

Criteria for Selecting Instructors of English for Academic Purposes Courses: What Do Students Look for?

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Abstract

Seeking to provide insight into the role that English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses play in China's growing number of joint-venture universities (JVUs), this article reports on a study of the factors that motivate students' selection of instructors for such courses. The study reports on three stages of the investigation: (1) a preliminary, online tapping of learners' motives in EAP instructor selection, (2) a survey, based on the findings of Stage 1, in which past EAP students ranked qualities most and least desired of EAP instructors, (3) focus-group discussions (FGDs), based on the survey of Stage 2, in which past EAP students commented on the qualities that they most and least desired of EAP instructors. Survey results are grouped into the top three, bottom three, and middle three; survey results are analyzed in light of FGDs, with discrepancies between the two being acknowledged and interpreted. Three overarching pedagogical implications are presented: (1) the need of a sense of community in EAP courses, (2) the need of transparency in EAP courses, and (3) the perception of EAP instructors as first and foremost classroom teachers. Limitations of the study are duly noted.

Keywords: English for academic purposes, English as a medium of instruction, instructor qualities, instructor selection, joint-venture university

1. INTRODUCTION

A central tenet of the teaching of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) has been a focus on *context*. Hyland (2006) notes that EAP instructors strive to “equip students to participate in new academic and cultural contexts” (p. 8). De Chazal (2014) argues that a major focus on EAP is to allow students to function effectively in particular institutions. Hirvela (2016) states that EAP is oriented around academic disciplines and may therefore focus on the requirements of those disciplines. Ferris (2009), working within the context of the American tertiary education system, divides second language students into different sub-groups (e.g., international students, late-arriving resident students) and presents ways in which the same educational context will present different challenges for the different groups. Benesch (2001) makes her case rather pointedly: “The strength of EAP has been its sensitivity to context” (p. 23).

Despite the focus on context, it must be recognized that EAP courses have at times fallen short in satisfying needs within particular contexts. More than two decades ago, Leki and Carson (1997) reported on a study at an American institution in which students described the topics of their writing classes as “arbitrary, arbitrarily chosen, unimportant, requiring minimal intellectual engagement, and varying interesting depending on the interests of individual students” (p. 53). Wingate and Tribble (2012) have pointed out that the role of EAP in British institutions is “outdated for today’s student generation” in that it tends to support only non-native speakers of English and “at risk” local students (p. 482). James (2014), in an extensive summary of EAP-related literature, raises questions concerning the transfer of EAP-acquired knowledge to other contexts.

Due to rapid changes in educational settings in China (the country in which the present study was carried out), the goal of focusing on *context* in EAP becomes especially challenging. English for General Purposes (EGP), as opposed to EAP, remains the norm in most Chinese mainland settings (see Cai, 2017). Students in such settings rarely need to write their undergraduate or graduate theses in English (see Cai, 2017). According to Feng, Sun, and Zou (2019), in cases in which EAP is taught in China, students tend to have “little *intrinsic* interest in learning it” as the academic writing needs are “*imposed*” and not required for other courses (p. 858, italics as in original). The increasing presence of joint-venture universities (JVUs) in China, however, leads to the assumption that a new context may have emerged. As English-as-a-medium-of-instruction (EMI) institutions, major JVUs such as Xi’an Jiaotong Liverpool University, the University of Nottingham Ningbo China, and Duke Kunshan University all require Chinese students to write theses in English and also to carry out all coursework in English.

The study reported here took place at Duke Kunshan University (DKU), one of the aforementioned JVUs in China and hence one of the possible new contexts for EAP in China. Upon undertaking the study, the researchers were aware that, consistent with Feng, Sun, and Zou’s (2019) assessment of EAP in China, intrinsic interest in DKU EAP courses sometimes appeared to be lacking. This awareness stemmed from comments made in recorded interviews with former EAP students. Revealing examples are provided below:

People tend to regard [EAP] as a mandatory thing instead of something [they] really want to engage in. It's quite different from the other courses that we choose when we register. So...I don't think EAP class is very engaging (*excerpt from interview with S1: 04 November 2020*).

Recently, have used much writing assignments and basic English writing skills. And I didn't feel that I really used what I had learned in the EAP class (*excerpt from interview with S2: 17 November 2020*).

EAP kind of becomes a burden because it adds to the workload and...the kinds of papers we are writing in our chosen courses are much, much harder than the ones we are doing in EAP. So...it just feels like EAP is an additional course workload and not really helping us much about our actual writing practices (*excerpt from interview with S3: 10 December 2020*).

Due to the lack of importance sometimes given to DKU EAP courses, and due to the fact that almost all DKU first-year students from China mainland are required to take four seven-week EAP courses, the researchers chose to investigate the factors that motivated students in their choice of EAP instructors. Are instructors chosen because of their academic qualifications? Are instructors chosen because of their reputation of giving high grades (and therefore of lightening the workload given to students)? What other factors may motivate students' choice of an EAP instructor? Hence, the major research question guiding the study was the following:

- What qualities characterize students' ideal EAP instructor?

With this question in mind, the researchers aimed to shed light on students' perceptions of their EAP courses in a Chinese JVU and, by extension, to shed light on the role that EAP courses play in such a context.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Overview

To date, no research has been dedicated specifically to determining the qualities that characterize students' ideal EAP instructor in a JVU setting. Research on JVUs in China has tended to focus on the historical/political factors behind them (see Ennew & Yang, 2009) or on issues regarding the teaching and learning processes involved in integrating international (i.e., non-Chinese) students into a Chinese setting (see Ergenc, 2020). Oddly enough, then, literature specifically related to the present study tends to deal more with Chinese public universities than with JVUs. This literature revolves around Chinese students' views of a "good" university instructor in general and, to a lesser extent, around Chinese students' views of a "good" university English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) instructor. As such studies have aided in the framing of the present research, they will be briefly discussed here.

2.2. Chinese Students' Views of a "Good" University Instructor

Though studies concerning Chinese students' perceptions of a "good" tertiary instructor reveal some discrepancies, research has frequently indicated that Chinese learners appreciate instructors who are (1) approachable and friendly, (2) student-centered and entertaining in class, and (3) constructive in providing feedback on student performance. Regarding the importance of approachability and friendliness, Tam, Heng, and Jiang (2009) report the results of a survey conducted at a private and a public university in southeastern China. The authors conclude that "many university students express hope that their professors would become their friends, and be someone they can talk to, consult with and confide in outside the classroom" (p. 155). Echoing this finding, Kim and Olson (2016), in discussing the results of a survey carried out at three universities in Shanghai, note that a caring attitude and an interpersonal connection were among the qualities most valued by Chinese learners (see also Xiao & Wilkins, 2015).

Previous studies have also pointed out the importance of student-centeredness and the provision of entertaining lessons in which students are highly engaged. Tam, Heng, and Jiang (2009) contrast present-day Chinese university students with those of the past. The authors note that present-day Chinese students "are keen to play a more active role in their learning and to provide a voice in the teaching and learning process" (p. 155). Similarly, Yin, Wang, and Han (2016), in reporting on a sample of 2,043 students from two universities in China mainland, conclude that Chinese learners today expect to be empowered and feel more satisfied when they learn autonomously than when they learn from traditional knowledge-transmission pedagogical formats. Hence, the authors encourage "innovative, student-centered teaching approaches" such as "problem-based, self-regulated learning" (p. 52). Kim and Olson's (2016) work reveals that Chinese students place great emphasis on the entertaining, engaging nature of lessons, a result consistent with Zhang's (2006) earlier studies. All of these findings suggest that Chinese tertiary students are not supportive of the passive, rote-memory style of teaching that is often attributed to Chinese education (see Cheng, 2000).

The test-oriented nature of Chinese education has been well documented (see Snow, Sun, & Li, 2017). Hence, one might expect to find a major focus on grades in Chinese tertiary students' evaluations of their professors. However, in spite of the supposed test-oriented nature of Chinese education, studies concerning Chinese learners' appreciation of their instructors tend to point more toward issues of relevance of feedback than toward the actual grades that instructors assign. Tam, Heng, and Jiang (2009), for example, provide evidence of students who specifically eschewed exam-focused feedback in favor of feedback applicable to the real world. Xiao and Wilkins (2015), in discussing the relationship between perceived instructor commitment and student satisfaction at a Chinese university, stress the importance of the instructor's "giving help and assessment feedback in a caring way, and dealing with problems and complaints quickly and effectively" (pp. 99-100). And Yin, Wang, and Han (2016) conclude their study by focusing on the importance of providing feedback in terms of learners' needs and wants, not in terms of test scores. These studies, then, seem to indicate a preference among Chinese tertiary students for feedback with real-world relevance and timeliness over exam-oriented feedback.

2.3. Chinese Students' Views of a "Good" University EFL Instructor

While one might expect Chinese tertiary students' views of a "good" EFL instructor to be more precise than their views of "good" instructors in general, such seems not to be the case. By eliciting short essays, Zhang and Watkins (2007) obtained the opinions of Chinese students, Chinese EFL instructors, and international (i.e., non-Chinese) EFL instructors concerning the qualities of a "good" EFL instructor in China. While Chinese and international instructors differed in their views, Chinese students appeared to echo Cortazzi and Jin's (1996) assertion that the EFL instructor should be a "perfect person" (Zhang & Watkins, 2007, p. 787). Examples from students' essays indicated that students expected their EFL instructors to be well dressed, speak good English, be charismatic, show strong moral values, and show a love for their students. The study, then, more or less denies any conclusions concerning specific qualities valued by Chinese tertiary students.

The inability to draw concrete conclusions concerning Chinese learners' views of a "good" EFL instructor is further exemplified in Wan, Low, and Li's (2011) study of teacher metaphors used by Chinese university teachers and students. While first-year English major students appreciated an instructor's expertise in the field, third-year English major students provided rather negative metaphors regarding the instructor as knowledge provider. Third-year students equated such an instructor with "*mechanical explanations*" and the "*'ctrl+c'* and '*ctrl+v*' buttons on the [computer] keyboard" (p. 408, italics as in original). This difference of opinion might be considered as a sign that the third-year students, being more accustomed to university life, were ready for more autonomy. However, the third-year students, seemingly contradicting this interpretation, were more likely to value an *instructor as leader* than an *instructor as guide*. One is left, ultimately, to infer that learners' desire for autonomy may change as their academic goals change.

A final area in which no clear conclusions may be drawn concerns Chinese learners' preference for native-English-speaking teachers (NESTs) or non-native-English-speaking teachers (NNESTs). With the opening-up of China, cooperation between China and international institutions has become more and more common (see Ennew & Yang, 2009). It is therefore to be expected that more and more tertiary institutions now employ NESTs (see Rao & Yuan, 2016). Students' perceptions of NESTs have been mixed, however. Rao (2010), in carrying out a study of Chinese tertiary students' perceptions of NESTs at Jiangxi Normal University, found that learners appreciated certain qualities of these instructors: their ability to use idiomatic language, their familiarity with the target culture, and their innovative teaching methods. The same students, incidentally, noted that NESTs at times revealed an insensitivity to the language difficulties of Chinese learners and a lack of awareness of Chinese cultural and educational values.

He and Miller (2011), in a study in which students and instructors compared the strengths and weaknesses of NESTs and NNESTs, identified advantages and disadvantages of NESTs similar to those mentioned in Rao (2010). The authors concluded that "students' English level is an important factor in determining their preference of teachers" and therefore suggested a system in which NNESTs (or NNESTs together with NESTs) teach lower-level students and NESTs teach higher-level students (p. 436). Again, the implication is that learners may not have fixed preferences but instead may change their views as their academic situations change (see Trinder, 2013).

3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1. Participants

Participants in the study were 79 full-time DKU students who were in their second or third year of study and who had successfully completed their required EAP course requirements. As mentioned previously, almost all first-year DKU students from China mainland need to take four seven-week EAP courses. The decision to seek participants who had already completed the program was based on three factors:

- 1) These students had seen a variety of teaching styles during their EAP experience.
- 2) These students had been given various opportunities to choose particular instructors or to change EAP instructors during their EAP experience.
- 3) These students had had time to reflect on their EAP experience as a whole.

Students involved in the study participated in three different capacities, each of which will be discussed below.

3.2. Data Collection

STAGE 1. In carrying out the first stage of data collection, the researchers first identified eight factors that seemed most likely to influence DKU students' choice of EAP instructor. The category of *OTHER* was also provided. Among the eight factors were the following:

- Gender (e.g., I prefer female instructors.)
- Personality and class atmosphere (e.g., The instructor is funny.)
- Ability to speak Mandarin (e.g., I like to speak with my instructor in Mandarin after class.)

Personal experience played a role in the identification of the eight factors: One researcher is a former EAP student and now a fourth-year student at DKU; the other is a DKU lecturer of EAP courses. Previous literature concerning Chinese students' views of what makes a "good" instructor (see Section 2 above) was also of primary importance. In order to test the appropriateness of the originally identified factors, the researchers elicited, through Qualtrics software, anonymous, 150-word responses to the following request:

Please indicate, in approximately 150 words, what instructor qualities motivated you to choose a particular instructor for your EAP courses. Please provide at least two criteria. (*You may write in English or in Chinese*).

Responses were obtained from 19 students.

STAGE 2. In response to the comments from the participants in Stage 1, the researchers modified the original list of factors that might influence students in their choice of EAP instructors. Among the changes made were the following: The category of *gender* was eliminated since none of the 19 respondents in Stage 1 mentioned gender as being an important factor in instructor selection; the category of *tolerance of new ideas* was added since several respondents in Stage 1 mentioned a preference for instructors who allowed them to express their own opinions (as opposed to simply repeating what experts had said); and the category of *clear course structure* was also added since respondents in Stage 1 indicated some skepticism of instructors who made last-minute changes. In the end, a list of

nine categories, with *OTHER* serving as a tenth category, was compiled. The final list consisted of the following items:

- Tolerance of new ideas (e.g., I have a lot of freedom to voice my opinions.)
- Personality and class atmosphere (e.g., The instructor is funny, is a friend, and is responsible.)
- Strictness/flexibility in grading/class policies (e.g., I might receive an easy A./The instructor might forgive me for a late assignment.)
- Innovative assignments/activities (e.g., The instructor provides new class activities and/or new types of assignments.)
- Ability to speak Mandarin (e.g., I like to speak with my instructor in Mandarin after class.)
- Personal background (e.g., The instructor has traveled a lot; the instructor also likes to play video games.)
- Academic background (e.g., The instructor holds a prestigious degree; the instructor has many publications.)
- Native language (e.g., I prefer a native speaker of English.)
- Clear course structure (e.g., The instructor provides a clear map of the course and does not make last-minute changes./The instructor provides a clear timeline for assignments.)
- *OTHER*

The researchers then elicited, again through Qualtrics software, rankings of the various criteria

in terms of importance, with a ranking of 1 indicating great importance and a ranking of 9 indicating very little importance. Respondents were able simply to drag items to their appropriate places within the ranking system. The Qualtrics software enabled survey items to be re-arranged for each respondent. Hence, while it was possible for participants to base their responses on convenience instead of serious analysis (see Krosnick, 1991), convenience-based decisions would vary for each respondent, thus minimizing the likelihood of one factor being favored over another in the entire survey.

Responses were obtained from 46 students.

STAGE 3. The third stage of data collection consisted of two recorded focus-group discussions (FGDs), with each lasting approximately 45 minutes and with each consisting of seven participants. In conducting FGDs, the researchers first asked participants to rank, on paper and without consultation with other participants, the various criteria listed in Stage 2 (see above). Participants were then asked to discuss their top three and bottom three criteria for choosing EAP instructors. The researchers sought to allow the discussion to take place naturally but intervened when a particular comment seemed to merit more elaboration. The researchers also led a short discussion of why certain items on the list were rarely or never ranked in the top or bottom three by FGD participants.

Finally, the data from Stages 2 and 3 were compared so that the researchers could determine general tendencies of students' criteria for choosing EAP instructors.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Results of Survey

The chart below reveals the overall ranking of the nine categories that participants were asked to consider in reflecting on the factors that influenced their choice of EAP instructor. The ranking is given according to *mean* scores in the survey. In keeping with the focus of FGDs (with participants being asked to rank their top and bottom three factors), the percentage of respondents who ranked a particular factor in the top three and the bottom three is also provided.

| Rank | Factor | Mean | % in Top 3 | % in Bottom 3 |
|------|---|------|------------|---------------|
| 1 | Personality and class atmosphere (e.g., The instructor is funny, is a friend and is responsible.) | 3.02 | 73.91 | 4.34 |
| 2 | Clear course structure (e.g., The instructor provides a clear map of the course and does not make last-minute changes./The instructor provides a clear timeline for assignments.) | 3.52 | 56.52 | 10.87 |
| 3 | Strictness/flexibility in grading/class policies (e.g., I might receive an easy A./The instructor might forgive me for a late assignment.) | 3.78 | 56.53 | 17.4 |
| 4 | Tolerance of new ideas (e.g., I have a lot of freedom to voice my opinions.) | 4.96 | 26.09 | 21.74 |
| 5 | Native language (e.g., I prefer a native speaker of English.) | 5.39 | 30.43 | 30.44 |
| 6 | Innovative assignments/activities (e.g., The instructor provides new class activities and/or new types of assignments.) | 5.43 | 15.22 | 32.61 |
| 7 | Academic background (e.g., The instructor holds a prestigious degree; the instructor has many publications.) | 6.09 | 15.21 | 32.61 |
| 8 | Personal background (e.g., The instructor has traveled a lot; the instructor also likes to play video games.) | 6.33 | 15.22 | 36.96 |
| 9 | Ability to speak Mandarin (e.g., I like to speak with my instructor in Mandarin after class.) | 7.98 | 2.17 | 69.56 |

The following discussion will take survey respondents' top and bottom three choices as benchmarks, with similarities and differences between survey results and FGDs being pointed out along the way. Afterwards, some attention will be given to middle-ranking factors (i.e., Items 4-6) of the survey. As the category of *OTHER* revealed no consistent tendencies, it will be excluded from the analysis.

4.2. The Top Three

Personality and Class Atmosphere. With 73.91% of survey respondents placing the category of *personality and class atmosphere* within their top three and only 4.34% placing it within their bottom three, the survey data suggest that EAP students place significant value on this factor. The survey finding was heavily supported by comments in FGDs, with nine of the 14 participants including the factor within their top three and only one placing it within

their bottom three. The importance of this factor seemed to lie in the participants' interest in productive interaction in the classroom and in their appreciation of an enjoyable classroom climate.

FGD participants frequently related personality and class atmosphere to increased willingness to communicate (WTC). One participant made the following comment:

So, I rank the personality and class atmosphere to be my first choice because I think if the instructor is interesting, and he or she often tells jokes, so I will be more willing to like talk with him or her after class. And I think EAP is a course that included many discussion and like in-class activities. So, if the class atmosphere was comfortable, I will be more willing to talk much in class.

(S3, FGD #1: 29 May 2021)

Here the student first emphasizes her interaction with the instructor, pointing out that she would be likely to approach a humorous instructor outside of class time. She then takes into account the classroom context, indicating that a comfortable class atmosphere would increase the likelihood of her participation. In terms of classroom interaction, S1 seems to echo S3's opinion:

So, like my top choice is personality and class atmosphere because I think like EAP is a very interactive courses. So, if the instructor is very kindly and friendly, when we discuss our ideas, it will be much more like effective.

(S1, FGD #1: 29 May 2021)

The importance of a comfortable atmosphere in increasing WTC also appeared in FGD #2. S3 (of FGD #2) equated a comfortable atmosphere with a family gathering:

So, my first choice is personality and class atmosphere because I feel like the professor's charisma will really draw me into a class. And then, like, some professors would not make the classroom like a real lecture, but...it feels like my grandpa. It's like children are sitting around and we are doing some storytelling. So, this kind of class atmosphere really makes me feel comfortable and willing to share my ideas.

(S3, FGD #2: 29 May 2021)

The participants' linking of personality and class atmosphere to increased WTC takes on particular significance in light of frequent studies concerning Chinese students' reticence in class (see, for example, Li & Baldauf, 2011; Lin & Wu, 2012; Zhu, 2003). Interestingly, anxiety and the fear of making mistakes have been cited as two of the main causes of such reticence (see Liu & Jackson, 2008; Tsui, 1996). Though it is unlikely that the participants in the FGDs of this study were aware of the literature on WTC, they seemed implicitly aware of the benefits of not being anxious or afraid in the classroom or in conversations with instructors outside of class. The comfortable atmosphere that they advocated is of course one which would tend to lower levels of anxiety and fear and would thus increase WTC.

The role of humor in creating such an atmosphere was also emphasized by FGD participants. As noted above, S3 (of FGD #1) noted that she would feel more comfortable talking with her instructor out of class if the instructor “often tells jokes.” Other participants also commented on the need of having fun and studying with a humorous instructor:

So, um, for me, personality and cause atmosphere would be the most important because I think for a course like EAP the class content is almost identical [among instructors]. So, I would say, like, if the course is more fun, the instructors more accessible or, you know, like he or she can become friends with students, and maybe I can, you know, learn more than just a class.

(S2, FGD #2: 29 May 2021)

So, my first choice is also personality and class atmosphere. I think this course is quite important for freshmen students because EAP is especially for Chinese students and since they're not a native speaker, I think this course it's important for them to be one of the first classes to choose to adjust to the English learning atmosphere. So, I expect the instructor to be funny and accessible.

(S5, FGD #2: 29 May 2021)

So, I have the similar reason of other students because I think, especially for the newer students in the freshman year, I think, more funny and more friendly instructor will make me more interested in the EAP class, and I will put more effort in it.

(S7, FGD #2: 29 May 2021)

Granted, in S2's comments, the word *fun* cannot be strictly equated with *funny*. Nevertheless, S2's preference for a *fun* course and for an instructor who can become a friend suggests that she prefers a less serious atmosphere in which the instructor does not treat the classroom as “the most hallowed of all places” (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 41). It is in such a classroom, suggests Dörnyei (2001), that “the jokes will come” (p. 41). S5 and S7, on the other hand, specifically desire a *funny* instructor. Taken together, the participants' comments indicate that, in the participants' eyes, a lighthearted, more friendly method of managing the class may lead to more learning, to a more trouble-free adjustment to a new learning situation, and to more effort.

Clear Course Structure. Survey results indicate that respondents placed much less value on *clear course structure* than they did on *personality and class atmosphere*--as only 56.52% of respondents placed *clear course structure* within their top three criteria for choosing EAP instructors. It should be noted, however, that FGD participants placed *clear course structure* within their top three nine times—a figure which equals that given to *personality and class atmosphere*. An interest in efficiency and an interest in having a well-prepared instructor seemed to drive the FGD participants' choice of clear course structure as an important criterion.

The interest in efficiency becomes apparent in the following excerpts from FGDs:

Clear course structure speaks to the content or what we will learn through the course. When we have a clear structure, like the syllabus for the grading policies, we can, like,... One important benefit is to get more effectiveness or efficiency. We don't have to, like, every time, we go through a syllabus or ask our professors or peers what we are going to do today, which saves a lot of time.

(S7, FGD #1: 29 May 2021)

I think clear course structure is important. I think it's important for all of the classes, not only EAP, because students can save a lot of time from that. I always first go through the syllabus, then making decisions, how much time or effort I'm going to put into this course.

(S4, FGD #2: 29 May 2021)

A comparison of the two excerpts reveals that one participant does not want to consult the syllabus while the other takes the syllabus very seriously. In both cases, however, students appeared to give a high priority to saving time, a priority that would seem to be common among students not only in China mainland but also in Hong Kong and the United States (see Zhang, 2006).

A second issue related to the category of clear course structure seemed to revolve around the FGD participants' views of instructors' priorities—as the following comments reveal:

There is clear course structure because I kind of feel like it is a course after all and the instructor should have like a main idea about, like, what he or she wants to deliver in the course.

(S1, FGD #2: 29 May 2021)

My second choice is clear course structure because I think that reflects whether the instructor really puts effort into teaching or not, because I've met professors who have very good academic background, but they don't seem to prepare anything for the class, which is not very helpful if you really want to learn something.

(S2, FGD #2: 29 May 2021)

S1's comment deals simply with the matter of instructor responsibility: A good instructor knows what he/she is doing. S2's comment takes the matter further by addressing, albeit indirectly, the issue of where tertiary instructors' priorities often lie. Zhang, Fosskett, Wang, and Qu (2011) provide the following comment from a Chinese university student: "some teachers teach badly just because they have a heavy load of research tasks" (p. 24). Though S2 is not quite as direct as the student quoted in Zhang, Fosskett, Wang, and Qu (2011), the implication is rather apparent.

Strictness/Flexibility in Grading/Class Policies. Unlike the categories of *personality and class atmosphere* and *clear course structure*, the category of *strictness/flexibility in*

grading policies revealed large discrepancies between the online, anonymous survey and FGDs. While 56.53% of survey respondents placed this category within their top three, only three out of 14 FGD participants did so. As Hyland (2016) points out, one problem with FGs is that “what participants tell the researcher is shared with other group participants as well” (p. 80). It is of course possible that FGD participants, speaking in a group of their peers, did not want to appear shallow by admitting that their main concern was to get a high grade. In fact, only one FGD participant (S1 of FGD #1) specifically mentioned the importance of getting high grades. Other participants, tended to focus more on issues of transparency and fairness—as the following excerpts reveal:

My first choice is also like strictness, flexibility, and course policies. Like, I have experienced classes with very strict but good policies, while [others] were very, not strict, but bad policies.

(S4, FGD #1: 29 May 2021)

I think, if the instructors’ grading policies are fair enough, I don’t care about whether I get an A or A minus or B plus or something else. If it is fair enough, I will accept it. I will agree with it.

(S3, FGD #2: 29 May 2021)

[in response to S3 above] Yeah, sometimes, I feel like it’s even more annoying if the instructor is not responsible with the grading and just gave a lot of As and made me feel like, you know, my effort is just gone away.

(S1, FGD #2: 29 May 2021)

While there is a common view that Chinese students grow up with a heavy focus on grades (see Snow, Sun, & Li, 2017), the comments above indicate that the specific grades are not as important as the rationale behind them. Another FGD participant (S6 of FGD #1) emphasized that she merely wanted to know why she got “the deduction of the points” and stressed that “what we learn and, like, how we progress is more important.” It would seem, then, that FGD participants revealed a rather high “learning orientation”—that is, a focus more on learning than on the final grade (see Xu, 2019).

4.3. The Bottom Three

Academic Background. As the previously given chart reveals, only 15.21% of survey respondents placed the category of academic background within their top three while 32.61% place it within their bottom three. Five of the FGD participants placed this category within their bottom three. Others made it clear that they did not worry much about their EAP instructor’s qualifications, with one stating that, if an instructor had been hired, he/she must have something to offer. Only one FGD participant placed this category within the top three. The reasons given for not placing much emphasis on academic background tended to revolve around participants’ perceptions of instructors’ priorities and participants’ views that, for an

EAP instructor, effective communication is more important than prestigious degrees or extensive publications.

As suggested in the discussion of clear course structure above, some FGD participants appeared to believe that instructors with lofty academic qualifications tended to prioritize research over teaching. In discussions specifically related to the category of academic background, FGD participants expressed this belief more directly—as the following comments will reveal:

Some instructors they are, like, very, very, like, very established in their fields and have very, like, abundance of knowledge in their fields. However, he or she may be very busy. So, it may be very, very, like, short office hour or very little chances to get, like, in-depth conversation.

(S4, FGD #1 29 May 2021)

Maybe a professor with good academic background, they might do their own research well. But that doesn't equal to teaching. I think the ability of teaching is more like my classmate just said--more about communicating instead of only a degree.

(S6, FGD #1 29 May 2021)

Such comments, curiously enough, suggest that FGD participants feel that a strong academic background may ultimately hinder communication with the instructor, the implication being that active researchers may not take the time to develop personal connections with students or to communicate deeply with them. The participants, however, distinguished between EAP instructors and instructors of their major courses. When asked if they would place importance on academic qualifications when choosing instructors for their major courses, FGD #1 participants simply responded with comments such as “of course” and “yes.” One FGD #2 participant elaborated on the matter:

Because I think EAP is more about language. And, also, I think EAP is like instruction. When you go to the class, you learn a lot of things about the way that is preferred to write in a proper form, but not about your major. So, I think I don't care about the background of EAP instructors, but for my major courses, a person who has a stronger academic background would guide me better to study the knowledge that I want to learn in my major.

(S3, FGD #2 29 May 2021)

The students' distinguishing between EAP instructors and instructors of their major courses could be considered as an instance of the former being relegated to the role of second-class citizens or service providers (Morgan, 2009; Pennington & Hoekje, 2014). A less cynical interpretation would take into account the fact that EAP courses, at least those of DKU, are geared toward a variety of majors and hence do not normally present highly specialized knowledge.

Personal Background. Like the category of *academic background*, the category of *personal background* did not fare too well in the online survey, with 15.22% of respondents placing it within their top three and 36.96% placing it within their bottom three. Eight of the 14 FGD participants listed personal background within their bottom three. Although (as mentioned previously) FGD participants tended to prioritize personality and class atmosphere as well as communication with students, they did not appear to think that specific details about the instructor's personal life were especially relevant. Three examples should help to illustrate this point:

So, my bottom choice is personal background because we're not, like, it's not a date. We're just taking academic courses. So, I don't think personal background is important.

(S7, FGD #1 29 May 2021)

I think that the personal background also doesn't matter. Sometimes, some instructors are kind, and they would like to make friends with us. But if his or her instruction is not very efficient or useful, I personally would like to be friends with this instructor, but I'm not sure of their courses because it's not very useful.

(S5, FGD #1 29 May 2021)

So, I actually record the personal background as seventh place. But I do not put it to the bottom because I think, as in the example, say the instructor also likes to play video games. I like to play video games. So, if I know the instructor has a shared interest with me, I'm more willing to choose his or her course, because I know we have a shared interest.

(S6, FGD #1 29 May 2021)

S7, with his rather witty explanation, indicates a basic understanding of the instructor-student relationship. Though he ranked the category of personality and class atmosphere as his top criterion, he realizes that connectedness between instructor and student has its boundaries. S5, in agreeing with S7, reveals once again FGD participants' rather high "learning orientation" (Xu, 2019): Friendship with the instructor may be nice but cannot overtake the priority of learning from the instructor. In terms of underlying message content, S6 to some degree echoes S5's comment. For her, an instructor's personal background is not very important—hence, seventh place in the rankings. However, if a shared interest happens to exist, she is happy to take the matter into account. In short, all three FGD participants appear to give more importance to the notion of instructor as *instructor* than to the notion of instructor as *personal friend*.

Ability to Speak Mandarin. The category of *ability to speak Mandarin* ranked overwhelmingly in last place in the online survey, with only 2.17% of respondents placing it within their top three and 69.56% placing it within their bottom three. In some respects, such a low ranking would appear quite logical. Students in JVUs have intentionally chosen an EMI institution. And since students in such institutions are encouraged to study at the

“parent university” at some point (Ergenc, 2020, p. 2), one would suppose that they are prepared to function entirely in English. In terms of numbers, FGD participants appeared to agree with this logic: In their original rankings, 12 out of 14 participants placed this category within their bottom three, and only one included it in the top three. FGDs, incidentally, revealed some caveats and, seemingly, at least one change of opinion.

The principal caveat came from S7 (of FGD #2):

And for ability to speak Mandarin, I personally don't see that very important to myself. But I could see how that helped a lot of other students who are not so confident or comfortable with speaking English when they first get into DKU. So, it would really help them get familiar with...get easy to talk with the instructor at the start. So, I will say this is sort of more important than I would personally evaluate.
(S7, FGD #2 29 May 2021)

S7, an extremely proficient user of English, recognizes that the ability to speak Mandarin may benefit less proficient students. Hence, she is careful not to reject the importance of Mandarin completely. Likewise, S1 (of FGD #1), after initially arguing that the use of Mandarin runs counter to the goals of EAP, acknowledged the value of Mandarin on some occasions:

We have a lot of, like, Chinese speakers in WLS [DKU's Writing and Learning Studio]. So, if you have some specific questions that you can't ask, like, explain very clearly to your EAP instructor, you can come to them.
(S1, FGD #1 29 May 2021)

Eventually, through the debate that ensued in FGD #1, S1 seemed somewhat to change her stance. When S2 (of FGD #1) pointed out how much she had learned from a native-speaking instructor of English who is also fluent in Mandarin and is therefore able to detect signs of “Chinglish,” S1 made the following concession:

If the instructor is a native speaker [of English] but also learn some Chinese, it's very good for students because they also have the professional, like, understanding of how to use the language more natively, but also can, like, communicate with us better. So, I think this is a very, like, the best choice for students.
(S1, FGD #1 29 May 2021)

Such a concession, coupled with the caveats discussed earlier, would seem to reveal that the extremely low ranking of the category *ability to speak Mandarin* in the online survey cannot be taken at face value. Through discussion and debate, new and refined opinions emerge (see Basturkmen, 2002). Ultimately, FGDs revealed that an ability to speak Mandarin *is* perhaps considered a useful skill for an EAP instructor of a Chinese JVU.

4.4. The Middle Three

As mentioned previously, the main focus of the present study revolves around the participants' top three and bottom three choices of factors that motivate their choice of EAP instructor. Nevertheless, it seems only prudent to give some attention to the middle three.

Tolerance of New Ideas. It must be acknowledged that survey respondents and FGD participants differed considerably in the importance given to this category. While only about one fourth of survey respondents (26.09%) placed this category within their top three, nine out of 14 FGD participants did so. On the negative side, 21.74% of survey respondents listed this factor within their bottom three while only one FGD participant did so. Clearly, such a discrepancy allows for no easy explanation. The FGD participants mentioned matters such as the chance to "create some new ideas" (S5 of FGD #2), the "freedom to say...what we want to say" (S1 of FGD #2), and "the freedom to voice our opinions" (S1 of FGD #1). Such comments, along with the fact that FGD participants readily volunteered to participate in FGDs, might lead to the assumption that FGD participants are more outgoing and confident than are some who responded to the online survey and thus would be more likely to want to express novel ideas in class.

Native Language. Like the category of *tolerance of new ideas*, the category of *native language* also revealed large discrepancies between survey respondents and FGD participants. Survey respondents were rather polarized, with 30.43% ranking this category within their top three and 30.44% placing it within their bottom three. Among FGD participants, however, only two placed *native language* within their top three choices while seven ranked this criterion within their bottom three. Such a discrepancy would seem to reflect the ongoing debate concerning NESTs' often privileged position in ELT (see Ma, 2012). S5 (of FGD #1) argued that an NNEST might produce confusion in learners' attempts "to understand the right use of the phrases or vocabularies." Other FGD participants, however, were quick to point out that an NNEST is likely to be a "great language learner" (S4 of FGD #2), likely to be able to share experiences of being a "multilingual person" (S7 of FGD #2), and likely to "provide some interesting insights" into language learning (S1 of FGD #2). FGD participants, then, revealed that they had some doubts about the privileged position of NNESTs.

Innovative Assignments. Survey responses indicated that only 15.21% of respondents placed this category within their top three; 32.61% placed it within their bottom three. Two FGD participants placed it within their top three, and five placed it within their bottom three. Although one FGD participant (S5 of FGD #1) claimed to "personally hate innovative assignments," the majority of participants simply revealed some skepticism about such assignments. S1 (of FGD #2), for example, noted that a creative person can be creative even without an innovative assignment and that a supposedly innovative assignment may just add "meaningless group work or something." S7 (of FGD #2) responded to S1's comment by pointing out that, with an innovative assignment, "it takes you a lot of time to figure out what exactly [the instructors] want." Ultimately, then, FGD participants seemed to feel that too much innovation in assignments may merely complicate matters for students.

5. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR JVUS

The findings presented here have three overarching pedagogical implications for JVUs: (1) the need of a sense of community in EAP courses, (2) the need of transparency in EAP courses, and (3) the perception of EAP instructors as first and foremost classroom teachers. Regarding the sense of community, one must keep in mind that students in a JVU EAP course may be experiencing an international environment for the first time. As mentioned previously, these students have intentionally sought out an EMI institution. Hence, it is reasonable to assume that these students should be mentally prepared for what awaits them. Nevertheless, the EAP course, as perhaps the only course in which Chinese students do not have to “compete” with international students, may provide a safe haven for free discussion of doubts and concerns (see Benesch, 2001). As revealed here, JVU EAP students sometimes value instructors who also speak their native language and sometimes value instructors who are native speakers of English (i.e., NESTs). But concerns about personality, class atmosphere, and open communication seem to override those related to native language and to second-language skills.

Secondly, JVU EAP students desire transparency in terms of course policies and assignments. Given their focus on learning and their need to adapt to a new environment, these students are interested in saving time and focusing on learning goals. With the *Gaokao* (i.e., the national Chinese college entrance examination) still serving as a key determinant of Chinese students’ futures (Muthanna & Sang, 2015), it is unlikely that China’s reputation as a test-oriented society will disappear in the near future. University students, however, have already gotten over the hurdle of the *Gaokao*. And the present study reveals that JVU EAP students now wish to pursue *learning* instead of simply striving for high test scores. But *learning* needs to take place quickly and efficiently. Hence, course policies and assignments need to be designed to promote efficiency, with special care being given to assignments that may appear innovative but may also require unnecessary interpretation. In short, transparency in the form of a clear orientation toward learning goals would seem to be the most likely mechanism for creating the effective and efficient learning environment that JVU students expect.

Lastly, the JVU EAP instructor is considered to be first and foremost a classroom teacher. This role does not deny the importance of EAP instructor research (such as the present study), nor does it relegate the EAP instructor to a position of subservience to instructors of content courses. Rather, it acknowledges the fact that students in JVUs (and, probably, in non-JVUs) will inevitably place more value on the academic background of instructors of major content courses than they do on instructors of EAP courses. By embracing this role, and by opening themselves up to active and ongoing dialogue with EAP students, the EAP instructor enjoys the privilege of helping to shape the discourses that will form the content of the learners’ major courses (see Benesch, 2001).

6. CONCLUSION

This study has presented the results of a study of the factors prioritized in students’ selection of EAP instructors in China-based JVUs. In doing so, it has taken a rather specific angle in an attempt to provide insight into the role that EAP courses play in such a context. The results indicate that EAP students of JVUs highly value instructors who are accessible

and create a friendly class atmosphere, provide a clear map of course plans, and show some flexibility in terms of grading/course policies. The relation between grading and clear course plans has been shown: Students do not necessarily demand high grades; they seek a clear rationale for the grades assigned to them. EAP students of JVUs do not seem to give much importance to an EAP instructor's academic or personal background, and they vary in their concerns about an instructor's first language (i.e., NEST or NNEST) and about an instructor's ability to speak their own language (i.e., Mandarin Chinese). Students seem to prioritize free and open communication with their instructor over the instructor's specific linguistic background.

Granted, the study has its limitations—particularly, a limitation in terms of quantity of data. As Nulty (2008) points out, “online surveys are much less likely to achieve response rates as high as surveys administered on paper” (p. 302). The online survey discussed in the present study reveals only an 11.53% response rate. It is certainly possible that a higher survey response rate, coupled with a greater number of FGD participants, might have produced slightly different results. Specifically, discrepancies between online survey results and FGDs might have been reduced, or more concrete explanations might have been made available.

Regardless of the aforementioned limitation, the study presented here should provide ample opportunities for reflection for JVU EAP course instructors. As mentioned previously, JVU EAP students reveal a high “learning orientation” (Xu, 2019). Logically, it may be assumed that they will choose instructors who will guide them along their learning path. This paper, therefore, has sought to provide insight into the instructor qualities that JVU EAP students are likely to desire in terms of guidance along this path.

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