

# Chinese Education and Learning Activities Outside of Class: What Lies Beyond Basic Education?

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Received: September 17, 2015 Accepted: October 19, 2015 Online Published: March 23, 2016

doi:10.5539/ies.v9n4p54

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ies.v9n4p54>

## Abstract

A considerable number of studies have investigated students' learning in class and outside of class across subjects such as English, mathematics, and physical education in China and other countries. Scholars have found that students' activities in class and outside of class are closely related to their learning outcomes, self-regulated learning and future development of transition strategies. However, the relationship between Chinese basic education and students' choices of activities outside of class has rarely been addressed. Using mixed research methods, this paper examines the relationships between Chinese students' basic education and their choices of English activities at university. The results showed that the participants' basic education and senior high school rankings had significant influences on their choices of learning activities out of the class at university level. The paper also highlights occurrences beyond the classroom in the 21st century China.

**Keywords:** learner autonomy, curriculum reform, Chinese Basic education, learning activities, knowledge transition

## 1. Introduction

Given the top-down national English language syllabus and curriculum reforms, diverse English language pedagogies, teaching and learning resources and activities must be used both in and out of class in China. In the first-round national English language syllabus and curriculum reform in the 1990s, the Ministry of Education (MOE) emphasised that improving students' reading and writing abilities remained the most important task for teachers in schools rather than enhancing students' communicative language skills. Subsequently, teaching materials were developed by the Longman Publishing Group in the UK. Passages and articles in textbooks were chosen with a focus on drilling students on vocabulary and grammatical usage. However, an increasing number of arguments and critiques of this approach have appeared in recent studies (Benson, 2011; Li & Ni, 2012; Richards, 2015) claiming that focusing solely on English reading and writing in English language teaching is likely to increase the number of "mute" and "deaf" learners in China. That is, a large number of Chinese university graduates who achieved high scores on the College English Test Band 4 (CET-4) and the College English Test Band 6 (CET-6) may not be able to communicate effectively with English native speakers.

Furthermore, because of the high demands of globalised business and economy, the MOE realised that fostering communicative skills is pivotal for students to improve the four basic English language skills (speaking, listening, writing and reading). Based on this aim, the second-round national English language syllabus and curriculum reform was initiated in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The MOE emphasised the important role of the development of quality education in enhancing students' general development. In particular, understanding how to guide students rather than simply imparting knowledge to them is essential for teachers in practice (Ministry of Education, 2007). The new reform established three trends in English language learning and teaching: implementing technology in teaching and learning (e.g., Web-based learning, digital teaching and computer-assisted teaching), fostering students' learning autonomy, and enhancing teachers' education.

Benefitting from two rounds of reforms, English language teaching and learning have developed in all aspects. These developments include an increased number of studies that have focused on this research field, a large number of international and domestic conferences discussing EFL in China, and a significant increase in funding

opportunities for applications related to language learning and teaching in China. However, despite the large number of studies examining English language teaching and learning for all levels of students in China, few researchers have focused on exploring the influence of Chinese basic education on students' choices of English activities outside of class at the university level. This study thus aims to answer the following three research questions:

- 1) How does students' Basic Education (primary and junior middle school) influence their choices of English activities outside of class in universities?
- 2) Do students' senior high school ranks influence their choices of English activities outside of class in universities?
- 3) What lies beyond these choices?

## 2. Literature Review

The balanced development of education is critical to social and economic development, human wellbeing, and social stability. Zhai (2007) reported that although the gap between rural and urban areas was decreasing with regard to students' enrolment rates, the development of educational infrastructure, and teachers' education, a significant gap between funding allocation and the financial budget remained in China. Consequently, this imbalance is likely to broaden the gap between junior middle schools and senior high schools in relation to teachers' and students' resources and the financial budget. From this perspective, the overall development of basic education remains uneven, and some students are unable to enjoy equal rights in education.

### 2.1 Basic Education in China

China's basic education includes pre-school, a nine-year compulsory education and a standard high school education. Chinese scholars have different opinions on whether senior high school education should be included in China's basic education, as it is not compulsory for all students. Based on a document by the MOE (2004), a standard high school education can be considered part of the Chinese basic education system. Students who begin senior high schools are usually 15 years old and finish this schooling in three years. However, China's basic education does not include vocational high schools and professional training, whose students are also 15 to 18 years old. Students who are disabled are allowed to receive special education in schools that are fully funded by the government. For example, students who are blind can receive basic education in special schools for the blind, and those who are hearing impaired can attend special deaf-mute schools (Y. Wang, 2012).

China's pre-school education less formal than that in Western countries (e.g., U.K. and U.S. K-12 education) because of uneven financial allocation and unbalanced regional development. For example, a large gap between rural areas in western China and urban coastal cities in south-eastern China has long existed (L. Wang, 2010). In addition to the uneven development between rural areas and urban areas, numerous researchers (Robinson & Yi, 2008; L. Wang, 2010; X. Zhang & Kanbur, 2005; Zhao, 2009) have found imbalances even within the same provinces/communities, including imbalances between metropolitan resources in education, the economy, and health and those in other small cities. Zhao (2009) claimed that the Chinese central government reshaped the structure from total decentralisation to some degree of recentralisation to demonstrate equality in inputs into Basic Education. However, it is unclear how this approach has progressed and how the central government and the local township government have cooperated. Because of the informal style of Chinese pre-school education, the current study did not consider this level of schooling.

Compared with pre-school education, the nine-year compulsory education programme has gained more attention from scholars because it is a more formal institution in China (Jiang, Lu, & Throssell, 2012; L. Wang, 2010; Wu, 2010). The nine-year compulsory education system includes six years of elementary school and three years of junior middle school education. Although the majority of studies have focused on the nine-year compulsory education, the uneven development between the West and East, between rural and urban areas, and between ethnic minority communities and central China remains striking (L. Wang, 2010). As argued by Zhao (2009), the degree to which the educational system has been reshaped from decentralisation to recentralisation by the central government is not clear and is likely to lead to greater gaps between rural and urban areas. Consequently, such issues are likely to be raised by those who need special education in rural areas. Using case studies, Jiang (2012) demonstrated the imbalance of resources that children from lower- and higher-income families can obtain from the government, schools, and teachers in Eastern China. This finding is supported by Xin and Kang (2014), who claimed that "China's compulsory education has entered a new phase: promoting equitable and balanced development" (p. 49). Although many challenges are involved in the nine-year compulsory education, a recent study showed significant achievements in the three stages of China's basic education (Xin & Kang, 2014). At the

first stage, from 1980 to 1985, the MOE promulgated the “Interim Provisions on the Basic Requirements for Universalising Elementary Education” (B. Wang, 2009), and establishment of compulsory education in China nationwide at the second stage between 1986 and 2000. The most important benchmarks were the New Compulsory Education Law and free compulsory education implemented during 2001 and 2008.

Generally, standard high schools are conducted for three years in public form, whereas vocational schools, international schools and professional training schools are operated by the private sector in China. In particular, an increasing number of international schools in Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou are symbols of the “rich generation”, and their tuition is far more expensive than that of public high schools. As noted by Traub (2014), differences and imbalances between elite senior high schools and ordinary senior high schools exist in large cities such as Shanghai. The evidence is given below:

“The country’s business and finance capital is one of its richest cities, and the majority of China’s children still live in poor rural areas. There is a profound difference between the best public high schools in Shanghai and the education a peasant kid gets” (Traub, 2014, p. 5).

Traub (2014) also argued that a substantial number of migrant workers moved from rural areas to large cities, but their children were refused acceptance into public schools simply because they lacked a local household residency permit. Hence, to some extent, the Chinese household registration system determines the quality of education to which children have access.

In the last 10 years, researchers have paid greater attention to social issues in relation to this household registration system (K. W. Chan, 2010; Feng & Lu, 2013; Traub, 2014). These social issues not only include the quality of basic education but are also linked to housing prices, social justice, and migrant labourers’ wellbeing and social welfare. According to Feng and Lu (2013), influenced by the One-Child Policy, Chinese parents put considerable effort into their children’s basic education. Because parents recognise the importance of the household residency permit, housing prices in large cities (e.g., Shanghai) have increased significantly. However, because of a recent reform called “Attending Nearby Schools”, obtaining a local household residency permit is not sufficient to guarantee that children can access the best public education from elementary to senior high school in China (Feng & Lu, 2013, p. 294). This reform means that children whose household residency location is not close to elite public schools cannot be accepted into these schools regardless of their efforts. Consequently, housing prices, living costs and family expenses are all increasing substantially near these highly ranked public schools. Moreover, social justice, migrant labourers’ wellbeing and social welfare are important factors affecting social stability and national integration in China (Jiang et al., 2012; Wei & Hou, 2010).

To achieve equality in basic education, the MOE (2000a) has promoted distance learning and ICT application in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the MOE (2000b) initiated an ICT curriculum reform that requires the implementation of a compulsory course on ICT as an important technological skill in all primary and middle schools. This nationwide reform provided children in rural areas and western China with greater access to that which is found in large cities. With the increasing popularity of the ICT course, online resources and distance learning classrooms can provide an alternative educational strategy for children living in rural or remote areas. The achievement of ICT application in Chinese basic education is evidenced in the following quote:

By the end of 2006, the ratio of the number of students in schools to that of computers rose from 35:1 in 2003 to 19.38:1. At the end of 2007, the goal of ‘All Schools Connected’ project was basically achieved: nearly all general high schools and more than 80% of secondary schools could access the Internet (over 90% in urban areas and over 70% in rural areas). Furthermore, more than 70% of primary schools could log on to the Internet. The preliminary requirement of ICT in education had been met. (J. Zhang, Fang, & Ma, 2010, p. 569)

## 2.2 English Learning Out of Class

English language learning has been investigated from various perspectives, including its relationships with English language learning strategies (e.g. Dörnyei, 2005; Oxford, 2011; Wen, 1995), learning styles (e.g. Ellis, 2008; Wong & Nunan, 2011), learner autonomy (Benson, 2001, 2011; Dam, 1995), and learner motivation (e.g. Chen, Warden, & Chang, 2005; Dörnyei, 2009). Both formal and informal activities are regarded as important approaches to the accumulation of learning experiences (Colley, Hodgkinson, & Malcolm, 2003). Compared with classroom activities, the more relaxed and informal style of learning experiences is more easily accepted by students, and these experiences are beneficial for students’ future language development (Lai, Zhu, & Gong, 2014). As Richards (2009) argued, “It has taken us a while to realize that while good teaching is no less important than ever, today’s learners are not as dependent on classroom-based learning and teaching as they used to be” (p. 10). In particular, English activities outside of class are essential to Chinese students. According to

Wilhelm and Pei (2008), instrumental contexts, predominantly the use of the Grammatical Translation Method and the Audio-Lingual Method in English language teaching in China, are critical. This finding is supported by Song (2013), who found that the major forms of classroom instruction in English classes in China were grammar exercises, translation and Q&A sessions. In this case, developing English learning activities for Chinese learners outside of class is both necessary and important.

In recent years, the use of technology in English language learning and teaching outside of class has been explored as an alternative option for students in rural and remote areas in China. According to a recent study undertaken by Lai and her colleagues (2014), participants from two high schools spent an average of 4.52 hours each week using technology to support their English language learning outside of English class. One of the results was that the use of diversified technologies had a significant influence on confidence and enjoyment in learning English. That is, “the more learning needs the participants tried to meet with the help of technology, the greater their confidence and enjoyment in learning English” (Lai et al., 2014, p. 292). Similarly, Richard (2015) investigated the activities used by non-Chinese learners, and the results showed that the use of various forms of technological tools, such as chat rooms and self-access centres, can assist in maintaining and enhancing English proficiency. The use of Web 2.0 tools by Chinese EFL learners has also been explored by scholars. For example, Zhang (2010) found that Chinese EFL students’ most preferred activities using technology were listening to English songs and watching English movies. In her study, the time that Chinese students spent using Web 2.0 tools (such as online forums and online class) to develop their English language communicative skills were limited, and the skills that they acquired were only fundamental. Therefore, previous studies suggest that the use of technology has a positive relationship with the development of students’ English proficiency. However, Chinese EFL students still have limited time and skills to develop their communicative skills via Web 2.0 technologies.

### **3. Method**

Mixed research methods were utilised in this study. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2010, p. 5) define the mixed method as “the broad inquiry logic that guides the selection of specific methods and that is informed by conceptual positions common to mixed methods practitioners (e.g., the rejection of “either-or” choices at all processes)”. The use of mixed research methods yields much richer data compared with a single research paradigm of. Moreover, numeric data from the survey and textual data from open-ended interviews and personal reflective writings can provide a data source for triangulation in the research study.

#### *3.1 Research Design*

The questionnaire was designed based on Chan’s (2002) research, which investigated students’ learning motivation and their activities in and out of class in Hong Kong. However, the questionnaire used in this research was modified to fit the educational system and cultural context in mainland China. The questionnaire was divided into four parts: students’ background information, English learning activities outside of class, learning motivation, and scenarios. There were 21 question items that were designed to investigate students’ English learning activities out of the class. These activities included both traditional learning activities, communicative activities, and web-based online activities, such as reading English books, using chatting rooms to communicate with friends, and joining in English speaking contest. A five-item Likert scale for student responses was used in the design of the first three sections. Multiple-choice questions and comments were used to collect numeric and textual data in the last scenario section. This paper focuses on exploring numeric data only in the first three sections. As students’ backgrounds and learning styles differ (Kolb, 1984), personal reflective writing was also employed as a tool to gather qualitative data in this study. Based on Lawrence (2013), reflective writing is regarded as an effective exercise for self-assessment and self-reported values. In this activity, students list their strengths and weakness based on their learning experiences.

In the first stage, because the questionnaire was originally designed in English, a bilingual independent back-translation method was adopted to translate the English into Chinese. This method is recognised as an effective way to test the accuracy and validity of cross-cultural research studies (Epstein, Osborne, Elsworth, Beaton, & Guillemin, 2015; van de Vijver & Leung, 1997). The English version of the questionnaire was translated into Chinese by the first author, who is fluent in both English and Chinese and who specialises in the research field of language learning and teaching. The questionnaire was independently back-translated by three other scholars with excellent knowledge of Chinese and English. Bilingual scholars were invited to participate in the interpretative process, as they play an important role in ensuring the validity and reliability of the research tool (Epstein et al., 2015). General linguistic agreement between the first author and other three bilingual scholars was achieved. The wording of the Chinese version of the questionnaire reflected only minor differences.

After the adjustments and recommendations of the three scholars and the research team members, the final Chinese version of the questionnaire was developed and sent to participants via Survey Monkey.

In the second stage, the participants' personal reflective writings were collected as a form of textual data and were analysed using NVivo version 10. A three-step coding process was employed in the analysis process (Creswell, 2012). First, the researcher was familiar with the raw textual data and with the phenomenon and concepts. Second, these concepts were extracted and coded to a higher level. Third, themes emerged from the comparisons and generalisations at the second level. During this process, the researcher had the opportunity to revisit the previous studies and gained a better understanding of the participants' feelings and perceptions.

Ten participants were invited to participate in a personal reflective writing task, but for personal reasons, two students dropped out in the middle of the data collection process. Thus, eight students completed and submitted their writing. The participants were composed of six female and two male students. All the six female students were in social sciences, including five undergraduates and one postgraduate student. The two male counterparts came from the Faculty of Science in the two universities, including one undergraduate and one postgraduate.

To make students feel comfortable using their preferred language, all participants were allowed to write in either English or Chinese (Mandarin). However, all of the writing samples gathered were written in English, indicating that the participants felt confident in using English to express their perceptions in their writing.

### 3.2 Data Collection

The quantitative and qualitative data were collected between January and June 2015 in China. The participants were randomly chosen from two Chinese universities. One is research intensive and the other is teaching intensive university in China. Both the universities are comprehensive in a broad of disciplines. . Therefore, the samples can be representatives of Chinese university students.. In this study, the researchers used SPSS version 22 and NVivo 10 software to analyse the quantitative and qualitative data, respectively.

### 3.3 Sampling

The participants (n=105) came from 17 provinces, 3 municipalities and 1 autonomous region and included 23 males and 82 females. Most participants were from coastal provinces (Guangdong, Shandong, Zhejiang, and Fujian) and the two largest municipalities. Only Sichuan Province was neither near the sea nor close to a municipality in China.

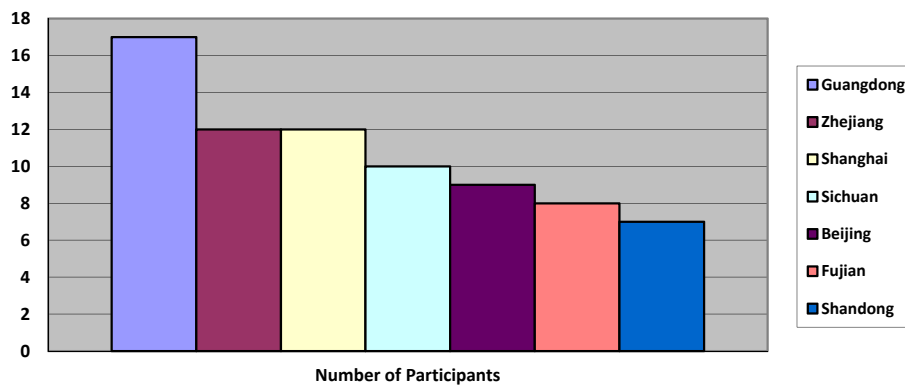


Figure 1. The seven largest areas based on the participants' geographical information

In relation to their length of study and disciplines in universities, the number of students in their second (n=34) or third year (n=40) was larger than the number of students in their first (n=7) or fourth year (n=21) at universities. Among these participants, only three students were postgraduate students; the others were undergraduates. The number of participants whose discipline was in the humanities (n=51) was slightly larger than those in a science field (n=41). The number of participants in the discipline of technology and engineering was rather small (n=13) compared with the other two groups.

The locations of the participants' primary and junior middle schools in their basic education (the nine-year compulsory education system) were divided into four groups: capital cities in China (including municipalities), non-capital cities in China (excluding municipalities), rural and remote towns in China, and autonomous regions

in China. Compared with the four groups of primary and junior middle schools categorised by location, investigation of the participants' senior high schools was generalised by the school rankings in China. The details are shown in Figure 2.

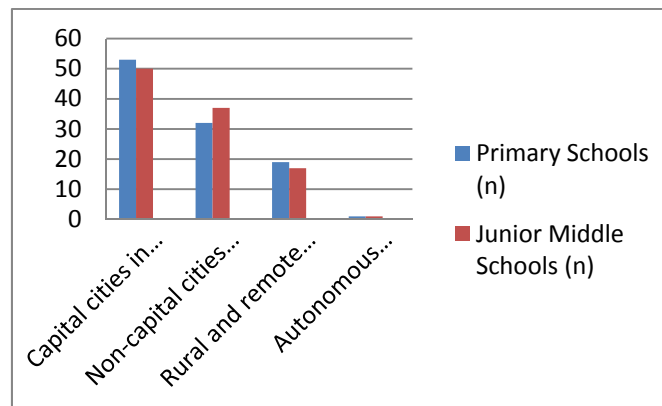


Figure 2. Participants' attendance in primary and junior middle schools

The number of the participants who attended normal public high schools ( $n=54$ ) was slightly larger than the number who studied in high-ranking senior public high schools ( $n=48$ ). However, a fairly small number of students attended private international senior high schools.

The last question item on the demographic information section asked the participants to evaluate their level of English proficiency. The results indicated that more than two-thirds of the participants considered their English level 'intermediate' ( $n=46$ ) or "good" ( $n=42$ ). Only a few of the participants regarded their English proficiency levels as 'extremely good' ( $n=8$ ) or 'poor' ( $n=9$ ). None of the participants believed that their English proficiency was 'extremely poor'.

#### 4. Results and Discussions

To answer the first research question, the Kruskal–Wallis test was initially used to identify any significant difference between the four locations of students' primary schools and the participants' English activities outside of class. If a statistically significant difference was found between the groups, then the Mann-Whitney U test was adopted to find the difference. Statistically significant differences were found within the four choices of English activities influenced by the participants' primary and junior middle school locations. However, the results indicated statistically significant differences between the primary schools and junior middle school locations with respect to two choices of English activities. The details are provided in the following table.

Table 1. Test of difference of English learning activities outside the classroom of participants when grouped according to locations of their basic education

English Learning Activities	Primary Schools (Statistical results)	Junior Middle Schools (Statistical results)
Practicing oral English with friends.	$X^2=16.030, p=.001$	$X^2= 16.358, p=.001$
Using multimedia centres and self-access learning centres.	$X^2=11.915, p=.008$	$X^2=9.853, p=.020$
Communicating with foreign friends or foreign teachers in schools.	$X^2=10.402, p=.015$	$X^2=10.031, p=.018$
Listening to English songs.	$X^2=12.201, p=.007$	$X^2=10.336, p=.016$
Participating in online chat rooms.	$X^2=8.692, p=.034$	
Participating in English corners.	$X^2=9.287, p=.026$	
Discussing questions and difficulties related to English learning with those excel in English (excluding teachers).		$X^2=12.736, p=.005$
Sending emails to friends and teachers in English.		$X^2=8.633, p=.035$

The results in the table above show that statistical significance was found for the locations of the participants' primary schools and junior high schools for four learning activities: "practicing oral English with friends", "using multimedia centres and self-access learning centres", "communicating with foreign friends or foreign teachers in schools", and "listening to English songs". All p values were less than .05 (Pallant, 2013).

A Mann-Whitney U test was then conducted to determine which of the groups of locations differed from one another in relation to the students' basic education. This test was used to explore differences with regard to the four choices of English activities influenced by the participants' primary and junior middle school locations. The results are highlighted in Table 2.

Table 2. Test of difference of English learning activities between participants from capital city and non capital city basic education

English Learning Activities	Primary Schools (Statistical results)	Junior Middle Schools (Statistical results)
Practicing oral English with friends	Between capital cities (including municipalities) and non-capital cities in China (excluding municipalities) (U=526.500, Z=-2.994, p=.003, r=.29)	Between capital cities (including municipalities) and non-capital cities in China (excluding municipalities) (U=,579.500 Z=-3.044, p=.002, r=.30)
Using multimedia centres and self-access learning centres	Between capital cities (including municipalities) and non-capital cities in China (excluding municipalities) (U=552.000, Z=-2.757, p=.006, r=.27)	Between capital cities (including municipalities) and non-capital cities in China (excluding municipalities) (U=577.500, Z=-3.067, p=.002, r=.30)
Communicating with foreign friends or foreign teachers in schools	Between capital cities (including municipalities) and rural and remote towns in China (U=326.000, Z=-2.337, p=.019, r=.23)	Between capital cities (including municipalities) and non-capital cities in China (excluding municipalities) (U=,635.000 Z=-2.555, p=.011, r=.25) Between capital cities (including municipalities) and rural and remote towns in China (U=240.000, Z=-2.751, p=.006, r=.27)
Listening to English songs	Between capital cities (including municipalities) and non-capital cities in China (excluding municipalities) (U=535.500, Z=-3.018, p=.003, r=.29)	Between capital cities (including municipalities) and non-capital cities in China (excluding municipalities) (U=584.000, Z=-3.116, p=.002, r=.30)

Table 2 shows that despite the small effect size (Pallant, 2013) for the four locations of the participants' primary schools and the four learning activities, a statistically significant difference between the participants' primary schools in capital areas and in rural and remote areas was found with respect to their reluctance to communicate with foreign friends or foreign teachers outside of class. The values of the mean rank indicate that the participants who finished their primary education in capital cities (N=53, mean rank=60.43) were more reluctant to choose "communicating with foreign friends or foreign teachers" as a learning activity outside of class at the university level than those who completed their primary education in rural and remote areas in China (N=19, mean rank=42.87). The results also show that the values of the effect sizes of the locations with regard to the participants' junior high schools were more statistically significant than those of the locations of primary schools for the four out-of-class activities. Thus, even with the same choices of out-of-class learning activities at the university level, the locations of the participants' junior high schools play a more important role than the locations of their primary schools.

The participants who completed primary and junior middle school in the capital cities were more likely to choose out-of-class learning activities related to speaking and listening when they were enrolled in universities. This finding supports the results of previous studies arguing that a large gap still exists between urban and rural areas with regard to Chinese basic education (Robinson & Yi, 2008; L. Wang, 2010; Zhao, 2009). The results also revealed small effect sizes between those who completed primary school in capital cities and non-capital cities and their choices of English learning activities in universities. However, the effect sizes between those who completed junior middle school in capital cities and non-capital cities and their choices of English learning activities in universities were larger. As noted by Xin and Kang (2014), the development of Chinese basic education reforms must consider how to improve the imbalance and injustice found in remote and poverty-stricken areas.

The results from the qualitative stage also showed that the students had more subjects to learn and more examinations to take in their junior middle schools. For example, one of the female undergraduate students commented that "In my primary school, the major subjects were only Chinese, Maths, and English. However, when I attended junior middle school, besides the three major subjects, I needed to learn other subjects as well, such as Chemistry, Biology, and Physics. All these subjects would be evaluated in the Entrance Examination for senior high schools so that I have to try my best to achieve a high score in every subject". Most participants believed that junior middle schools had a greater influence on their future success and on whether they would be accepted into high-ranking senior high schools. Students' spare time was fully occupied by their homework and extra assignments from teachers and parents as they understand that it is highly competitive to be accepted into a high ranking senior high school. One of the participants reflected his learning experience in the school time as:

I obtained a rather high score on the high school entrance examination, so I was accepted into the best high school in my hometown. From the first day when I was enrolled till the day before the college entrance examination, I was told to try my best to achieve a high score in all kinds of contests and competitions. Therefore, I spent a large amount of my spare time improving in mathematics, English, chemistry, and physics. I felt extremely pressured as teachers, school principals, and parents had put much effort and expectations on me. Apart from having meals and sleeping, I spent nearly all my time studying".

This result is aligned with Traub's (2014) investigation of Shanghai high schools, where students were primarily evaluated based on their examination scores. However, the results from the qualitative stage did not show a strong tri-correlation among the location of the participants' primary and junior middle schools and their choices of English activities at the university level.

In order to answer the second research question, the researchers also used the Kruskal–Wallis test and the Mann-Whitney U test to determine whether there was a difference between students' senior high school ranks and their choices of learning activities outside of class. The results showed that statistically significant differences were found for the following questions based on the three groups of senior high school rankings:



Table 3. Test of difference of English learning activities of participants when grouped according to senior high school ranking

English Learning Activities	Senior High School Rankings (Statistical results)
Completing English listening exercises outside of class.	$X^2=7.391$ , $p=.025$
Completing English reading exercises outside of class	$X^2=6.068$ , $p=.048$
Completing English writing exercises outside of class	$X^2=8.388$ , $p=.015$
Being willing to memorise new vocabulary	$X^2=10.502$ , $p=.005$
Practising oral English with friends	$X^2=9.770$ , $p=.008$
Watching English TV programmes and movies	$X^2=8.554$ , $p=.014$
Using English websites to learn outside of class	$X^2=13.333$ , $p=.001$
Using multimedia centres and self-access learning centres	$X^2=7.512$ , $p=.023$
Listening to English songs	$X^2=11.026$ , $p=.004$

Compared with the activities that were related to the participants' primary school and junior middle school locations, more learning activities were statistically significantly influenced by the rankings of the student's senior high schools. Thus, the ranks of different senior high schools have a significant influence on students' choices of learning activities at the university. To further explore where differences exist within the three groups of rankings of senior high schools, the Mann-Whitney U test was conducted. The details are given in Table 4.

Table 4. Test of difference of English learning activities between participants from high-ranking public school and normal public schools

English Learning Activities	Statistically significant differences differ in groups (senior high school rankings)
Completing English listening exercises outside of class	Between high-ranking public schools and normal public schools (U=996.500, Z=-2.079, $p=.038$ , $r=.21$ )
Completing English reading exercises outside of class	Between high-ranking public schools and normal public schools (U=948.000, Z=-2.460, $p=.014$ , $r=.24$ )
Completing English writing exercises outside of class	Between high-ranking public schools and normal public schools (U=932.000, Z=-2.538, $p=.011$ , $r=.25$ )
Being willing to memorise new vocabulary	Between high-ranking public schools and normal public schools (U=969.000, Z=-2.306, $p=.021$ , $r=.25$ )
Practising oral English with friends	Between high-ranking public schools and normal public schools (U=907.000, Z=-2.678, $p=.007$ , $r=.26$ )
Watching English TV programmes and movies	Between high-ranking public schools and normal public schools (U=977.000, Z=-2.256, $p=.024$ , $r=.22$ )
Using English websites to learn outside of class	Between high-ranking public schools and normal public schools (U=820.500, Z=-3.299, $p=.001$ , $r=.32$ )
Using multimedia centres and self-access learning centres	Between high-ranking public schools and normal public schools (U=958.500, Z=-2.325, $p=.020$ , $r=.23$ )
Listening to English songs	Between high-ranking public schools and normal public schools (U=929.500, Z=-2.626, $p=.009$ , $r=.26$ )

The results in Table 4 reveal statically significant differences only between high-ranking senior high schools and normal public schools for the nine out-of-class learning activities at the university. Although the values of the effect sizes were very small, we can conclude that high-ranking senior high schools play a more important role in the variety of learning activities that students choose relative to those found in normal schools.

The results from the quantitative stage clearly indicate a strong correlation between the ranks of senior high

schools and the number of student choices of English learning activities in universities. When students attended senior high schools, they had various choices for out-of-school activities, including writing, reading, speaking, and listening. This finding is consistent with Traub's (2014) study. Additionally, the reflections indicated that students who had previous access to advanced technology skills in higher-ranked senior high schools showed more interest in using ICT to communicate with others when they became university students. For example, one of the participants reflected upon her learning experience in the senior high school:

After the complete Entrance Examination for senior high schools, I was accepted into one of the elite senior high schools in my home town. Compared with the other normal public senior high schools in the city, my school was the first one to integrate multimedia teaching and learning resources into the Online English Learning Platform. With the help of these resources, I found learning English was not that tedious and I had more opportunities to speak with friends online. As a consequence, these benefited me in the development of English pronunciation and communicative skills in the university. Moreover, I would like to join in English activities out of the class more often on campus.

Similar results were obtained by Chen et al. (2005) and Dörnyei (2009), who claimed that motivation and previous learning experiences play an important role in language learning. However, the effect size was small between the high-ranking senior high schools and normal public senior high schools in terms of students' choices for learning activities in universities.

The third research question was answered by the data obtained from the qualitative stage. A form of textual data provided us with a greater understanding of what lies beyond this phenomenon. Compared with the numerical data gathered from the questionnaire, these deep and rich data reflect the participants' feelings, emotions and perceptions. The participants' reflections were primarily focused on five aspects: evaluation and assessment, educational justice, students' personalities, ICT usage, and management in Chinese higher education institutions. The participants reflected on their own learning experiences and indicated that English test in all levels of entrance examinations remained one of the most important evaluation methods from primary schooling through postgraduate study. One of the participants commented:

I had never been taught English in my primary school, as it was located in a village. However, when the school principal noticed that an English test was a compulsory component for the junior middle school entrance examination, he asked all the teachers and students to finish the English textbooks that those others who were from urban cities learnt from Grade 3 in primary schools.

In particular, for Chinese EFL learners at university, CET-4 and CET-6 are presently the only two major examinations used to assess students' English proficiency. The students called for a reform of these two examinations to improve assessments and evaluations of their communicative skills and practical ability for readiness in the job market. This suggestion was also documented in the MOE's requirement (2004). As claimed by Li and Ni (2012), providing students with more opportunities to access "hands-on experience" rather than restricting them to taking examinations in the classroom is a challenge in Chinese basic education reform. Those authors used the example of mathematics curriculum reform in China to discuss potential challenges and to provide implications for teachers and researchers.

The need to improve social justice in Chinese basic education was also noted in the participants' writing. In particular, some students who came from rural areas felt very disappointed in their learning resources compared with their counterparts in more developed areas. Evidences can be found in one of the participants' reflective writing:

I attended a high-ranking senior high school. In three years' time, I was provided with valuable opportunities to access advanced chemistry labs. Also, right after the college entrance examination, I was funded by the senior high school to join the summer student exchange tour to visit American universities. This trip not only broadened my mind but also provided me opportunities to make friends all over the world. I was influenced significantly when I came to the university. I chose cultural studies as my major, and I used my spare time to complete other business courses.

I usually participated in out-of-class English activities at the university, such as the English Speech Contest, English Role-Play, and English Poetry Writing Competition. I like them very much!

Apart from the disparities of learning resources, a lack of ICT use and technological skills might cause these students to choose more traditional English learning activities outside of class, such as reading books, reciting vocabulary, and writing, rather than using online platforms to improve their English. This finding is similar to the

works of Lai (2014) and Richards (2015), who argued that technological skills and ICT use are closely correlated with future communicative development in language. However, the research results were not aligned with the study by Zhang et al. (2010), who showed that most rural areas have met the need for ICT use in China.

The imbalance in Chinese basic education was not merely restricted to the use of ICT; the household registration system was another issue mentioned in the participants' reflective writing. Students who were born in rural areas had to attend schools near their homes; although they were able to achieve high scores on junior middle school entrance examinations, they did not have the right to be accepted into high-ranking public junior middle schools. One of postgraduate female students commented the basic education as:

The initial aim of the basic education system is to provide every citizen with the same education rights; otherwise, discussing social justice, social stability, and legitimacy is senseless. Nowadays, however, the household registration system is closely linked with opportunities related to whether children can be accepted into high-ranking schools. From this point of view, houses, apartments and units that were close to the high-ranking schools will gradually become the 'luxury products', and it might lead to more social problems.

This injustice was also found among students who were born in capital cities. Children whose parents were able to afford to buy houses near those high-ranking public schools could be accepted into these schools with a 'near-by entrance' policy, but children whose parents could not afford to buy houses needed to achieve a rather high score to compete for the few vacancies in large cities in China. From this perspective, housing prices, social justice and education equality are all closely related (Feng & Lu, 2013; Jiang et al., 2012). In a recent study, Feng and Lu (2013) used a natural experimental method to identify the causal relationship between Chinese basic education and housing prices in Shanghai, China.

In addition to these reflections, the participants expressed concern regarding how teachers and academic staff could provide more strategies to improve English learning both in and out of class.

Although the traditional teaching style has been criticised by researchers (Benson, 2011; Chik, 2014; Richards, 2015; Song, 2013). Most participants reflected that academic staff still used traditional teaching strategies rather than using innovative teaching methods to guide students. They believed that if teachers teach them 'how to fish' rather than just 'giving them a fish' would be more effective to enhance their learning skills. Based on the participants' learning experiences, we find that they were educated and treated as "professional test-takers" to achieve high scores. In the Chinese basic education system, students are not provided with opportunities to develop their personal interests and are not exposed to a free learning environment. With China dominated by a "teacher-centred" model in the formal education system, students are more likely to lack self-discipline and learner autonomy when they are suddenly exposed to a free learning environment (Ministry of Education, 2007) An example was found in a male participant's reflection:

I understand that my weakness is lacking self-discipline. Before I went to university, I spent most time at school with my classmates and teachers. My teachers were very strict. If I was absent-minded in the class, they would call my parents and ask them to punish me. This negative experience led me to be more eager to 'walk out' of my family, and I wanted to be far away from my parents when I had the chance. The right chance was to go to a university far from my hometown so that I was able to do anything I liked, and in this case, I was like the horse with loosened bonds.

At the university, I found that I had a lot of freedom. Although teachers assigned us to finish tasks after the class, no one pushed me to finish assignments. I was like a deaf person who suddenly got lost in the musical world. I like being guided, or at least someone could give me suggestions on English learning strategies at the university.

Students differ in their personalities and learning styles. In this regard, the MOE required teachers to pay more attention to students' personalities and individual learning styles to provide effective learning strategies to individuals because all of these factors may be correlated with students' English proficiency (Benson, 2011; Dörnyei, 2009; Ellis, 2008).

The reflections revealed some weaknesses regarding governance and management in Chinese universities. Most Chinese families have only one child; thus, when students were far from their parents, their teachers and universities became their second home. With technology and economic development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, university students have more temptation to resist than students in the 1980s and 1990s did. Therefore, if they are not provided with orientation guidance, students may find this "transition period" more difficult. Currently,

most Chinese universities have adopted a method of “tutor responsibility” for student supervision in daily life on campus. In this method, the tutor must stay with the students on weekdays, and the students report their difficulties to the tutor. By contrast, academic staff in most Chinese universities is present only during students’ class time. Hence, most academic staff and students may not know one another even though they have face-to-face lectures every week. The following structure clearly shows their relationships and the governance structure in Chinese universities.

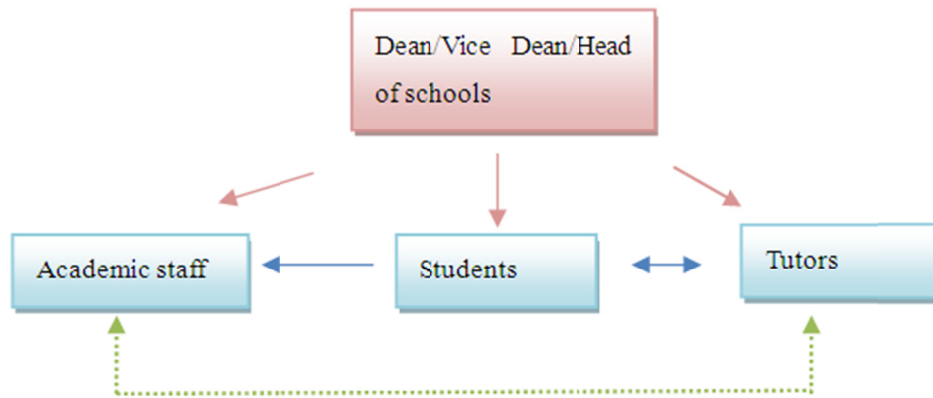


Figure 3. The management of students and staff in Chinese universities

Figure 3 indicates that academic staff and tutors may not have interactions in their workplaces or with students. From this perspective, whether students need support in their personal life or academic study, tutors are their only source for obtaining such support. From a long-term perspective, the relationship between students and academic staff is growing weaker. Additionally, students are likely to have a negative attitude towards learning and teaching if they cannot receive assistance in effective learning strategies from academic staff.

## 5. Conclusion

Overall, the research findings reveal significant differences between students who finished basic education (primary schools and middle schools) in capital cities and those who completed basic education in non-capital cities with regard to their choices of English activities outside of class. These differences are apparent in the four questionnaire items related to students’ communications with foreign friends and listening activities. However, students who attended top public high schools and those who studied in normal public schools had a significant difference in their choices of communicative learning activities at universities. These findings were demonstrated in both the quantitative and qualitative stages of the study.

The research findings also highlight several potential social problems that would influence social justice and social integrity. Particularly, driven by the One-Child policy, families, teachers and students have been highly pressured by the competitive examinations in the Chinese educational system. As a consequence, this might influence students’ mental and physical wellbeing. Moreover, the unbalanced development of Chinese basic education might broaden the gap between high-economic and low-economic families in terms of their children’s educational resources, and as a consequence, this would become one of the potential social problems in Chinese basic education, and Chinese university management and governance. All of these factors may influence students’ development, particularly their language communication skills, language learning motivation, and teacher-student relationships, as documented by the MOE.

This research only focused on investigating students’ perspectives on their learning experiences in their basic education stage rather than both students and teachers. These provide an opportunity for future researchers. In a direction of future research, the researcher suggests that our focus could be shifted from students’ perspectives to school teachers’ perspective toward their teaching and learning experiences, so as to find out whether this has correlations with students’ choices on their learning activities out of the class.

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