

**Problems in Intercultural Communication:
An Inter-University Study on Chinese
Undergraduate Students in Hong Kong,
and Pedagogical Insights**

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the problems that university students encounter in intercultural communication outside the classroom, describes how students tackle problems they encounter during real life intercultural communication and makes pedagogical recommendations.

Eleven students from eight universities in Hong Kong participated in the study. Data were collected by means of qualitative self-report entries recording in real life. The students were asked to describe the occasions during which they used English, reflect on their use of English during the occasion, and to comment on the extent to which the university ESL courses had equipped them with the skills to cope with the occasions described. They were allowed to write freely but some guiding questions were also provided so that they could have a framework to follow in writing the journal entries. The students submitted their journals to the researcher through e-mail regularly for one semester. Clarifications with the students were made, when necessary, through telephone conversations or e-mails.

The most pressing issue identified from the journal entries is intercultural communication in which three problems arose, namely following the speaker's accent and high delivery speed and the lack of conversation topics. The problems indicate both the importance of language skills, particularly comprehension skills, and knowledge about one's own and other cultures in initiating and sustaining intercultural communication. The analysis shed some light on the imminent need to strengthen language skills on the one hand, and intercultural knowledge on the other in current university English language courses in Hong Kong.

Introduction

Business bodies and the general public in Hong Kong have constantly expressed their concern about the English standard of local undergraduates for years. Research on the English capabilities of Hong Kong's undergraduates dates back to the 1980s. Given the Hong Kong's higher education reform that will take place in 2012, universities are preparing for a new undergraduate program proactively, one of which is the English as a second language (ESL) curriculum. This paper reports and discusses some real life intercultural communication problems encountered by Hong Kong's undergraduates, based on their records and reflections on their use of English in self-reports. It is hoped that the discussion of the problems can shed some light on the planning of a new ESL curriculum in Hong Kong's universities or elsewhere in which English is learnt and taught as a second or foreign language.

Background to the study

ESL in Hong Kong's universities and English language needs

ESL courses that aim to enhance undergraduates' English proficiency are provided in the current three-year university education, in spite of the fact that many local undergraduates have already studied English as a subject for at least 13 years. Surveying the homepages of Hong Kong's universities on the Web, it was found that the ESL courses comprise mainly two types: credit and non-crediting bearing English courses.

The credit-bearing English courses concentrate on (1) English for academic purposes (EAP) for a specific discipline or target students (e.g., English for Arts, English for Engineering students), (2) English for specific professional or occupational purposes (ESP/EOP) (e.g., business negotiations) and (3) generic English (GE) language skills (e.g., grammar and pronunciation practice). These courses help students practise their language skills for study, work or the profession in context. Nevertheless, the duration of study, content and assessment vary according to an individual university's or department's language policy. Some universities or departments list ESL courses as core compulsory and an exit requirement and require students to study one to two courses; some list ESL courses as electives and students determine when and what

to study within their three years of study; and some grant exemptions to individual students who have reached a proficiency level acceptable to the university's or department's language policy. For instance, in one university, students need to study an EAP course in the first semester of their first year of study and an EOP course in the second semester of their second year of study. In another university, all students are required to study a GE course in the second semester of their first year of study.

Non-credit bearing courses complement the undergraduates' needs and wants. Courses such as examination preparation courses and social English, or services such as writing clinics and self-access learning workshops are of this kind and are offered throughout the academic year or during summer holidays. All students can register on a voluntary basis.

Since the 1990s, research on surveying and interviewing Hong Kong's undergraduates and teachers on their perceptions and self-evaluation of needs, ability and proficiency (e.g., Flowerdew & Miller, 1992; Asker, 1995; Littlewood & Liu, 1996, Bhatia & Candlin, 2001; Yang & Lau, 2003; Jackson, 2005) as well as language attitudes, strategies and motivation (e.g., Axler, Yang & Stevens, 1998; Lin & Detaramani, 1998; Ma, 2002; Gan, 2003) have been conducted and pedagogical recommendations have been made.

Littlewood & Liu (1996) who surveyed first-year undergraduates' and teachers' perceptions of their English language proficiency, attitudes towards language learning and English use inside and outside the classroom showed that a majority of undergraduates did not have a positive attitude towards learning English, and that their language ability rating was always slightly higher than their teachers' ratings. Grammar, vocabulary, speaking and writing, in particular, were the areas that deserved more work from students. In a subsequent study, Chan (2001) also surveyed the needs of undergraduates and teachers at her university by asking them to indicate the level of importance of a number of sub-skills used for the following: studies, profession, social and private life. Follow-up interviews were also conducted. Both groups regarded such activities as reading magazines, periodicals and speaking at seminars and meetings as important for academic studies, whereas listening and speaking at conferences and listening on the phone were important for their professions. Additionally, Yang and Lau (2003) conducted a three-year longitudinal study examining the attitudes of

undergraduates regarding their English learning by means of questionnaires and interviews at regular intervals. It was found that the students generally agreed on the importance of using English as the medium of instruction at university and felt that the English courses were effective in sharpening their English skills.

In addition to the studies on English for academic purposes, other researchers focused their attention on English skills for specific purposes. Bhatia & Candlin (2001) evaluated the extent to which the English requirements for business school and professional needs were met by the existing English courses and the range of communicative demands placed on business students. After examining undergraduates', employers' and teachers' views through questionnaires, focused group interviews and syllabuses, the researchers recommended offering an EAP programme to all first-year business students and a genre-based ESP or EOP elective in Year two or three on a short-intensive, modular basis, or online. In another study by Jackson (2005), 45 business lecturers from five tertiary institutions were interviewed to examine their perceptions of the linguistic and conceptual problems encountered by Hong Kong's undergraduates; Jackson's findings and pedagogical implications for ESP course design are also in line with those of Bhatia and Candlin.

Hong Kong's 2012 higher education reform

In the face of ongoing economic, technological, social and cultural changes, the Hong Kong Education Commission, a government advisory body on education policy, submitted a *Reform Proposal for the Education System in Hong Kong* in September of 2000. The 2000 blueprint outlined a new education system; the new academic structure of Hong Kong education was then launched with significant impact on all stages of education, from kindergarten to higher education. The education reform focuses on seven major areas: curriculum reform, assessment mechanisms, language education, and support for professional development, student admission systems and an increase in post-secondary education opportunities. The most drastic aspect of the reform is the academic structure of senior secondary education from '2+2' to '3' years, and that of higher education from '3' to '4' years. According to the proposed time schedule, higher education reform will take place in 2012 with respect to the duration of study, admission system and content. With the reform of senior secondary education,

universities should begin taking heed of new developments and adjust the contents of their undergraduate programmes accordingly. Programme contents, however, have been left very much in the hands of individual universities in accordance with their missions. Among the variety of subject curricula, language curriculum is of a concern because of public demand and the language policy of the government, which aims at producing students and workers who are both fluent biliterate (in written Chinese and English) and trilingual (in Cantonese, Putonghua and English) (Education Commission, 2006). Thus, the education reform provides an unprecedented opportunity for universities to revisit their programmes and proactively respond to public concern over undergraduates' English standards.

Needs analysis which is essential for teaching and learning undoubtedly plays an important role in the ESL curriculum and course design. In fact, the first step for curriculum designers in developing workable courses is collecting and assessing the needs, wants and inadequacies of stakeholders through questionnaires, discussions, interviews, observations and assessment (Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998; Hutchison & Waters, 1996). Given the current education reform initiatives along with past research on Hong Kong undergraduates' English standards and needs primarily based on questionnaires and interviews, a research project that aims to investigate undergraduates' needs from multi-perspectives began in 2008, including administering surveys to stakeholders (undergraduates, graduates, employers and university teachers) regarding their perceptions of the importance of English language and cultural-related skills for work, study and daily interactions, conducting follow-up interviews, collecting and analysing undergraduates' self-reports on their use of English and related language problems in real life communication. This paper is based on the data collected from undergraduates' self-reports, reporting on their real-life communication problems when they interacted with native English speakers and other English-speaking counterparts. The analysis yields some pedagogical insights into the new university ESL curriculum or courses.

Methodology

Research questions

There were two broad research questions:

1. What are the situations in which English is frequently used by Hong Kong undergraduates outside the classroom?
2. What are the problems that Hong Kong undergraduates encounter in real life interactions in English?

Self-reports

The situations in which the undergraduates use English in real life and the corresponding problems were collected through self-reports. The self-reports allow the researcher to describe and yield insights into their language learning experiences, processes and emotional issues that inhibit language learning which are inaccessible from the researcher's perspective and quantitative analysis, and to identify patterns or categories from the data themselves rather than being imposed from the outside (Mackey & Gass, 2005).

The participants who wrote the self-reports were those recommended by the members of the research team. Each team member recommended five to six undergraduates whom they were teaching or had taught before. The students should be at different years of study and universities, with different majors and were willing to commit to the project for a semester. A total of fourteen participants who aged between 19 and 22 at different years of study (first, second and third years) and with different majors (e.g., business, education, Arts, Science etc.) at the eight universities out of the nine public¹ and private² universities in Hong Kong were selected based on the previous criteria. Then the Research Associate contacted the students by email, explaining the project objectives and their role and invited them to participate in the project. Only eleven of them responded to the invitation and finally submitted their

¹ There are seven public/government-funded universities in Hong Kong.

² There are two private university in Hong Kong.

journals. Although the number of volunteered students was very small and came from a limited range of disciplines, they had included four first-year students (36.36%), two second-year students (18.18%) and five third-year students (45.46%), representing science, social science, arts, humanities and nursing disciplines from the eight universities. All students met the university English language requirement and had passed the Use of English paper in the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination. Five of them (45.45%) obtained Grades D-E³ and 6 (54.55%) obtained Grades A-C. Table 1 is a summary of the 11 students' profiles.

Table 1: *Students' profiles*

Name	Gender	Age	Major	Eng grade	Yr of study
DC	Male	19	Maths	E	1
SL	Female	19	Chinese	E	1
C	Female	19	English	C	1
KY	Male	19	Nursing	C	1
S	Female	19	Physical Education	D	2
Sin	Male	20	Chinese	E	2
CH	Female	21	Chemistry	C	3
E	Female	22	Marketing	B	3
W	Female	22	English	B	3
EV	Female	21	Social Science	A	3
I	Female	21	Logistics	D	3

The purpose of the study was explained to each student and they were asked to write a three-month journal at self-determined regular intervals, for instance once every ten days, from mid-January to the end of April in the academic year of 2007-2008. Some guiding questions and areas for reflections were emailed to them for their consideration (see Appendix A). They were asked to submit their journals once a week. The students were advised to (1) write a description of the occasion in which English was used and (2) reflect on the use of English and the extent to which English language courses at their university could have prepared them for various communicative

³ Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination is a university entrance examination. All candidates' results are categorized into five grades, from A to E representing different levels of performance. Grade A is the highest grade and Grade E is the pass grade.

purposes. There were contacts with the students by email once a week, encouraging them to continue the commitment, answering queries and reminding them to follow the schedule. Only four students were able to follow the schedule; the others submitted their journals about twice a week. Nevertheless, most of the students followed the suggested structure and wrote their encounters in detail and in different forms. For instance, one student illustrated the problems according to their dialogues with English-speaking counterparts. Each student's journals were studied carefully and any unclear expressions or ideas were clarified via email subsequently.

Each student submitted three to 15 journals within three months. Identification and coding of the situations were made based on the instances described in the written journals in an inductive manner. A total of 85 journals were received and 99 instances were identified and coded according to the dominant language skills involved (e.g., speaking and listening) and communicative purposes (e.g., study, work and social interaction). For instance, the instance of seeking advice from a lecturer requires mainly speaking and listening skills and is used for the study purpose. Identification and coding were followed by frequency count (see Appendix B).

Results

Research question 1: Situations in which English is used

The 99 instances covered a wide range of situations from study, part-time work, social interactions to job applications. Grouping the situations according to communicative purposes, English was used for part-time job (11.11%), private study (31.31%), leisure (17.17%) and social interaction (40.40%). Noticeably, the speaking and listening skills for work, study and social purposes stood out, totalling 58 instances (58.59%). Among the 58 instances, 35 of them were casual chats with English-speaking counterparts of different social hierarchies on different occasions (see Appendix B, 3.7 for details). The English speakers came from different countries and social hierarchies and the interactions took place on both formal and informal occasions: American, British, Irish, Australian, European and Asian English-speaking exchange students, professors, tutors, maids and visitors in a gathering, at a Rugby competition, in an exhibition, in a hostel, at an MTR station, a Western restaurant, and so forth.

Research question 2: Problems encountered by the undergraduates

Examining the instances for a range of communicative purposes, four common problems which were repeatedly mentioned by the undergraduates in their journals were identified, regardless of their proficiency level. The following paragraphs summarize each problem and are supplemented with the students' written descriptions⁴ and dialogues⁵ extracted from their journals.

1. Understanding the interlocutor's accent

The first and most frequently mentioned problem is to understand the interlocutor's accent. The English-speaking interlocutors included both native English speakers and English speakers of other languages. According to the undergraduates' written accounts, they found it difficult to follow the interlocutor's English accent which in return affected their comprehension of the message. For instance, when *E* was working as part-time staff for the Hong Kong International Art Fair, she encountered a few English-speaking visitors from different countries, each with different accents. She wrote,

'I spoke to an Australian lady, a Malaysian man, a Korean girl and a British guy and some foreigners whom I have no idea where they came from. These people spoke with *different accents*. Frankly, I could not fully understand what they said immediately because of the *accent*, and I had to think for three more seconds to understand their requests.' (E – Journal 9)

C who is an English major and achieved a good English grade in the university entrance examination reported the same problem when she interacted with an Australian professor. Apart from the face-to-face interactions, another student, *W*, also recorded the same problem when she was watching a film featuring American film actors and actresses. She found it difficult to follow their variety of accents and speed of dialogue, and eventually turned to the Chinese subtitles.

2. Following the speaker's delivery speed

In addition to accent, the English speaker's speed of delivery was mentioned. The phrases 's/he spoke too or very fast' was reported by most students in their journals

⁴ The written descriptions were edited.

⁵ The dialogues were slightly edited by adding two symbols – (.) and () to better reflect the conversation, both of which are based on Jefferson's transcript symbol (2004). A dot in parentheses (.) indicates a brief interval within or between utterances. The empty parentheses () indicate that the student was unable to comprehend what was said.

during both face-to-face interactions and entertainment (see Appendix E for the written accounts).

A student, *S*, even illustrated the problem by writing down her dialogues with the exchange students in the journals. In both situations, *S* initiated another topic (Line 8 in situation 1 and Line 5 in situation 2) because she could not understand what the exchange student said. The empty parentheses⁶ represent the missing part of the speech.

Situation 1: *S* met an exchange student (ES) at the lift lobby at her hostel.

- 1 ES: You go downstairs?
 2 S: Yes! (He presses the button 'up'. Then he presses
 3 'down'.) Oh, thank you. I can't see this.
 4 (.)⁷
 5 S: You are not live in this floor?
 6 ES: No, I live upstairs.
 7 S: You find friends?
 8 ES: → Yes () (Fingers move like playing piano)
 9 S: (lift doors are opened) See you.
 10 ES: See you.'

(S – Journal 2)

Situation 2: *S* had a casual chat with *Sa*, an exchange student from France at the lift lobby of the hostel.

- 1 *Sa*: Hi.
 2 *S*: Hi.
 3 *Sa*: (press the 'up' button) I go upstairs. You?
 4 *S*: I go to learn piano.
 5 *Sa*: → Good ()
 6 *S*: (I didn't know what she said. She spoke quickly) Grade 8
 7 *Sa*: Oh good.
 8 *S*: You go to do homework?
 9 *Sa*: Something about the graphic.
 10 *S*: I see (.) I go now.'

(S – Journal 3)

⁶ Refers to endnote (5).

⁷ Refers to endnote (5).

3. Expressing with the appropriate word and expression

The third problem is limited vocabulary and an inability to retrieve the appropriate word or expression at the right time. For example, *E* wrote,

‘As for speaking, I am a bad speaker because I will feel uneasy when I have to speak in English. I could not explain why my brain processed the language on the interview day successfully. It would be nice if this “ability” could appear at the right time each time, for instance when I am presenting in English.’ (E- Journal 8)

Further, *S* mentioned the vocabulary problem three times in her journals, and all instances were supported with evidence. In the first instance, she could not retrieve the phrase ‘rush hour’ while interacting with an Australian fan of Rugby Seven. Instead she described it as ‘the time that people after work’. She felt nervous when she could not find the right words (see Appendix C, situation 1). In the second instance, *S* wanted to express her anger at an exchange student who frightened her. However, she did not know the appropriate expression and she just laughed with her friend (see Appendix C, situation 2). In the third instance, *S* experienced the same vocabulary problem when interacting with Alex on another day (see Appendix C, situation 3).

When considering students’ confidence with English vocabulary, it is important to note that their concept of vocabulary included slangs or colloquial expressions. The lack of vocabulary was not only a stumbling block for in speaking but also in writing in intercultural communication. In one of *E*’s journals, *E* and her friends planned to travel to England and Scotland during the summer holidays. *E* registered and pre-paid for accommodations at a hostel. Her friend registered a few days later but was charged a higher rate. Noticing the different rate, *E* wrote to the hostel arguing against the additional cost for her friend. Her complaint was not dealt with. One of her friends wrote back in a strong and angry tone and successfully received a reply saying, ‘Please don’t get mad.’ Reflecting on this instance, *E* felt that her failure was caused by an inappropriate tone and her limited vocabulary.

4. Lacking conversational topics

A lack of conversational topics was also reported by a few students. They ended their conversations quickly after several short exchanges. In the following extract, *SK* said he did not greet the exchange student even though she saw him in the elevator lobby of the residential hall.

I did not call him because I don't know what to say afterwards. (SK, Journal 2)

Discussion

Pedagogical insights

The undergraduates' major problems which include understanding the English-speaking interlocutor's accent, following their delivery speed and expressing ideas in a relatively short period of time in real time communication seem to be caused by their inadequate mastery of the language and language skills. The lack of conversational topics, however, appears to be a culture-related issue. The four problems are indeed not uncommon; they are prevalent among ESL learners in intercultural or interpersonal communication and have been discussed by Byram in his intercultural competence construct (1997; 2000). Byram's intercultural competence consists of five elements, namely attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness or political education. The knowledge element which consists of a broad range of entities, including one's knowledge of the language used in intercultural communication such as the knowledge about the accents of a variety of English, a wide range of vocabulary for expressions and topic of interests of one's interlocutors from another culture in conversations, are shown in the paper. The undergraduates' ability to comprehend, produce and sustain a conversation is also a demonstration of their 'skills of discovery and interaction' element which refers to the 'ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction' (Byram, 1997: 52). Initiating a topic concerns the interlocutor's ability to acquire new knowledge (that of the English language and topics of interest, for example). Many undergraduates who have some passive understanding of other cultures and the English language at the rational level may still lack an active understanding⁸ at the experiential level. The lacks, linguistic and experiential, that have been manifested in the written accounts are not contradictory and should be properly addressed in the ESL curriculum and courses in Hong Kong's universities which

⁸ I borrow 'passive understanding' and 'active understanding' from Sikkema & Niyekawa-Howard (1977).

primarily emphasize skill training for study and work purposes.

There are two possible ways to address the experiential and linguistic lacks. The first way is to integrate the lacks into the existing GE, EAP, EOP or ESP courses. The intended outcomes are to raise their knowledge sensitivity and cultural awareness, anticipate and solve intercultural communication problems in a monolingual and monocultural classroom environment. Teachers can provide relevant knowledge and examples to dovetail specific course contents and focus, particularly listening to different accents and delivery speeds in intercultural communication contexts, and encourage undergraduates to share intercultural communication experiences, if any. The second way is to offer an independent course on English for intercultural communication in addition to the EAP or ESP courses. In the course, students can discuss topics such as (1) relationships between language and culture⁹, (2) conversation topics and politeness by culture, and (3) understanding the use of vocabulary and grammar, accents, delivery speed and even language use for different functions by people of different cultural backgrounds. They can record, analyze and solve intercultural communication problems with teachers and peers. Relevant examples and knowledge of native and non-native English speakers' accents, salient pronunciation features and linguistic devices for different speech functions can be reinforced in context simultaneously. The clear learning and teaching purposes, constant discussion and anticipation of problems can help undergraduates overcome anxiety in expressing their views and be more comfortable when interacting with English-speaking interlocutors in real life communication.

Conclusion

The paper has reported four potential problems of Hong Kong undergraduates in intercultural communication and has attempted to explain them with reference to Byram's intercultural communication construct. The problems have provided some insights into the way in which a new ESL curriculum or course may proceed. The major change is to emphasize the intercultural communication element in which relevant skills such as listening and speaking and vocabulary are practised in context and with a clear

⁹ 'Culture' here refers to the concept of culture in general, rather than about a specific culture.

purpose, and cultural awareness is raised. The more the students are prepared for, experience and reflect on intercultural encounters, the less their anxiety, frustration and evasion are. Since the scope of the study was relatively small and the single data collection method (i.e., self reports) may not be sufficient to make any generalisations, caution should be exercised when interpreting the data or applying the findings to other L2 learners elsewhere. To validate the pedagogical recommendation, self-reports can be supplemented with follow-up interviews. More data can be sought from other stakeholders including teachers, employers and working graduates.

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Appendix A: Questions for journal writing

Description of the situation:

1. What was the situation (meeting, casual/working lunch, presentation, seminar, casual chat, etc.)? When and where did it take place?
2. Who were involved in the situation?
3. What was your role in the situation (gave a presentation on a certain topic, participated in the conversation, led a discussion, answered a stranger's question, wrote a letter/report, etc.)? Please give details about the process.

Appendix B

Dominant language skill(s) and purpose(s)	Frequency (%)
<i>1. Speaking (for study purpose)</i>	
1.1 Oral presentation in front of audience for study	5 (5.05%)
1.2 Oral test (IELTS, computerized test)	2 (2.02%)
1.3 Asking questions in a seminar	1 (1.01%)
<i>Subtotal</i>	8 (8.08%)
<i>2. Listening (for leisure and study purposes)</i>	
2.1 Watching movies/videos/TV programmes	12 (12.12%)
2.2 Listening to radio	1 (1.01%)
2.3 Listening to a speech/oral presentation/lecture	4 (4.04%)
<i>Subtotal</i>	17 (17.17%)
<i>3. Speaking and listening (for study, work and social purposes)</i>	
3.1 Group discussion (e.g. for study/business)	6 (6.06%)
3.2 Interviewing (e.g. job/scholarship/internship/project)	7 (7.07%)
3.3 Part-time tutoring	3 (3.03%)
3.4 Consulting a vet	1 (1.01%)
3.5 Arguing with senior staff in a part-time job	1 (1.01%)
3.6 Seeking advice from a lecturer	1 (1.01%)
3.7 Casual chat with English-speaking counterparts of different social hierarchies on different occasions (e.g. professors/tutors/visitors/exchange students in the street/lobby/kitchen/a Western restaurant/MTR stations)	35 (35.35%)
3.8 Answering enquiries at an exhibition	1 (1.01%)
3.9 Asking for/showing English speakers direction	3 (3.03%)
<i>Subtotal</i>	58 (58.59%)

4. Writing (for study and work purposes)		
4.1	Writing assignments (e.g. essays, reports)	2 (2.02%)
4.2	Sitting for a written test (e.g. business writing ability test/company's selection test)	2 (2.02%)
4.3	Filling out an application form (e.g. joining a political party, for further study)	2 (2.02%)
4.4	Writing an application letter	3 (3.03%)
4.5	Writing emails (e.g. complaint, argument or reply)	3 (3.03%)
	Subtotal	12 (12.12%)
5. Reading (for leisure purpose)		
5.1	Reading articles (e.g. journals/magazines for project/essay)	2 (2.02%)
5.2	Reading novels	1 (1.01%)
5.3	Reading English comics	1 (1.01%)
	Subtotal	4 (4.04%)
	Total	99 (100%)

Appendix C

More examples on limited vocabulary for expressions

Situation 1: S went to Hong Kong stadium to watch Rugby Seven. On the way to Causeway Bay, two foreign strangers talked to S. S was answering their questions.

- 1 A: Excuse me, how to go Hong Kong Stadium?
- 2 S: You go to watch Rugby Seven?
- 3 A: Yes.
- 4 S: Oh, me too. Let's go together.
- 5 A: Is it also so many people in the street?
- 6 S: No because it's the time that people after work, yet this is a
- 7 busy region.
- 8 B: Oh yes, it's rush hour.
- 9 S: Where do you come from?
- 10 A: Australia. And you?
- 11 S: I am a local student.

'I felt nervous as I could not think of the expression *rush hour* at the right time.' (S – Journal 6)

Situation 2: Sandy (S's roommate), S and Alex, an exchange student, are in the hostel's kitchen. Alex shouted at their back.

- 1 Alex: Wow!
- 2 Sandy: Ah (scream)
- 3 S: You shock me.
- 4 (S and Sandy laughed.)

‘I encountered a big problem on this occasion. I didn’t have any phrase to express my anger. I did not know the way to express my thoughts. Actually I wanted to say something to punish him. However I really could not say a word that could express this feeling. We just laughed.’ (S – Journal 1)

Situation 3: S has a casual chat with Alex.

- 1 S: Play basketball?
- 2 Alex: Yes.
- 3 S: Where?
- 4 Alex: ()¹⁰ park.
- 5 S: (turn to Ricky) Where is it? (in Cantonese)
- 6 Ricky: (answer in Cantonese)

¹⁰ The empty parentheses () indicate that the student was unable to comprehend what was said.

