Research on English Literacy Among Chinese College Students

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Abstract

English is learned as a foreign language among Chinese college students. Traditionally, tests and examinations are two major approaches used to assess the achievements of English learning among students in China. Despite that the assessment based on these two approaches is effective on screening and selection, its role in monitoring education process and improving education quality is disregarded. The overall development of students' English literacy, which includes their awareness to the differences between English and Chinese languages, their attitudes to English learning, their knowledge on English language and their competence to utilize English in authentic contexts, cannot be assessed via these two approaches. Therefore, it is of great necessity to construct a new framework of assessment covering these aspects. In this research, on the basis of the theory of educational assessment (the fourth generation) and the concept of teachers' assessment literacy, such a framework is proposed and used to assess the level of English literacy among Chinese college students. This research intends to explore the level of English literacy among Chinese college students and the influential factors to their English literacy. This research will provide a theoretical significance as well as the practical significance to the development of assessment on English education in China.

Keywords: English education, English as a foreign language, English literacy, awareness, attitudes, knowledge, competence, among Chinese college students

1. Introduction

No one can doubt the significant role that English plays in the development of international communication and globalization. Currently, English is being used as one of the official languages in some major international organizations, such as the United Nations (UN), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the European Union (EU), as well as in some major international events, such as the Olympic Games, the World Games, the World Exposition and various international conferences. According to the estimation by the British Council, almost 3 billion people could

communicate in English and around 70 countries have designated English as the official language by 2020 (British Council, 2009). Under these circumstances, the English literacy among Chinese college students, who remain as the main reserve force of English talents, is closely related to the strategic development of China and the future of Chinese society. In this sense, English teaching in China is no longer a mere subject; rather it is an influential factor to the development of the education in the whole country. Therefore, it is of great necessity to explore the current situation of English education in China.

English is learned as a foreign language in China (Han Baocheng, 2010). Jiang Feng (2016), the secretary of the Party Committee of Shanghai International Studies University, proposes that English literacy is a strategic resource for China to participate in global affairs. In 2016, EF Education, an international educational institution, released its annual English Proficiency Index Report globally. The report covers more than 0.95 million English learners in 72 countries and regions. The report indicates that the average score of English proficiency index among English learners in Mainland China is 50.94, ranking at the 39th place among the 72 surveyed countries and regions. It lags behind Singapore (63.52), South Korea (54.87), India (57.30), Hong Kong China (54.29), Taiwan China (52.82), and even Vietnam (54.06) and Indonesia (52.94). It turns out that English learners in Mainland China has low proficiency level. (EF, 2016). The project team led by Professor Mei Deming (2004) conducted a field survey on English teaching in levels of Chinese schools, ranging from primary schools to universities. The result exhibits that there exist various kinds of problems in the currently existing English assessment system. These problems prohibit assessment exerting its positive influences on English teaching as a return. Research on the English test corpus built by NEEA (National Education Examinations Authority) illustrates that the forms of English tests conducted in some schools at the primary level are rigid and the content is decontextualized from the authentic English language use. These tests are generally conducted by teachers solely and they are believed to lack reliability and validity (Liu Shixiang & Zhu Bingyan, 2017). Shi Long, the

chairperson of the Education Assessment Professional Committee of Chinese Education Society, mentioned at the 2015 Education Assessment Seminar that assessment is a powerful lever for education; however, there still exist many problems in the assessment system in China (Li Ping & Chai Wei, 2015). It is the truth that the current standards for English assessment in the educational system in China are not systematic and comprehensive to cover the dimensions of the overall development of Chinese students' English literacy (Research Group on Standards for National Education System, 2015). Assessment plays a significant role in monitoring the quality of English teaching and the overall development of students' English literacy. In this sense, it is of great importance to conduct research on the assessment system on English literacy among Chinese students.

2. Literature Review

In China, English teaching is an effective way to improve English literacy among Chinese students. In this process, assessment plays an influential role in English teaching (Wang Duqin, 2007).

As listed above, there still exist various problems in the assessment system. Regarding these problems, Chinese scholars did extensive corresponding researches. In his study, Cen Jianjun (1997) argues that the phenomenon of exam-oriented English teaching is widespread and the blind comparisons among Chinese schools are prevalent in China. In these schools, the examination scores are compared overwhelmingly while the overall development of students' English literacy is neglected. Gong Yafu (2002) proposes three points in this respect. Firstly, the current assessment system is mainly focused on fragmentary language knowledge while a comprehensive assessment on English literacy is lacking; secondly, screening and selection are overemphasized in the current assessment system while the role of assessment in monitoring and improving English teaching is ignored; and thirdly, the current assessment only includes the content knowledge of English language while the emotions, interests, motivations and attitudes of students when they are learning English are not involved. Li Huiqing (2015) argues that although it is required to develop students' English literacy in English syllabus, a corresponding assessment

approach is lacking. Thus, driven by the orientation that "what is taught should be what is tested in the examinations", exam-oriented English teaching is prevail. The development of English literacy is disregarded. Since examination is taken as the main objective of English teaching and it is regarded as the only valid approach to measure students' English abilities, the current assessment system cannot play its role in promoting teachers' teaching and students' learning (Zhou Xiaoyong & Zhu Xiaoying, 2016). The utilitarian thought brought about by exam-oriented education has exerted a negative influence on English teaching and the overall development of students' English literacy. Thus, it is urgent to establish a systematic, comprehensive and diversified assessment system to provide a valid and reliable measure on students' English literacy (Peng Qinglong, 2016). Currently, English teaching is oriented to the cultivation of students' listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. The stakeholders in education tend to position the attribute of English as a tool and turn their blind eyes to students' emotions and attitudes in learning English as well as the values embedded in this language (Wang Chunhui, 2016).

To summarize, there do exist some problems in English assessment system currently. Assessment plays an important role in ensuring and improving the quality of English education. Thus, it is needed and urgent to establish a reliable and valid assessment framework, which covers not only the assessment on English knowledge, but also the assessment on students' emotions, awareness and attitudes to English.

The problems on assessment system does not only exist in the domain of English teaching; rather, these problems also exist in the domains of other subjects. Fang Xiangyang (2015) makes a comprehensive analysis on the problems existing in the current assessment system on entrepreneurship education in Chinese polytechnic colleges and based on the theory of educational assessment (the fourth generation), he proposes his suggestions on the improvement of such an assessment system. Aiming to solve the problems in the assessment on the quality of education at the undergraduate level, Wen Ping (2010) proposes her suggestions on how to improve the assessment system at this level on the

basis of the theory of educational assessment (the fourth generation). In view of the problems existing in the current assessment on classroom teaching, Qiao Juanjuan (2010) proposes her suggestions on the reform of the assessment content and operations of classroom teaching with the theory of educational assessment (the fourth generation) as its framework. Moreover, Zhang Hua (2010) explores on the assessment on academic achievements among Chinese college students based on educational assessment theory (the fourth generation). Zhou Xiangjun and Luo Zhimin probe on the problems existing in the assessment on the overall development of graduated students and propose their suggestions accordingly. Although Xie Lingying and Luo Shimei (2015) focus their attention on the exploration on the assessment of academic achievements among English majors in Chinese colleges with the fourth generation of educational assessment theory as the framework, their study does not include non-English-major students.

Despite that these researches do not focus on the development of English literacy among English learners, including English majors and non-English majors, in Chinese colleges, they provide an insight to solve the existing problems on assessment of English literacy with educational assessment theory as the framework.

In order to fill the gap on the researches of assessment on English education, this research is intended to explore the assessment of English literacy among Chinese college students learning English as a foreign language. Therefore, the objectives of this research are two-folds:

a) To explore the level of English literacy among Chinese college students learning English as a foreign language; and

b) To explore the influential factors to English literacy among these students.

Thus, two research questions are proposed:

a) What is the level of English literacy among Chinese college students learning English as a foreign language?

b) What are the influential factors to English literacy among these students?

3. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

3.1. Theoretical Framework

The theory of educational assessment provides the theoretical framework for this research. Educational assessment is the process of scientific judgement on educational activities, processes and results conducted via the utilization of certain technologies and approaches.

The revolution of the educational assessment theory experienced four generations. The first generation is the Measurement Generation, which focuses on tests and measurements with the main goal of pursuing the quantification of assessment results. It is established on the basis of Thorndike's view that "everything that exists has a quantity, and everything that has a quantity can be measured". During this period, the focus of the educational assessment is to develop various test scales to measure students' skills. Objective test and normal referenced test are the products in this generation.

The second generation is the Description Generation. This generation focuses on the description on test results. It aims to judge whether the educational objectives have been achieved and to what extent they have been achieved. During this period, the Eight-year Study, led by The Progressive Education Association, proposed that the primary purpose of education is not to transmit knowledge, but to promote the overall development of students. Considering the one-sidedness of measurement in the first generation, Taylor proposed the concept of assessment to distinguish from the concept of measurement. Hence, he proposed the concept of educational assessment.

The third generation is the Judgement Generation with an outstanding feature of judgement. During this period, educators should not only collect assessment data through certain measurements, but also formulate certain criteria and objectives for judgement. Scriven (1967) pointed out in his article that the estimation of strengths and values should be incorporated in assessment. In 1972, he proposed goal-free assessment and emphasized that educational objectives should be differentiated from assessment activities so that both the actual effects of educational objectives and assessment activities could be taken into account, rather than only the expected effects of educational objectives.

The fourth generation is the Construction Generation. It emphasizes that assessment does not describe the objective state of things; rather, it describes a subjective understanding to assessed subjects by the people or groups involved in the assessment. It also proposes the participation of the assessed subjects in the assessment, not only the educators or teachers.

The fourth generation of educational assessment theory is taken as the theoretical framework for this research. The reasons are three folds:

Firstly, the assessed subjects are endowed with the rights to participate in the assessment, which provides them with a chance to fully analyze their merits and shortcomings in an active and effective way.

Secondly, tests and examinations are two primary assessment approaches used in China. Considering that, the scores of tests and examinations cannot reflect the overall development of students, multiple assessment approaches, such as questionnaire, classroom observation and interviews, are proposed.

Thirdly, the function of assessment is limited to screening and selection as it is reflected in the current major examinations in China, such as the entrance examination for secondary school and the college entrance examination. At the meantime, the traditional assessment approach is the last step of the teaching process, which means the assessment marks the end of the entire educational process. In this sense, assessment cannot provide comprehensive feedback on the previous teaching, nor provide reference and guidance for further study, let alone the role it plays in improving the overall development of students. The fourth generation of educational assessment theory emphasizes the need that assessment should focus on the overall development of the assessed subjects rather than the standardized quantified tests or examinations.

Therefore, the fourth generation of the educational assessment theory provides a reliable and reasonable framework for this research.

3.2 Conceptual Framework

The concept of teachers' assessment literacy, proposed by Dr. Zhao Xuejing (2014), provides the conceptual framework for this research. According

to Dr. Zhao, teachers' assessment literacy can be divided into four dimensions: assessment awareness, assessment knowledge, assessment competence and teachers' attitudes to assessment. Among them, assessment awareness refers to teachers' awareness to the significance and usefulness of assessment in their teaching; assessment knowledge refers to teachers' knowledge on various assessment approaches and assessment competence refers to their abilities to utilize these approaches.

On the basis of this concept, students' English literacy can be divided as four dimensions as well. These four dimensions are English awareness, English knowledge, English competence and students' attitudes to English. Similar to teachers' assessment literacy, English knowledge and English competence refer to students' knowledge on English language and their abilities to use English in authentic contexts respectively. English awareness refers to students' awareness to the different between Chinese and English languages and attitudes to English refer to their opinions on learning English and their self-efficacy when learning English. Hence, the framework of English literacy is constructed as below.
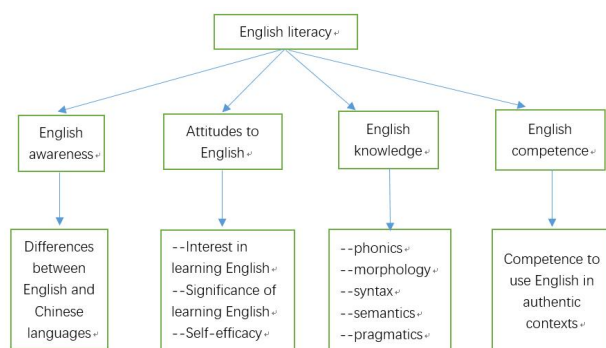

Figure 1. Framework of English literacy

4. Research Methodology

On the basis of the theoretical framework of educational assessment theory (the fourth generation) and the conceptual framework listed above, the questionnaire for this research is development. The questionnaire consists of five parts. The first part is about the information of the participants, including their genders, grades, majors, years of learning English, regions they are from, whether they have attended out-of-school English classes, and parents' educational background. The second part is about their attitudes to English, the third part their English awareness, the fourth part their English knowledge and the fifth part their English competence. The survey on these four parts is conducted on Likert Scale of five points while 1 point corresponds to totally disagree and 5 points correspond to totally agree. Altogether 25 questions are constructed. Questions 9-14 are about their attitudes to English, questions 15-17 about their English awareness, questions 18-25 about their English knowledge and questions 26-33 about their English competence.

This questionnaire is posted on www.wenjuanxing.cn, the website specifically designed for questionnaire research, for a month to collect data.

5. Data Analysis

5.1 Participants

Altogether 498 students responded to the questionnaire. Among these respondents, 257 are male students (51.6%, N=498) and 241 are female students (48.4%, N=498).

As for their grades, 145 (29.1%, N=498) are freshmen, 190 (38.2%, N=498) are sophomores, 103 (20.7%, N=498) are juniors and 60 (12.0%, N=498) are seniors.

In terms of their major, 51.4% of them (n=256) are English majors while 31.9% of them (n=159) are majors in humanities and 16.7% (n=83) are majors in science.

As for the experience of learning English, most of them claim that they have learned English for more than 9 years (n=272, 54.6% for 9-12 years; n=146, 29.3% for 13-15 years). 13.5% of them (n=67) claim that they have no more than 9 years of English learning experience while 2.6% (n=13) claim they have more than 15 years of English learning experience.

For the region they are from, 20.7% of these participants (n=103) are from Western China, 34.5% (n=172) from Central China and 44.8% (n=223) from Eastern China. Among them, 345 (69.3%) admit that they have attended out-of-school English classes while the rest of them (n=253, 30.7%) did not attend any out-of-school English classes.

With regard to their parents' degrees, 44% of the participants (n=219, father's degree) and 41.2% (n=205, mother's degree) claim that their parents hold bachelor degrees. 17.5% of their fathers hold master or doctoral degrees (n=72, 14.5% for master degree; n=15, 3.0% for doctoral degree) and 7.2% of their mothers hold master or doctoral degrees (n=26, 5.2% for master degree; n=10, 2.0% for doctoral degree). 18.9% (n=94) of their fathers have diploma and 19.7% (n=98) have just graduated from senior secondary schools or below. For their mothers, 21.3% (n=106) have diploma and 30.3% (n=151) graduated from senior secondary schools or below. The Cronbach's Alpha is 0.894.

5.2 Level of English Literacy

Descriptive analysis is used to describe the level of English literacy among Chinese college students learning English as a foreign language in four dimensions.

For the first dimension English awareness, the statistic shows that the respondents have a relatively medium level of awareness to the differences between Chinese and English languages (Mean=3.57; 3.56; 3.56) as illustrated in Figure 2.

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
I know that in English the logic is embedded in the formation of an English sentence, while in Chinese, the logic is embedded in the meaning of a Chinese sentence.	498	1	5	3.57	1.184
I know that in English it is intended to describe the essence of the world, while in Chinese, it is intended to describe the representation of the world.	498	1	5	3.56	1.174
I know that in English it is emphasized to describe the objective facts, while in Chinese, the subjective feelings are emphasized.	498	1	5	3.56	1.165
Valid N (listwise)	498				

Figure 2. Level of English awareness

For the second dimension attitudes to English, the figure indicates that these respondents all have a positive attitude to English learning. In their opinions, learning English is not only necessary, but also essential for them to participate in the world (Mean=4.07). They have a great passion and also strong interests and self-efficacy in English (Mean=4.07).

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
I like English very much.	498	1	5	4.07	1.059
I have a strong interest in English.	498	1	5	4.07	1.056
English is helpful for me to understand the world.	498	1	5	4.07	1.046
I think learning English is significant and essential.	498	1	5	4.07	1.033
I will never give up learning English no matter what difficulties I meet.	498	1	5	4.07	1.041
I firmly believe that I can learn English well and finally reach the proficiency level.	498	1	5	4.07	1.055
Valid N (listwise)	498				

Figure 3. Level of the attitudes to English

For the third dimension English knowledge, the statistic illustrates that they all self-report that they have a comparatively high level of English knowledge in terms of phonics, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics (Mean=3.92).

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
I have learned phonics and can sound out an English word using phonics.	498	1	5	3.92	1.066
I have learned the formation of an English word and I know how to form a word using word root and suffix.	498	1	5	3.92	1.040
I have learned the five basic structures of English sentences and can write an English sentence using any of these structures.	498	1	5	3.92	1.070
I have learned the eight basic tenses in English and can write an English sentence using any of these tenses.	498	1	5	3.92	1.095
I have learned the two voices in English and can write an English sentence using any of these voices.	498	1	5	3.92	1.062
I know how to figure out the meaning of an English sentence by analyzing its components or analyzing in context.	498	1	5	3.92	1.053
I know how to figure out the meaning of an English utterance spoken by someone in a specific situation.	498	1	5	3.92	1.066
I know how to choose the appropriate English utterance in a specific situation.	498	1	5	3.92	1.052
Valid N (listwise)	498				

Figure 4. Level of English knowledge

For the third dimension English competence, the shows that they self-report that they have a comparatively high level of English competence when using English in authentic contexts (Mean=3.70).

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
I can describe my personal experience in detail and express my feelings accurately in English.	498	1	5	3.70	1.115
I can express my opinions on current heated-debated social issues logically in English after preparing in advance.	498	1	5	3.70	1.140
I can communicate and negotiate on daily issues, such as doing business, travelling and shopping in English.	498	1	5	3.70	1.117
I can communicate and negotiate in English effectively when handling daily disputes or emergencies.	498	1	5	3.70	1.138
I can analyze the situation, causes and solutions to current heated-debated social issues and express my opinions clearly in English.	498	1	5	3.70	1.122
I can express my opinions logically and comprehensively on abstract topics in English.	498	1	5	3.70	1.135
In professional discussions, I can summarize the key points of the discussion and comment on others' points appropriately in English.	498	1	5	3.70	1.131
I can make impromptu communication with others on current heated-debated social issues with clear opinions and rational logic in English.	498	1	5	3.70	1.122
Valid N (listwise)	498				

Figure 5. Level of English competence

5.3 The Correlation Between the Level of Students' English Literacy and Their Background

In order to find out whether there is a correlation between students' background and their level of English literacy, Pearson correlation coefficient is used. According to the statistic, the level of students' English awareness has a positive correlation with their majors ($r=0.105$, $P=0.020$), the region they are from ($r=0.094$, $P=0.036$; $r=0.103$, $P=0.021$); and their mother's educational background ($r=0.096$, $P=0.033$)

Correlations

		Your major	The region you come from	Your father's degree	Your mother's degree	I know that in English the logic is embedded in the formation of an English sentence, while in Chinese, the logic is embedded in the meaning of a Chinese sentence.	I know that in English it is intended to describe the essence of the world, while in Chinese, it is intended to describe the representation of the world.	I know that in English it is emphasized to describe the objective facts, while in Chinese, the subjective feelings are emphasized.
Your major	Pearson Correlation	1	.581**	.682**	.645**	.068	.083	.105*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001	<.001	<.001	.129	.063	.020
	N	498	498	498	498	498	498	498
The region you come from	Pearson Correlation	.581**	1	.467**	.472**	.073	.094*	.103*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001		<.001	<.001	.105	.036	.021
	N	498	498	498	498	498	498	498
Your father's degree	Pearson Correlation	.682**	.467**	1	.890**	.059	.061	.079
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001		<.001	.188	.177	.078
	N	498	498	498	498	498	498	498
Your mother's degree	Pearson Correlation	.645**	.472**	.890**	1	.064	.085	.096*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001	<.001		.157	.059	.033
	N	498	498	498	498	498	498	498
I know that in English the logic is embedded in the formation of an English sentence, while in Chinese, the logic is embedded in the meaning of a Chinese sentence.	Pearson Correlation	.068	.073	.059	.064	1	.614**	.607**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.129	.105	.188	.157		<.001	<.001
	N	498	498	498	498	498	498	498
I know that in English it is intended to describe the essence of the world, while in Chinese, it is intended to describe the representation of the world.	Pearson Correlation	.083	.094*	.061	.085	.614**	1	.659**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.063	.036	.177	.059	<.001		<.001
	N	498	498	498	498	498	498	498
I know that in English it is emphasized to describe the objective facts, while in Chinese, the subjective feelings are emphasized.	Pearson Correlation	.105*	.103*	.079	.096*	.607**	.659**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.020	.021	.078	.033	<.001	<.001	
	N	498	498	498	498	498	498	498

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Figure 6. Correlation between students' background and the level of their English awareness

In terms of the level of students' attitudes to English, this variable also has a positive correlation with students' majors (r=0.104, P=0.020; r=0.106, P=0.018; r=0.016, P=0.018; r=0.113, P=0.012;

r=0.092, P=0.040), the region they are from (r=0.093, P=0.038; r=0.116, P=0.009; r=0.107, P=0.017; r=0.108, P=0.016), their fathers' educational background (r=0.126, P=0.005; r=0.139, P=0.002; r=0.140, P=0.002; r=0.120, P=0.008), and their mothers' educational background (r=0.145, P=0.001; r=0.100, P=0.025; r=0.145, P=0.001; r=0.119, P=0.008; r=0.144, P=0.001).

Figure 7. Correlation between students' background and the level of their attitudes to English

With regard to students' English knowledge, it only has a positive correlation with the educational background of students' parents, as the coefficients are 0.120 (P=0.007) and 0.111

(P=0.013) with fathers' educational background and 0.105 (P=0.019), 0.104 (P=0.020) and 0.105 (P=0.019) with mothers' educational background.

Correlations

		Your father's degree	Your mother's degree	I have learned phonics and can sound out an English word using phonics.	I have learned the formation of an English word and I know how to form a word using word root and suffix.	I have learned the five basic structures of English sentences and can write an English sentence using any of these structures.	I have learned the eight basic tenses in English and can write an English sentence using any of these tenses.	I have learned the two voices in English and can write an English sentence using any of these voices.	I know how to figure out the meaning of an English sentence by analyzing its components or analyzing in context.	I know how to figure out the meaning of an English utterance spoken by someone in a specific situation.	I know how to choose the appropriate English utterance in a specific situation.
Your father's degree	Pearson Correlation	1	.890**	.056	.028	.120**	.069	.077	.111*	.066	.002
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001	.216	.531	.007	.125	.084	.013	.139	.959
	N	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498
Your mother's degree	Pearson Correlation	.890**	1	.109*	.053	.105*	.104*	.087	.105*	.070	.022
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001		.015	.241	.019	.020	.051	.019	.116	.625
	N	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498
I have learned phonics and can sound out an English word using phonics.	Pearson Correlation	.056	.109*	1	.479**	.485**	.489**	.554**	.496**	.501**	.515**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.216	.015		<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498
I have learned the formation of an English word and I know how to form a word using word root and suffix.	Pearson Correlation	.028	.053	.479**	1	.482**	.500**	.508**	.481**	.526**	.493**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.531	.241	<.001		<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498
I have learned the five basic structures of English sentences and can write an English sentence using any of these structures.	Pearson Correlation	.120**	.105*	.485**	.482**	1	.482**	.515**	.514**	.494**	.520**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.007	.019	<.001	<.001		<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498
I have learned the eight basic tenses in English and can write an English sentence using any of these tenses.	Pearson Correlation	.069	.104*	.489**	.500**	.482**	1	.520**	.483**	.494**	.482**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.125	.020	<.001	<.001	<.001		<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498
I have learned the two voices in English and can write an English sentence using any of these voices.	Pearson Correlation	.077	.087	.554**	.508**	.515**	.520**	1	.503**	.538**	.482**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.084	.051	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001		<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498
I know how to figure out the meaning of an English sentence by analyzing its components or analyzing in context.	Pearson Correlation	.111*	.105*	.496**	.481**	.514**	.483**	.503**	1	.486**	.478**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.013	.019	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001		<.001	<.001
	N	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498
I know how to figure out the meaning of an English utterance spoken by someone in a specific situation.	Pearson Correlation	.066	.070	.501**	.526**	.494**	.494**	.538**	.486**	1	.488**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.139	.116	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001		<.001
	N	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498
I know how to choose the appropriate English utterance in a specific situation.	Pearson Correlation	.002	.022	.515**	.493**	.520**	.482**	.493**	.478**	.488**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.959	.625	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	
	N	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Figure 8. Correlation between students' background and the level of their English knowledge

As for students' English competence, it has a positive correlation with students' majors, the region they are from and their parents' educational background (as illustrated in Figure 9).

		Your major	The region you come from	Your father's degree	Your mother's degree	I can describe my personal experience in detail and express my feelings accurately in English.	I can express my opinions on current heated-debated social issues logically in English after preparing in advance.	I can communicate and negotiate on daily issues, such as doing business, travelling and shopping in English.	I can communicate and negotiate in English effectively when handling daily disputes or emergencies.	I can analyze the situation, causes and solutions to current heated-debated social issues and express my opinions clearly in English.	I can express my opinions logically and comprehensively on abstract topics in English.	In professional discussions, I can summarize the key points of the discussion and comment on others' points appropriately in English.	I can make impromptu communication with others on current heated-debated social issues with clear opinions and rational logic in English.
Your major	Pearson Correlation	1	.581**	.682**	.645**	.264**	.317**	.291**	.232**	.287**	.271**	.257**	.252**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498
The region you come from	Pearson Correlation	.581**	1	.467**	.472**	.328**	.314**	.297**	.248**	.221**	.297**	.264**	.231**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001		<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498
Your father's degree	Pearson Correlation	.682**	.467**	1	.890**	.282**	.278**	.307**	.275**	.273**	.345**	.309**	.310**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001		<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498
Your mother's degree	Pearson Correlation	.645**	.472**	.890**	1	.287**	.301**	.316**	.269**	.263**	.348**	.328**	.307**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001	<.001		<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498
I can describe my personal experience in detail and express my feelings accurately in English.	Pearson Correlation	.264**	.328**	.282**	.287**	1	.473**	.471**	.468**	.470**	.496**	.450**	.457**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001		<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498
I can express my opinions on current heated-debated social issues logically in English after preparing in advance.	Pearson Correlation	.317**	.314**	.278**	.301**	.473**	1	.468**	.448**	.479**	.504**	.493**	.480**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001		<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498
I can communicate and negotiate on daily issues, such as doing business, travelling and shopping in English.	Pearson Correlation	.291**	.297**	.307**	.316**	.471**	.468**	1	.505**	.472**	.494**	.474**	.464**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001		<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498
I can communicate and negotiate in English effectively when handling daily disputes or emergencies.	Pearson Correlation	.232**	.248**	.275**	.269**	.468**	.448**	.505**	1	.486**	.523**	.483**	.487**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001		<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498
I can analyze the situation, causes and solutions to current heated-debated social issues and express my opinions clearly in English.	Pearson Correlation	.287**	.221**	.273**	.263**	.470**	.479**	.472**	.486**	1	.475**	.465**	.460**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001		<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498
I can express my opinions logically and comprehensively on abstract topics in English.	Pearson Correlation	.271**	.297**	.345**	.348**	.496**	.504**	.494**	.523**	.475**	1	.466**	.483**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001		<.001	<.001
	N	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498
In professional discussions, I can summarize the key points of the discussion and comment on others' points appropriately in English.	Pearson Correlation	.257**	.264**	.309**	.328**	.450**	.493**	.474**	.483**	.465**	.466**	1	.487**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001		<.001
	N	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498
I can make impromptu communication with others on current heated-debated social issues with clear opinions and rational logic in English.	Pearson Correlation	.252**	.231**	.310**	.307**	.457**	.480**	.464**	.487**	.460**	.483**	.487**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	
	N	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Figure 9. Correlation between students' background and the level of their English competence

6. Discussion

6.1 The Level of English Literacy

The data analysis indicates that the participants all claim that they have a comparatively high level of English awareness, English knowledge and English competence as well as they all bear a positive attitude to learning English. Among these four dimensions, students are quite confident about their English knowledge. They believe that they have a comprehensive understanding about English phonics, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics. This is reasonable as English is required to be learned from primary grade 3 (in some economically advantaged regions, it is required to be learned from primary grade 1) except for some areas inhabited by minority groups. Most of them have more than 9 years of English-learning experience when they enter the

college and the teaching of English knowledge is quite emphasized in both primary and secondary schools. In this sense, it is not surprising that students have a high level of English competence.

The level of English competence is slightly lower than the level of English knowledge, which may be due to the fact that English is learned as a foreign language in China and students are far away from the authentic contexts to use the target language. This constraint may hinder the development of their English competence. Although students all bear a positive attitude to learning English, the level of their awareness to the differences between Chinese and English languages is medium, lower than the level of their English knowledge and English competence. It may attribute to the fact that schools emphasize too much on their teaching on factual knowledge and disregard the cultivation of their students' awareness to the differences underlying between these two languages.

6.2 The Influential Factors to the Level of English Literacy

The analysis illustrates that four variables have positive correlations with the level of English literacy. These four variables are students' majors, the region they are from and the educational background of their parents (both fathers and mothers). It is unsurprising that students majoring in English have high levels of English literacy as they are required to be trained professionally in colleges. As mentioned above, students from economically advantaged regions are endowed with the chances to learn English from an earlier age. The long years of English learning experience will guarantee their mastery of English knowledge. Furthermore, in economically advantaged regions, students are provided with ample opportunities to practice using English in authentic contexts as they have more chances to communicate with English native speakers, to join the English summer camp or to attend the English classes in international schools. The students from economically disadvantaged regions are lacking these opportunities.

The most influential factor to the level of students' English literacy is the level of their parents' educational background. The analysis indicates that the students whose parents have high degrees

(bachelor, master or doctoral degree) tend to self-report high level of English literacy as their parents are able to provide them help with their learning; whereas the students whose parents have comparatively low degrees (diploma or graduated from secondary schools or lower) tend to self-report that they have comparatively low level of English literacy as it is hard for their parents to offer academic assistance.

7. Conclusion

This research intends to explore the level of English literacy among Chinese college students learning English as a foreign language. It is found that the achievement of English education in China is satisfying as the participants in this research all report that they have a comparatively high level of English knowledge and English competence. Meanwhile, their attitudes to learning English are positive and they have medium level of awareness to the differences underling between Chinese and English languages. In addition, this research also explores the influential factors to the level of English literacy. The analysis indicates that four variables (students' major, the region they are from and the educational background of their parents) have great influences on the level of students' English literacy. This finding will provide some reference to the improvement of English teaching.

Yet, this research also has some limitations. The sample is small. Only 498 students responded to the questionnaire. And in the questionnaire, students are asked to self-report the level of their awareness, attitudes, knowledge and competence. There may exist a possibility that students exaggerate their level of English literacy. The future studies can enlarge the sample by advertising more students to participate in the research and develop a more reliable research instrument to collect data that are more objective.

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