is not strange that more and more Chinese students are involved in studying it. Relatively, language attrition takes place in the process of studying English. It occurs everywhere among young students and old people the like. Otherwise, this phenomenon has attracted the attention of many scholars. That the first major conference was convened by Richard Lambert at the University of Pennsylvania,

May 1980 started the language skill loss research. At the meeting, their achievements were on foreign language loss, first language loss and dialect loss, mainly discussing research plans rather than research findings (Van Els, 1986, p.3). Then investigations of second language attrition have steadily accumulated. Many studies about second language attrition have been brought forward and Hansen and Hansen and Reetz-Kurashige (1999, p.5) listed these achievement: English loss by Hebrew L1 speakers; French loss by Dutch native speakers and by English-speaking Canadians; German loss by Turkish native speakers, and by English native speakers; L2 Hindi-Urdu by English speakers; L2 Portuguese by English/Hebrew bilinguals, and L2 Spanish by English speakers. An increasing number of Chinese people learn English but relating language attrition material is seldom. After 2000, Chinese experts have begun to do research relating to language attrition. Mr. Zhong Shuneng (2003) displayed the implication of our foreign language teaching based on the research of language attrition. After that, more and more materials about language attrition occur: The review of language attrition research by Cai Hansong and Zhou Rong (2004); the analysis of influencing factors from foreign language attrition by Ni Chuanbing and Yan Junrong (2006); Essential attributes of foreign language attrition by Ni Chuanbing (2007). On the basis of former achievements, this paper is to focus on the reality of engineering freshmen' foreign language attrition and suggests the implication which is helpful for our foreign language teaching in the situation of lacking enough language input.

1. LANGUAGE ATTRITION AND EXPLANATORY FACTORS

1.1 Definition and Classification of Language Attrition

Language attrition describes the loss of, or changes to, grammatical and other features of a language as a result

of declining use by speakers who have changed their linguistic environment and language habits. In such a situation there may, for example, be simplification in the tense system or in certain properties of subordinate clauses; some vocabulary items might fall into disuse and phonetic features may be restructured. These changes can be affected by features of the speaker's environment, but also by his or her attitudes and processes of identification (Schmid, 1997). Van Els (1986) divided language attrition in four different categories according to what is lost (first language attrition or second language attrition) and environment in which it is lost (in first language environment or in second language environment).

Table 1

Language	First language	Second language
Environment	L1 (First category)	L1 (Third category)
	L2 (Second category)	L2 (Fourth category)

From Table 1, the first category is loss of first language in first language environment, e.g. dialect loss within the dialect community or the loss of a certain minority's language in ethnic minorities' community. The second category is the loss of first language in second language environment, e.g. loss of native language by migrant people or the loss of our Chinese language when we go to foreign countries. The third category is loss of second language in first language environment, e.g. the loss of English in Chinese situation after a period of disuse, which is foreign language attrition. The fourth category is loss of second language in a second language environment. For example, a group of Chinese people, mastering English in China go to England for jobs and the research about their English attrition in England falls into the fourth category.

This paper focuses on second language attrition in the situation of lacking relative contexts. In details, that means the loss of some English elements, seen in inability to produce, perceive, or recognize particular rules, lexical items, concepts, or categorical distinctions due to Chinese influence.

1.2 Explanatory Factors

Many attempts were made to conduct language attrition research. Among the researcher about language attrition, Ni Chuanbing and Yan Jianrong (2006) gave the detailed explanation about language attrition as follows: 1) the level of language before attrition 2) the length of time since the onset of attrition 3) language contact 4) age 5) the language acquisition method 6) social and emotional factors and 7) literacy. This paper will mainly display the explanation in detail combined with college engineering students' reality.

2. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ENGINEERING STUDENTS' LEARNING ENGLISH AND LANGUAGE ATTRITION

Yağmur (2002, p.137) pointed out that language attrition is not an isolated phenomenon, rather it is a special case of variation in the acquisition and use of language/s and can best be studied, described, documented and explained within a large framework which includes all other phenomena of L1/L2 acquisition, bilingualism, language use/choice, code-switching/mixing, and language attitudes. Besides those, there are many factors that cause language attrition among engineering students. One attributes to students' own learning environment and proficiency. For Chinese college engineering students, they learn English in the situation of lacking English context. Besides it, other factors also cause their low proficiency in English language.

2.1 The Reality of Chinese Engineering Students Learning English

It is acknowledged that English has become the most common language and been used everywhere in the world, including the virtual world. From the standpoint of most people, people who are good at English will have a good job with a high salary. Therefore, the number of learning English people has been increasing. Learning English fever has hit China. Colleges used to combine graduation certificates with the result of passing College English Test Band 4 (CET-4). The reality of English learning is that many Chinese people have labored on it but only to find it is a waste of time and energy. In other words, their language proficiency is not so good.

Through talking with other English teachers who mainly teach engineering students English, the students' level of education has to influence language attrition research to a large degree. Köpke and Schmid(2002:11) showed Jaspaert&Kroon's pilot study on attrition among 30 Italian immigrants in The Netherlands. The result showed that their educational level had a great effect on the tests, especially text editing and vocabulary tests where evidence for attrition was found. For engineering freshmen, they have just finished their entrance examinations. Study in senior school is so tough; therefore, they need a long time to adjust themselves after graduation from middle school. During the long entertainment time, learning English is none of their business and far from them. At that time, their learned English is not related with their future major. Then it is not strange that language attrition occurs.

When the engineering freshmen enter the university, most of them have no any English contact for at least four months (for freshmen, they usually have military training in September and they have classes after the

National Day). Many experts through their tremendous studies reach an agreement that language attrition begins at the exact moment when the language of people's environment changes or people stop using the language. Chinese always plays the dominant role in the process of engineering freshmen learning English in lacking target language context. Complete immersion in the dominant language environment leads to access to English gradually becoming slower and reducing the amount of English vocabularies, phrases, etc. The length of time since the onset of attrition also has a great effect on their attrition. The longer the time since the onset of attrition is, the more they will attrite.

Another factor which is estimated to influence language attrition is attrited language contact and use. For engineering freshmen at most of Chinese universities, they have four classes each week. Each class has 40 or 45 minutes. If they just only use the limited time to learn English, they will not achieve the high level of language in our eye's mind. Learning a foreign language is a tough process and needs learners to spend increasing time. Otherwise, it is hard for them to master the language. During the limited time, the amount of language contact is not so much. What we do not feel strange that engineering freshmen even in English classes express their ideas or answer the questions in Chinese even in English classes. What's worse, most of the English teachers do not speak English all the time, perhaps half and half.

The reality is most engineering freshmen do not enter the top universities in China because their English entrance examinations are not so good. They choose engineer as their major because they have been ready to give up English learning. Moreover, that idea that they will not make money by way of speaking English has been rooted deeply in their minds. Therefore, it is common that many engineering freshmen sleep in English class and keep silent. What's worse, their teachers from middle school told them that they would have a lot of spare time to entertain themselves. In the beginning, they usually can not adjust themselves to the universities because most are different from that in middle school. They are busy attending different mass organizations. They are puzzled about what to do next and how to do. Thus, they do not center on their studies, not to mention their English studies.

2.2 Factors From the English Teachers

Besides the factors existing in Chinese engineering students learning English, teachers become another important factor which influences the level of engineering students' English. Most of English teachers have no relative storage of engineering knowledge. What most have are just English words, vocabulary, useful expressions in daily life and English grammar. The teachers' English knowledge is independent of engineering students' majors. What the teachers care is whether their

classes can be finished or not. They do not care whether their English classes are useful to help the engineering students' academic course study. What is the common situation for most of English teachers is they have just used the one textbook for a long time. On other words, they just repeat their work on the same level; therefore, they usually can not keep pace with knowledge changes and improvement.

Another is about that most English teachers have no choice to store more knowledge about professional engineering, as huge teaching workloads force them to be busy. They themselves are not familiar with the engineering terms. How do they teach engineering students about engineering contents? What's worse, students can not see the English teacher even if they meet problems in their learning English because most English teachers have no fixed office to work. Except the limited class time, there is not communication between them and students do not want to turn to English teacher just through the limited contact.

2.3 Factors From the Engineering Freshmen

Far more than that, freshmen's own factors also contribute to language attrition, such as the critical threshold, language attitude, motivation and the like.

It is acknowledged that Chinese university students' low English proficiency is still common even if they work hard to study English for more than 6 years, of course including engineering freshmen. As engineering freshmen, they have much more spare time, compared with it in high school. Most of them come to a strange city, full of excitement and curiosity. No contacting any books for more than five months, they have no idea about their own majors. They are confused, disappointed and have experienced great differences from high schools, accompanied by fears of their future. With negative emotions, a long time of no contacting English and the bad threshold, their English linguistic system is not immune to attrition.

It is pointed out that language attitude, motivation and other affective factors have played essential roles in language progression and attrition. The researchers suggest that attitudinal/ motivational factors may influence people's attrition primarily in the process of acquisition, mainly influencing the level of competence (Hansen & Reetz-Kurashige, 1999, p.8). For engineering freshmen, they feel that English learning will not be associated with their future professions, so it is a waste of time to spend much time learning English on campus. Moreover, the English teachers lack professional engineering knowledge. That causes to breeding the idea that it is not necessary to learn English. Even some English engineering terminology existing, they just do rote learning. Thus, it is not effective to study English well. Without the instruction time or immersion time of English, their English attrition takes place inevitably.

3. APPLICATIONS TO FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING IN CHINA

Without the English learning context, many factors will accelerate language attrition, so it is essential for engineering freshmen to recognize the regularity and principles of language acquisition and attrition in order to overcome language attrition.

Engineering freshmen must reach the lowest level of the critical threshold. It is better that English teachers use different ways to increase input and students increase their own input through extensive reading or contacting English materials. Meanwhile, students grasp chances to make drills. Length of time since the onset of attrition determines the level of language attrition. Language attrition process is displayed -- attrition takes place quickly at the first; then it is not apparent in the middle and it is quick again in the end. According to the law of language attrition, it is helpful that English teachers suggest increasing English input and students review what they have learned on time in order to solidate and reinforce their English abilities. It is beneficial for learners to take a proficiency-oriented approach from the beginning of learning English.

Affective factors have a decisive effect on language learning and attrition. Positive affective factors can help learner arouse their interest of learning English, and can be transformed into driving factors of learning. It is good to foster a right and active attitude of target language learning, such measures like this: overcoming the psychological barriers, reducing anxiety and building confidence....

CONCLUSION

This paper falls into several parts. It starts with combing briefly the relative research on language attrition home and abroad on the one hand and lists the types of language attrition on the other hand. It is generally assumed in language attrition studies that factors influence attrition. Then it displays the reality of Chinese engineering freshmen learning English and factors having a great

effect on attrition mainly from English teachers and learners. As a matter of fact, all the factors influencing language acquisition also are interference or acceleration for attrition. Factors influencing language attrition are sophisticated, so this paper does not take into account that all cases with different factors occur in language attrition. It is greatly beneficial to do researches on language attrition for foreign language teaching in China. It can be explored that the next researchers doing language attrition concentrate their attention on English course design and pedagogy in China which would be resistant to attrition.

REFERENCES

- Cai, H. S., & Zhou, R. (2004). A survey of language attrition studies. *Psychological Science*, (4).
- Hansen, L., & Reetz-Kurashige, A. (1999). Investigating second language attrition: an introduction. In L. Hansen (Ed.), *Second language attrition in Japanese contexts*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Köpke, B., & Schmid, M. S. (2002). Language attrition. In M. S. Schmid, B. Köpke, M. Keijzer, & L. Weilemar (Eds.), *First Language Attrition*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co..
- Ni, C. B. (2007). Essential attributes of foreign language attrition. *Journal of Foreign Languages*, (1).
- Ni, C. B., & Yan, J. R. (2006). Analysis of influence factors on foreign language attrition. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*.
- Schmid, M. S. (1997). *Language attrition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Van Els, T. (198). An overview European research on language acquisition. In B. Weltens, B. de Bot, T. van Els (Eds.), *Language attrition in progress*. Dordrecht: Foris Publications.
- Yağmur, K. (2002). Issues in finding the appropriate methodology in language attrition research. In M. S. Schmid, B. Köpke, M. Keijzer, & L. Weilemar (Eds.), *First language attrition*. Amsterdam; Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Co..
- Zhong, S. N. (2003). The implication of language attrition study to foreign language teaching and research in China, *Foreign Language Education*, (1).