



Chinese International Students' Perceptions of a General English Course at a Korean University

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Abstract

This study examines Chinese international students' satisfaction, learning challenges, and preferred English skills for improvement in a general English course at a Korean university. Seventy Chinese international students enrolled in a mandatory general English course participated in the study. Data were collected through a questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews to examine how Korean language proficiency and perceived English proficiency relate to students' course satisfaction and learning experiences. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, one-way ANOVA, and chi-square tests, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The results show that Korean proficiency and perceived English proficiency were significantly associated with course satisfaction. Students with higher proficiency levels reported greater satisfaction. In contrast, proficiency levels did not significantly influence the types of learning challenges reported or the English skills they preferred to improve. Across all proficiency groups, students most frequently reported difficulty understanding Korean used during classroom instruction. In addition, most students strongly preferred to improve their English speaking skills, regardless of proficiency level. These findings suggest that instructors can enhance students' participation and learning experiences in general English courses by addressing learning challenges and providing more opportunities for spoken English practice.

INTRODUCTION

Globalization has increased diversity at universities worldwide. As higher education becomes more international, campuses now welcome students from many different cultures and languages (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Boeren, 2024; Knight, 2004; Ward et al., 2025). This trend appears especially strong in East Asia, where governments actively attract more international students as part of their higher education strategies (Jon & Yoo, 2021). In South Korea, for example, the government launched the *Study Korea 300K Project* in 2023 to attract 300,000 international students by 2027 (Ministry of Education, 2023).

According to the Ministry of Education (2025), the number of international students in Korea reached 253,434 as of April 2025, marking a 21.3% increase from the previous year. Chinese students constitute the largest group, with 76,541 enrolled

in Korean universities in 2025, approximately one-third of the total international student population. Most Chinese international students pursue degree programs, with undergraduates comprising the largest proportion, followed by master's and doctoral programs. This distribution shows that Chinese international students participate as long-term academic members and must fully engage in university-level coursework.

As a result, Korean campuses have become increasingly multilingual and multicultural, and students use Korean, English, and other languages in academic and social interactions (Jang, 2024). However, the rapid growth in international enrollment has also introduced new challenges. Despite ongoing efforts by universities and the Korean government to promote internationalization, many international students, particularly those from China, still struggle with language barriers, cultural adjustment, and unfamiliar academic practices in Korean higher education.

Like many non-native English-speaking students, Chinese international students face linguistic and academic challenges while studying English in a context where Korean remains the dominant language of instruction and campus life. These students must learn English as a foreign language while simultaneously navigating academic environments that operate primarily in Korean. Given that most Chinese international students enroll in full degree programs, they must participate in a wide range of academic activities conducted in English, including mandatory general English courses at many Korean universities. However, these courses are typically designed for domestic students who have completed secondary English education in Korea, often without sufficient consideration of international students' linguistic backgrounds or their concurrent adjustment to Korean-medium instructional environments. Consequently, Chinese international students may encounter distinctive challenges in general English courses, particularly in comprehension, participation, and overall satisfaction. This context differs from traditional English as a foreign language (EFL) settings, in which students study English in their home countries, and from English as a second language (ESL) settings, where students learn English in English-speaking countries.

Given that most universities require general English courses and Chinese international students must complete them as part of their degree programs, educators need to examine these students' learning experiences in this context. Therefore, the present study identifies the challenges Chinese international students face in general English courses and provides pedagogical implications to support the development of instructional and institutional support programs for international students at Korean universities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

International Students in ESL-oriented University Contexts

Studies conducted primarily in ESL-oriented university contexts show that English proficiency plays a crucial role in international students' academic engagement, classroom participation, and learning satisfaction (Brown, 2008; Campbell & Li, 2008). For instance, Brown (2008) investigated academic stress among international postgraduates enrolled in an international master's program in the United Kingdom using an ethnographic research design. The study drew data from individual interviews with 13 international students and participant observation of approximately 150 master's students over one academic year. Brown found that academic stress was widespread, particularly in the first semester, and stemmed from academic cultural differences, intensive assignment schedules, and language-related difficulties. Importantly, international and home students experienced workload-related stress, indicating that program structure, not international status alone, generated much of the stress. Stress did not diminish simply as students progressed through the program; rather, it decreased only after instructors reduced assignment intensity. Regarding language, Brown (2008) reported that limited English proficiency substantially magnified students' academic stress by constraining students' ability to engage with complex academic tasks, classroom discussion, and written assignments. At the same time, the study emphasized that linguistic competence alone was insufficient to ensure successful academic adjustment. Even students with adequate language skills continued to experience stress when confronted with unfamiliar academic conventions and intensive workload demands. Brown therefore demonstrated that academic stress emerged from the interaction of linguistic demands and structural academic requirements rather than from language proficiency alone, underscoring the importance of early academic orientation and targeted academic support.

Synthesizing prior research on international students in English-speaking universities, Andrade (2006) found a close correlation between English language proficiency and students' classroom participation, perceived learning effectiveness, and overall academic experiences, particularly in speaking and writing tasks. Across multiple studies, international students with lower English proficiency experienced greater difficulty understanding lectures, participating in discussions, and

completing language-intensive assignments, often requiring substantially more time and effort to keep up with coursework. At the same time, Andrade (2006) noted that language proficiency alone did not consistently predict academic achievement, as relationships between English test scores and performance varied across disciplines and instructional contexts. These findings suggest that instructional demands and classroom language environments, alongside individual language ability, shape international students' learning experiences, providing an important background for examining English course experiences in non-English-speaking university contexts.

Campbell and Li (2008) explored Asian international students' learning experiences at a New Zealand university, focusing on language difficulties and limited familiarity with academic conventions. Using qualitative data from student narratives, the study examined how these factors functioned as barriers to academic learning and social participation. The findings showed that English language difficulties constituted a major communication barrier for Asian students. Limited language proficiency hindered students' ability to communicate effectively with lecturers and peers, understand lectures and instructions, interpret assessment criteria, complete assignments, and participate in group discussions. Even after one year of study, some students reported understanding only about half of the classroom instructions and examination questions. Language difficulties also forced students to devote excessive time to preparation, often resulting in high levels of stress. In addition, unfamiliar lecturer accents further impeded comprehension, even among students with several years of English study.

Campbell and Li's (2008) study also revealed that students' academic difficulties correlated strongly with their limited knowledge of Western academic conventions. Many participants lacked familiarity with genres such as literature reviews, critical essays, research reports, and referencing practices, as instructors had not explicitly taught these conventions. Students often learned these conventions through trial and error, frequently after losing marks on assignments. Length of study did not guarantee mastery of academic writing, as students at different stages continued to struggle with academic writing requirements. Difficulties in reading and critically engaging with complex academic texts further compounded these challenges. Overall, Campbell and Li demonstrated that Asian international students' learning difficulties stemmed from individual language limitations, implicit academic expectations, and insufficient instructional support.

Taken together, these Western studies suggest that differences in English proficiency shape international students' patterns of classroom participation and perceptions of learning effectiveness; however, they also indicate that language functions in interaction with instructional practices and academic expectations rather than as an isolated factor. These findings provide an important reference point for the present study, which examines how language proficiency relates to students' learning experiences and perceptions within compulsory general English courses at a Korean university.

International Students in Non-English-Speaking University Contexts

Researchers have examined international students' academic adjustment and sociocultural adaptation since the early twentieth century, focusing on issues of language barriers, cultural differences, and academic adjustment among students studying abroad (Andrade, 2006; Brown, 2008; Campbell & Li, 2008; Penman et al., 2021; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). Building on this foundation, more recent research has expanded to non-Western contexts, including Asian host countries, where international students encounter distinct linguistic and institutional environments. In non-English-speaking universities, international students often experience a dual linguistic burden: they must learn English while still developing proficiency in the host country's language.

In Korean universities, researchers consistently report that although many Chinese international students feel satisfied with university life, they continue to face various academic and sociocultural challenges. Students struggle to adapt to daily life in Korea, interact socially with Korean students, and complete major coursework (Jung, 2020; Oh, 2024; Shin & Yu, 2014). In addition, higher education institutions play a critical role in supporting international students' cultural adjustment by helping them understand the host country's academic culture and social norms (Penman et al., 2021; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015).

Oh (2024) investigated the overall satisfaction levels of 202 Chinese graduate students in Korean universities and found that most viewed their study-abroad experience positively. However, students identified limited interaction with Korean students as the most significant challenge. Oh recommended that universities provide diverse extracurricular programs, such as sports activities, to reduce students' sense of alienation and promote social integration.

Similarly, Shin and Yu (2014) conducted qualitative interviews with eight Chinese undergraduate students and identified major difficulties, including challenges in major coursework, limited opportunities to form friendships, strained relationships with professors, confusion arising from sociocultural differences, and feelings of loneliness and depression. Many students also balanced academic responsibilities with part-time employment, which left them with insufficient time for academic study. Shin and Yu emphasized the importance of institutional support, such as scholarships and access to dormitory housing,

in facilitating students' successful adjustment.

While these studies addressed broad aspects of university adaptation, Jung (2020) focused on academic challenges related to major coursework. Jung found that students struggled to understand major-specific terminology, follow professors' lectures, cope with marginalization as international students, and respond to what they perceived as indifferent faculty attitudes. Jung argued that universities should provide customized instructional support for international students, including supplemental courses or specialized curricula.

In recent years, Korean universities have expanded English-medium instruction (EMI), making English proficiency an important competency for international students (Y. J. Lee & Y. Kim, 2023). Consequently, Chinese international students in Korea must develop adequate Korean language skills and sufficient English proficiency to participate in academic activities. From an EFL classroom perspective, Y. Lee and S. Kim (2015) found that Korean, Chinese, and Japanese students perceived speaking as the most challenging English skill, largely because they had limited opportunities for oral interaction. Chinese students, in particular, reported lower levels of satisfaction compared to Japanese students, highlighting the importance of interaction in the learning environment.

S. H. Kim (2019) further emphasized how prior English learning experiences shape Chinese international students' English learning in Korea. Through surveys and in-depth interviews with 52 Chinese international students, S. H. Kim identified substantial individual differences in students' English learning histories and found that many struggled to understand classes conducted in English. Although some students expressed satisfaction with their English learning, many emphasized the need for additional instructional support.

These findings suggest that Chinese international students' experiences in English courses in Korea reflect their current classroom environments and their prior English learning backgrounds. S. H. Kim (2019) concluded that universities should design customized English curricula and tailored support systems to improve the effectiveness of English education for Chinese international students in Korea.

Despite these contributions, existing research has paid relatively limited attention to Chinese international students' experiences within compulsory general English courses, which are typically designed for domestic students and required across diverse academic majors.

The Present Study

Previous studies show that Chinese international students in Korea face persistent challenges related to sociocultural adaptation, academic adjustment, and language learning (e.g., S. H. Kim, 2019; Oh, 2024; Shin & Yu, 2014). However, existing studies have not sufficiently examined how Chinese international students experience compulsory general English courses that universities design primarily for domestic students. Much of the existing literature focuses on English-major contexts, oral proficiency assessment, or mixed classes that include domestic and international students. As a result, scholars have paid relatively little attention to Chinese international students' learning experiences and satisfaction within general English courses, which universities require across diverse academic majors and typically design for domestic learners rather than international students.

To address this gap, the present study investigates Chinese international students' experiences in a general English course at a Korean university, with particular attention to their course satisfaction, perceived learning challenges, and preferred English skills for improvement. Rather than treating English learning needs as a broad construct, this study examines students' preferences for particular English skills (e.g., speaking, reading, writing), thereby responding to recent calls for more fine-grained analyses of language learning experiences in university English courses.

In addition, the study situates English learning within a Korean-dominant instructional environment and examines how individual differences in Korean language proficiency and perceived English proficiency relate to students' satisfaction, perceived challenges, and preferred English skills for improvement in the general English course. By doing so, this study clarifies how dual linguistic demands shape international students' classroom experiences beyond patterns documented in Western or ESL-oriented research.

Based on this review, the present study addresses the following research questions:

- 1) What level of satisfaction do Chinese international students report with the general English course at a Korean university?
- 2) What learning challenges and preferred English skills for improvement do Chinese international students perceive in the general English course?
- 3) To what extent do Chinese international students' Korean language proficiency (TOPIK) and perceived English proficiency influence their course satisfaction, perceived learning challenges, and preferred English skills for improvement in the general English course?

These research questions provide a focused understanding of Chinese international students' learning experiences in general English courses, particularly course satisfaction, perceived learning challenges, and preferred English skills, and offer pedagogical implications for improving instructional practices in Korean higher education.

METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods research design that combined a questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews to examine Chinese international students' satisfaction, learning challenges, and preferred English skills for improvement in a general English course at a Korean university. The study used the survey to collect data from a relatively large sample and to identify patterns and relationships among key variables, including Korean proficiency, perceived English proficiency, and course satisfaction. To complement the quantitative data, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews to gain deeper insights into students' learning experiences and to contextualize the survey findings.

Research Context and Course Description

The researcher conducted this study at K University in Sejong City, South Korea. The course General English 1 is a mandatory freshman-level general education course for domestic and international students at the university. In the course registration process, international students are enrolled in general English sections designated exclusively for international students. Consequently, international students and domestic Korean students do not attend general English classes together. Although the courses are offered in separate sections, the curriculum is identical to that of the general English course offered to domestic students, and the same general English textbook is used across all sections. Each instructor selected the instructional language in accordance with the university's general education policy. At the beginning of the semester, during course orientation, the instructor asked students whether they preferred Korean or English as the primary instructional language. Approximately 95% of the students chose Korean. Based on this preference, the instructor conducted the course primarily in Korean. Nevertheless, the instructor regularly used English for vocabulary explanations and selected instructional content. Accordingly, the course employed a Korean-dominant instructional approach with partial use of English, reflecting students' linguistic needs and the pedagogical objectives of the general English course. The university organized the course by academic major rather than language proficiency level, and each class meets once a week for two hours. In the present study, two course sections participated, and the researcher taught both sections. This arrangement minimized instructional variability by ensuring consistency in teaching style, assessment methods, and classroom management. The majors of the participating classes included Business, Smart City, and Big Data Science.

Institutional Language Policy for International Students

The National Institute for International Education administers the Test of Proficiency in Korean (TOPIK), a standardized Korean language test. According to the university's admission guidelines for international students, TOPIK Level 4 is the official Korean language proficiency requirement for admission. Although the university admits some applicants without TOPIK Level 4, it requires those students to achieve TOPIK Level 4 before graduation. This policy regulates Korean language proficiency at the admission and degree completion stages. In contrast, the university does not set English proficiency as a formal requirement for admission or graduation.¹

Participants

Chinese international students enrolled in a first-year general English course at K University participated in this study. The researcher initially recruited 75 students. After excluding five students who did not meet predefined inclusion criteria, the final sample included 70 students for analysis. The inclusion criteria required that participants (a) be first-year undergraduate students, (b) have lived in Korea for less than one year, and (c) have no prior experience studying or receiving formal

¹ Depending on their TOPIK score, international students may be subject to compulsory general Korean language course and restrictions on major course enrollment. Students with TOPIK Level 3 or above are not subject to enrollment restrictions, whereas those below Level 3 are required to complete credit-bearing general Korean language course and may participate in mandatory Korean language training. These students are permitted to enroll only in general education courses and may earn up to 19 credits per semester.

education in English-speaking countries.

The researcher applied the first criterion to control for academic level and focus on students in the early stage of university adjustment. The second criterion limited the influence of prolonged exposure to the Korean academic environment. The third criterion ensured a more homogeneous participant background, as prior research suggests that exposure to Western educational systems can influence international students' learning styles and academic behaviors (Smith & Smith, 1999).

Among the participants ($n = 70$), 36 students (51.4%) were male, and 34 (48.6%) were female, indicating a relatively balanced gender distribution (see Table 1). Although the researcher collected gender information, the analysis did not include gender as a variable because the study focused primarily on linguistic and educational factors, specifically Korean and perceived English proficiency levels, in relation to students' satisfaction and perceived learning difficulties.

TABLE 1

Participants' Demographic Information

Distinction		<i>N</i>	%
Gender	Male	36	51.4
	Female	34	48.6
Major	Business	20	28.6
	Smart City	30	42.9
	Big Data Science	20	28.6
	Not taken (below Level 1)	30	42.9
Korean Proficiency (TOPIK)	Level 1	2	2.9
	Level 2	8	11.4
	Level 3	26	37.1
	Level 4	4	5.7
Perceived English Proficiency	Beginner	20	28.6
	Intermediate	46	65.7
	Advanced	4	5.7

Note. "Not taken (below Level 1)" refers to students who did not take the TOPIK due to insufficient Korean proficiency to attempt the test, as reported in the questionnaire and confirmed in follow-up interviews.

As Table 1 shows, the study categorized TOPIK levels into two groups: no TOPIK qualification and Levels 1-4. Thirty students (42.9%) reported no TOPIK qualification, indicating that many respondents had not taken the official Korean language test. During the interviews, these students explained that their Korean proficiency was far below the level necessary to attempt the TOPIK examination. Accordingly, for analysis purposes, the researcher classified participants without a TOPIK qualification as below TOPIK Level 1, representing proficiency below the minimum officially assessed level.

Two students (2.9%) achieved TOPIK Level 1, and eight students (11.4%) reached Level 2. A larger group, 26 students (37.1%), held Level 3, representing intermediate-level Korean proficiency, while four students (5.7%) reported Level 4 proficiency. No participants reported Level 5 or Level 6. Overall, these results show that most Chinese international students in this study had low to intermediate Korean language proficiency, which may affect their understanding of course content and classroom communication in Korean-medium settings.

None of the participants had official English proficiency test scores. During the interviews, all 70 participants explained that they had not taken standardized English proficiency tests during high school because they did not consider them necessary and reported limited engagement in English study before university. These findings clarify that the absence of standardized English scores reflects the participants' prior educational context, not missing data. Therefore, the analysis measured English proficiency as perceived English proficiency levels based on self-reported categories (beginner, intermediate, and advanced), which reflect students' perceived ability to understand course materials and participate in class. Table 1 shows that 65.7% of participants reported intermediate-level English proficiency, 28.6% reported beginner level, and 5.7% reported advanced proficiency.

Although the study did not validate these perceived proficiency levels with standardized tests, the researcher contextualized them qualitatively through classroom observations and interview interactions. Specifically, the analysis examined students' self-reported English proficiency in relation to their English use, responsiveness, and communicative behavior during interviews. The researcher used these qualitative observations to support the interpretation rather than as an objective measure.

Data Collection

The researcher designed the questionnaire to investigate Chinese international students' satisfaction, challenges, and preferred English skills for improvement in a general English course offered at a Korean university. As Table 2 summarizes, the questionnaire comprised three main sections based on content focus and response format. Section 1 collected basic demographic and academic information, including gender, age group, degree program, major, and length of stay in Korea. These items provided background context about the participants. Section 2 examined participants' language proficiency in Korean and English. The study measured Korean proficiency using participants' self-reported TOPIK scores and levels. Participants who had not taken the TOPIK test explained their reasons in an open-ended format. Participants also reported whether they had official English test scores (e.g., TOEFL or IELTS). Those who did not have an official English test score explained their reasons in an open-ended format. In addition, all participants reported their perceived level of English proficiency by selecting one of three categories: beginner, intermediate, or advanced. Section 3 focused on students' satisfaction with the general English course and their perceived learning challenges. The study measured course satisfaction and comprehension using five-point Likert-scale items, with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction and understanding. Participants also identified their main difficulties in the course by selecting one option from a list, followed by an open-ended question that allowed them to report additional difficulties not listed. Finally, students selected the English skills they wished to improve, including listening, speaking, reading, writing, vocabulary, and grammar (see Appendix A).

TABLE 2
Structure of the Questionnaire

Section	Content	Number of Items	Response Format
1	Basic Information	5	Multiple choice
2	Language Proficiency	3	Open-ended, multiple choice
3	Course Satisfaction & Learning Experiences	5	Likert scale, multiple response, open-ended

To ensure accurate comprehension, the researcher wrote the questionnaire in English and Chinese. Two professors in English education reviewed the questionnaire to establish content validity.

Data were collected during the fourteenth and fifteenth weeks of the Spring 2025 semester. During the fourteenth week, the researcher distributed the questionnaires in class and assured participants that their personal information would be kept confidential.

In addition to the questionnaire, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews during the fifteenth week of the semester. Each interview lasted approximately 10-15 minutes per participant (see Appendix B). Since the students had limited English proficiency, the researcher distributed the interview questions one week in advance as handouts in Korean, English, and Chinese. The researcher audio-recorded the interviews with participants' consent to ensure accuracy in transcription and analysis. Students were informed that their responses would be used solely for academic research and would have no impact on their grades.

While the survey provided quantitative data on satisfaction, difficulties, and learning needs, the interviews allowed the researcher to explore students' perceptions and experiences in greater depth. Table 3 presents an overview of the interview structure.

TABLE 3
Structure of the Interview

Section	Focus	Purpose
1	Academic and Classroom Experiences	To explore students' classroom experiences and perceived challenges
2	Language Proficiency and Learning	To examine how language proficiency shapes students' learning experiences
3	Suggestions for Improvement	To identify students' recommendations for course improvement

The interview protocol comprised three main sections: (1) academic and classroom experiences, (2) language proficiency and learning, and (3) recommendations for improvement (see Table 3).

The first section focused on academic and classroom experiences, exploring the specific difficulties students encountered in the general English course and the strategies they used to cope with these challenges. Through questions about teaching style, classroom interaction, and the use of Korean during instruction, this section captured students' perceived challenges and their adaptive responses in the classroom.

The second section examined language proficiency and learning experiences in the general English course, focusing on the roles of Korean and perceived English proficiency. Participants discussed their prior English learning backgrounds in Mainland China, and how their Korean and English language abilities influenced their comprehension of textbooks and instructional materials, participation in classroom activities, and engagement in discussions, group work, and presentations. This section also included questions about coping strategies students employed when experiencing linguistic difficulties, such as translation, peer support, and the use of online tools.

These questions provided qualitative evidence that complemented the survey results on perceived English proficiency, Korean proficiency (TOPIK), learning difficulties, and course satisfaction. In particular, the language proficiency section focused on how participants understood and used English in actual classroom contexts, including comprehension of English materials, participation in English-based activities, and strategies for handling linguistic difficulties. These interview questions elicited specific classroom-related examples illustrating how participants' English ability influenced their comprehension and participation, thereby complementing the questionnaire data in the absence of standardized English test scores.

In the third section, the researcher focused on recommendations for improvement. Participants provided suggested changes that could make the general English course more effective for Chinese international students and proposed specific support programs that could help international students improve their English learning outcomes. This section provided qualitative insights into students' learning needs and institutional support expectations.

Overall, the semi-structured interview format allowed for follow-up questions when necessary, enabling the researcher to clarify responses and explore emerging themes in greater depth while maintaining consistency across participants.

Data Analysis

The researcher calculated descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and frequencies) to summarize participants' satisfaction levels and background characteristics. The analysis included a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) followed by a post hoc Tukey Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) test to examine differences in satisfaction across TOPIK proficiency levels. Additionally, chi-square tests of independence and Cramer's V were used to examine associations between categorical variables, including Korean proficiency, perceived English proficiency, reported learning difficulties, and preferred English skills. Given the small sample sizes in some proficiency subgroups (e.g., TOPIK Level 1 and advanced English proficiency), chi-square results were interpreted with caution, and effect size indices (Cramer's V) were reported to supplement significance testing. A thematic analysis of qualitative data from open-ended survey responses and interview transcripts helped to identify recurring patterns related to students' perceived difficulties and preferred English skills for improvement.

RESULTS

This section reports the quantitative and qualitative results regarding course satisfaction, reported difficulties, and preferred English skills for improvement in the general English course. The study presents quantitative findings with descriptive and inferential statistics, and provides qualitative excerpts to illustrate key patterns.

Course Satisfaction by Language Proficiency

Across all participants, the overall mean satisfaction score was 3.45, indicating a moderate level of satisfaction with the general English course. As Table 4 shows, students' satisfaction levels increased consistently with higher Korean (TOPIK) and perceived English proficiency. Mean satisfaction scores increased from 3.00 at the lowest TOPIK level to 4.78 at the highest level, indicating greater satisfaction at higher TOPIK levels.

A similar pattern emerged for perceived English proficiency, with scores increasing from 2.95 at the beginner level to 4.78 at the advanced level. The researcher conducted an ANOVA to examine whether satisfaction differed significantly across levels of language proficiency.

The results revealed a significant effect of Korean proficiency on course satisfaction, $F(4, 65) = 114.03, p < .001$. Post-hoc Tukey analyses showed that students without a TOPIK qualification and those at Level 1 reported significantly lower satisfaction than students at Levels 2-4, while no significant differences emerged among Levels 2, 3, and 4. Notably, the analysis revealed no statistically significant differences among TOPIK Levels 2, 3, and 4, as none of the pairwise

comparisons between these higher proficiency groups reached significance. Overall, the largest mean difference was observed between TOPIK Level 1 and Level 2. Similarly, the findings revealed a significant association between perceived English proficiency and satisfaction, $F(2, 67) = 70.72, p < .001$. Post-hoc analyses indicated statistically significant differences among all three perceived English proficiency groups ($p < .001$). Specifically, beginners reported the lowest satisfaction ($M = 2.95$), intermediate students showed moderate satisfaction ($M = 3.57$), and advanced students exhibited the highest satisfaction ($M = 4.78$). Unlike the pattern observed for Korean proficiency, the analysis resulted in statistically significant differences between all adjacent English proficiency groups, indicating a more gradual increase in satisfaction as English proficiency levels rose.

TABLE 4

Satisfaction with the General English Course by Korean (TOPIK) and Perceived English Proficiency

Variable	Level	N	M	ANOVA F (df)	p	Post-hoc Result (Tukey)
Overall	All participants	70	3.45	-	-	-
	Not taken	30	3.00			
Korean Proficiency (TOPIK)	Level 1	2	3.00	114.03 (4, 65)	< .001*	Not taken, Level 1 < Levels 2-4
	Level 2	8	3.69			
	Level 3	26	3.75			
	Level 4	4	4.78			
Perceived English Proficiency	Beginner	20	2.95	70.72 (2, 67)	< .001*	Beginner < Intermediate < Advanced
	Intermediate	46	3.57			
	Advanced	4	4.78			

Note. Satisfaction was measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *very dissatisfied*, 5 = *very satisfied*). *p*-values indicate the results of one-way ANOVA. Post-hoc comparisons were conducted using Tukey's HSD test. * $p < .001$.

Primary Difficulty in the General English Course

Table 5 presents the frequency and percentage of students' reported main difficulties in the general English course. Each student identified one primary difficulty.

TABLE 5

Primary Difficulty in the General English Course

Main Difficulty	N	%
Difficulty in understanding the Korean used in class	55	78
Difficulty with the English used in the textbook	11	16
Difficulty communicating with professors	2	3
Heavy academic workload (assignments and exams)	2	3
Total	70	100

Note. N = number of students; % = percentage

As Table 5 shows, more than three-fourths of the students ($N = 55, 78\%$) reported that understanding Korean used in class posed their primary challenge. Eleven students (16%) reported difficulty with the English used in the textbook; two students (3%) reported difficulty communicating with professors, and two others (3%) cited a heavy workload. These results show that linguistic challenges, whether in Korean or English, are more frequent than workload-related difficulties in the general English course.

The following interview excerpt illustrates how limited Korean proficiency hindered students' comprehension and participation in the general English course.

Apart from opening the textbook and hearing about homework, I couldn't understand what the professor said. When the professor explained grammar or gave feedback in Korean, I just sat there and waited for my classmates to move on. I wanted to ask questions but didn't know how to express them in Korean, so I stayed quiet most of the time. (Student #1, TOPIK not taken, English beginner)

In addition, several students expressed challenges related to the English materials used in the general English course. The following excerpts illustrate these experiences:

The general English textbook feels too hard—I only recognize a few words on each page. Even though I try to study before class, it takes too long to understand the passages, so I often fall behind during group activities. (Student #47, TOPIK 3, English intermediate)

I hardly studied English in high school, so it's difficult to keep up now. The vocabulary is too advanced, and I get nervous when the teacher asks us to discuss in English. Sometimes I understand the questions, but I don't know how to answer fluently. (Student #50, TOPIK 3, English intermediate)

These excerpts show that students often linked difficulties with English materials to limited prior English learning experiences and challenges in classroom participation. Table 6 further examines whether these difficulties vary across Korean proficiency and perceived English proficiency levels.

The researcher conducted two separate chi-square tests of independence to examine whether students' reported main difficulties differed by Korean proficiency and perceived English proficiency.

For Korean proficiency, the analysis revealed no statistically significant association between TOPIK level and reported main difficulty (χ^2 (12, $N = 70$) = 13.43, $p = .339$, Cramer's $V = .25$). Across all TOPIK levels, understanding Korean used in class was the most frequently reported challenge, accounting for more than half of responses at every proficiency level. Although minor variations were observed across levels, the overall distribution of difficulty types did not differ significantly by TOPIK level.

TABLE 6
Primary Difficulty by TOPIK and Perceived English Proficiency Levels

Language Proficiency	Level	Korean in Class	Textbook English	Professor Communication	Workload
Korean Proficiency (TOPIK)	Not taken (n = 30)	27 (90.0%)	3 (10.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
	1 (n = 2)	1 (50.0%)	1 (50.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
	2 (n = 8)	5 (62.5%)	3 (37.5%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
	3 (n = 26)	18 (69.2%)	4 (15.4%)	2 (7.7%)	2 (7.7%)
	4 (n = 4)	4 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
χ^2 (df)		13.43 (12)			
p		.339			
Cramer's V		.25			
Perceived English Proficiency	Beginner (n = 20)	20 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
	Intermediate (n = 46)	31 (67.4%)	11 (23.9%)	2 (4.3%)	2 (4.3%)
	Advanced (n = 4)	4 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
χ^2 (df)		9.96 (6)			
p		.126			
Cramer's V		.27			
Total N		70			

Note. The table shows values as frequency (percentage within each proficiency level). Chi-square statistics indicate differences in the distribution of reported primary difficulty across proficiency levels.

A separate chi-square test examining perceived English proficiency likewise indicated no statistically significant association between perceived English proficiency and reported main difficulty (χ^2 (6, $N = 70$) = 9.96, $p = .126$, Cramer's $V = .27$). Across all perceived English proficiency groups, difficulty understanding Korean used in class remained the most commonly reported challenge. Intermediate-level students, however, exhibited a more varied pattern: 11 students (approximately 24%) cited difficulty with textbook English, two mentioned communications with professors, and two referred to workload-related issues. Although the chi-square results did not indicate a statistically significant association between proficiency level and reported main difficulty, the qualitative interview data were examined to provide a more nuanced understanding of how students at different proficiency levels experienced classroom challenges.

The following interview excerpts are drawn from students with higher TOPIK levels, including Level 4, to provide illustrative qualitative evidence.

The Korean level required for admission is very different from what we actually need to follow lectures. When I passed TOPIK Level 4, I believed I was ready for university study in Korea. But during lectures, I realized that understanding academic Korean—especially when professors speak fast or use technical words—is still very challenging. (Student #70, TOPIK 4, English advanced)

Even though I understand most of the lecture, it's hard to follow when the professor explains grammar in Korean. I know the words, but I can't grasp the meaning of the explanation. In those moments, I hesitate to ask questions because I'm not confident that I fully understand the Korean explanation, so I just try to follow along as best as I can. (Student #67, TOPIK 4, English advanced)

These excerpts show that even students with higher TOPIK levels (TOPIK 4) reported difficulties in understanding Korean classroom discussions. The following excerpt illustrates difficulties reported by students with lower Korean proficiency.

I feel nervous in class discussions because I worry about my Korean accent and making mistakes. When I try to speak, I'm afraid that my pronunciation sounds strange, and sometimes my classmates don't understand me. That makes me lose confidence and stay quiet even when I know the answer. (Student #2, TOPIK not taken, English beginner)

This interview pattern aligns with the survey results, which showed that understanding Korean used in class was the most frequently reported challenge across proficiency levels.

Preferred English Skills for Improvement in the General English Course

Table 7 summarizes the frequency and percentage of students who selected each English skill they wished to improve through the general English course.

TABLE 7
Preferred English Skills for Improvement in the General English Course

	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Listening	20	28.6
Speaking	31	44.3
Reading	26	37.1
Writing	22	31.4
Vocabulary	13	18.6
Grammar	9	12.9

Note. Values represent the percentage (%) of participants who selected each skill. Total percentage exceeds 100% because participants could select more than one option.

Because this survey item allowed multiple selections (“select all that apply”), the total number of responses exceeds the number of participants, and the percentages do not sum to 100%. As shown in Table 7, students most frequently indicated a desire to improve speaking (44.3%), followed by reading (37.1%), writing (31.4%), and listening (28.6%). By contrast, relatively fewer students chose vocabulary (18.6%) or grammar (12.9%) as primary areas for improvement.

To examine whether students' preferred English skills for improvement differed by Korean and perceived English proficiency, the analysis conducted chi-square tests of independence. Table 8 shows a significant association between students' Korean proficiency and their preferences for several English skills. The results revealed significant differences across TOPIK levels for listening, speaking, reading, writing, and grammar (all $p < .05$), whereas no significant association was found for vocabulary ($p = .080$).

With respect to perceived English proficiency, chi-square analyses indicated that students' preferences for English skills varied by proficiency level. The analysis revealed significant associations between perceived English proficiency and speaking, writing, and vocabulary (all $p < .05$). In contrast, no statistically significant differences were found for listening ($p = .366$), reading ($p = .080$), or grammar ($p = .714$). Across perceived English proficiency levels, speaking emerged as the most frequently selected skill for improvement.

TABLE 8*Preferred English Skills for Improvement by TOPIK and Perceived English Proficiency Level*

Proficiency	Level	Listening (%)	Speaking (%)	Reading (%)	Writing (%)	Vocabulary (%)	Grammar (%)
Korean Proficiency (TOPIK)	Not taken	46.7	50.0	26.7	30.0	33.3	10.0
	Level 1	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0
	Level 2	50.0	87.5	25.0	0.0	0.0	12.5
	Level 3	0.0	19.2	61.5	34.6	0.0	11.5
	Level 4	0.0	100.0	0.0	100.0	0.0	0.0
	χ^2		23.61	19.69	12.09	13.46	6.77
	p	.000*	.000*	.017*	.009*	.080	.006*
Perceived English Proficiency	Beginner	35.0	65.0	25.0	15.0	45.0	15.0
	Intermediate	28.3	30.4	45.7	32.6	8.7	13.0
	Advanced	0.0	100.0	0.0	100.0	0.0	0.0
	χ^2		2.00	12.09	5.08	11.26	13.12
	p	.366	.002*	.080	.004*	.001*	.714

Note. Values represent the percentage (%) of students within each proficiency level who selected each English skill. Chi-square tests of independence were conducted on frequency data. Chi-square tests were considered significant at $*p < .05$.

The following interview excerpts demonstrate that students, regardless of perceived English proficiency level, view speaking as the most challenging and most essential skill for their academic and communicative success.

I understand grammar, but speaking is hard because I don't get many chances to talk. During the semester, most activities are about reading or completing worksheets, so I rarely speak more than a few sentences in class. When the professor asks questions, I usually think of what to say in my head but stay quiet because I'm not confident about English pronunciation or grammar. I know how to make sentences, but when I have to speak quickly, everything disappears. If there were more time to practice speaking freely, I think I could improve much faster. (Student #40, TOPIK 4, English advanced)

I want more time to practice English speaking in pairs or small groups in the general English class. When I talk with my classmates, I feel more relaxed and can try to use new words or expressions. But in front of the whole class, I get nervous and worry about making mistakes. If we had regular conversation activities every week, I would feel more comfortable expressing myself. I think pair work helps us learn not only English but also how to communicate naturally. (Student #15, TOPIK not taken, English beginner)

Reading is okay for me now, but I need more practice using English to express my ideas. I can read the textbook and understand most of the passages, but when the teacher asks for my opinion, I can't explain it in English. I hesitate and sometimes mix Korean and English. I want to practice English speaking more about daily topics or opinions, not only grammar exercises. It would help me feel more confident when I meet foreign friends or talk to exchange students. (Student #3, TOPIK 3, English intermediate)

These interview excerpts show that students across proficiency levels reported a strong desire for more opportunities to practice English speaking in the general English course. This qualitative evidence directly aligns with the quantitative results showing that speaking was the most frequently selected skill for improvement across perceived English proficiency levels (see Table 8). In addition, some students commented as follows:

If you are good at English, it is easier to make Korean friends. Even outside of class, it becomes easier to get close to Korean students when I speak to them in English rather than Korean or Chinese. I have a classmate who speaks English very well, and he has many Korean friends. He talks in English with Korean students on campus. I really want to improve my English-speaking skills and make many Korean friends, too. (Student #12, TOPIK not taken, English beginner)

I have taken classes with Korean students, and I felt that speaking English rather than Korean led to more positive responses from my Korean classmates. During team projects, communicating with Korean students in English also helped us become friends more quickly. I would like to further develop my English speaking skills in the general English course. (Student #33, TOPIK 2, English intermediate)

These comments suggest that some students viewed English speaking ability as facilitating social interaction and relationship-building with domestic students.

CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study examined how Chinese international students' linguistic proficiency in Korean and English affected their satisfaction, challenges, and preferred English skills for improvement in a general English course.

Difficulty Understanding Korean in the Classroom

One of the study's most salient findings showed that students identified understanding Korean used in class as their greatest challenge; nearly 80% of participants reported this difficulty. Students reported this challenge more often than difficulties with textbook English, communication with professors, or academic workload. These results indicate that limited comprehension of Korean explanations, rather than difficulties with English content, emerged as the most frequently reported obstacle to classroom participation and learning confidence. Although chi-square analyses did not reveal statistically significant relationships between difficulty types and TOPIK level or perceived English proficiency, interview data demonstrated that difficulties with Korean classroom discourse persisted across all proficiency groups. Notably, even students with higher TOPIK levels reported difficulty following rapid or technical Korean explanations, which suggests a potential gap between standardized proficiency assessments and the actual communicative demands of classroom instruction.

Taken together, these findings suggest that support for Korean classroom discourse should be positioned as a foundational component of general English course instruction rather than treated as an optional accommodation. Accordingly, instructors may consider providing consistent instructional support for Korean comprehension through practices such as pre-class glossaries, lecture transcripts, and selective bilingual explanations.

Speaking as the Most Commonly Preferred English Skill for Improvement

Regarding preferred English skills for improvement, students across almost all proficiency levels selected speaking most frequently, regardless of their Korean or perceived English proficiency, consistently ranking English speaking as their top priority. This finding indicates that students perceive spoken communication as the area in which they most need instructional support, even when they report relatively higher levels of English proficiency. In addition, the interview findings further illustrate how students perceived English speaking ability as closely tied to social interaction with Korean peers, suggesting that speaking proficiency functions not only as a classroom skill but also as a key resource for building interpersonal relationships on campus.

This result is consistent with Jon's (2012) assertion that communicative competence plays an important role in facilitating interaction and peer acceptance among international and domestic students. This pattern suggests that students' strong preference for improving their English speaking may reflect their desire for greater participation, interaction, and confidence in university classrooms. Accordingly, instructors may consider providing additional opportunities for spoken interaction within existing course structures, such as through pair or small-group activities.

Language Proficiency Requirements and Implications for Needs Analysis

The findings of this study also need to be understood in relation to the broader institutional and instructional context of Korean higher education. In many Korean universities, Korean language proficiency is not always a decisive admission requirement for international students, which means that some Chinese international students may begin their studies without sufficient preparation for Korean-medium academic instruction. As a result, students with relatively low Korean proficiency may experience difficulty attending and comprehending university-level courses conducted primarily in Korean.

Participants' accounts revealed that some students perceived English textbooks as excessively challenging while simultaneously struggling to follow Korean explanations. This dual burden—difficulty with English academic content alongside limited comprehension of Korean instructional discourse—indicates a misalignment between students' language resources and classroom demands, which may reduce their comprehension of course content and engagement in classroom activities. These patterns are consistent with findings from previous studies on Chinese international students' language-related challenges in Korean university contexts (Jung, 2020; S. H. Kim, 2019; Y. Lee & S. Kim, 2015; Oh, 2024), which reported persistent difficulties in understanding Korean-medium instruction despite formal language qualifications. Taken together, these studies highlight the importance of examining instructional language practices, rather than relying solely on students' certified proficiency levels, when interpreting their learning experiences.

In this sense, conducting a needs analysis prior to the course provides a principled basis for understanding students'

linguistic readiness and instructional needs in linguistically diverse university classrooms. Rather than serving merely as a curriculum-adjustment tool, needs analysis functions as an interpretive framework for aligning course design with students' actual language resources and learning conditions, beyond assumptions based on formal language qualifications (Bang, 2014; Han, 2019; S. H. Kim, 2019; Seong & Chang, 2008).

Limitations and Future Research

When interpreting the findings, several limitations should be considered. First, the study focused only on Chinese international students at one university and included a relatively small sample, which limits its generalizability. Second, the study measured perceived English proficiency using self-reported data, which may not accurately reflect students' actual language ability. Future studies should incorporate standardized English proficiency measures alongside self-reports to provide a more comprehensive assessment. Third, the study's cross-sectional design limits insights into how students' perceptions and language development change over time; longitudinal research designs would allow for a more detailed examination of changes in students' perceptions and language development over time.

Future research should include larger and more diverse samples of international students across multiple institutions. Expanding participant diversity would allow researchers to examine whether the patterns observed in this study are consistent across different national, linguistic, and cultural groups. Such efforts would enhance the generalizability of the findings and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of international students' experiences in general English courses within increasingly diverse higher education contexts.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire

This survey investigates Chinese international students' satisfaction, challenges, and preferred English skills in a general English course offered at a Korean university.

Section 1. Basic information

1. Gender:

- Male
 Female
 Other

2. Age group:

- 18-22
 23-26
 27 or older

3. Degree program:

- Bachelor's
 Master's
 Ph.D.
 Exchange student

4. Major:

- Humanities & Social Sciences
 Natural Sciences & Engineering
 Arts & Physical Education
 Other: _____

5. Period of stay in Korea:

- Less than 6 months
 6 months-1 year
 1-2 years
 More than 2 years

Section 2. Language proficiency

6. Korean language test score (e.g., TOPIK Level 4, 230 points): _____
 If you have not taken the TOPIK test, please indicate your reason: _____

7. English language test score (e.g., TOEFL 85, IELTS 6.5): _____

8. If you do not have an official English test score, please select the level that best represents your perceived English proficiency:

- Beginner
 Intermediate
 Advanced

Section 3: Course satisfaction and learning experiences

9. Overall satisfaction with your general English course:

- 1 Very dissatisfied
 2 Dissatisfied
 3 Neutral
 4 Satisfied
 5 Very satisfied

10. How well did you understand the course content?

- 1 Not at all
 2 A little
 3 Moderately
 4 Mostly
 5 Completely

11. Main difficulty in your general English classes (Select one):

- Difficulty understanding the Korean used in class
 Difficulty understanding English used in the textbook
 Difficulty communicating with professors
 Heavy academic workload (assignments and exams)
 Other: _____

12. Additional difficulties not listed above: [Open-ended response]

13. Which English skills would you like to improve? (Select all that apply):

- Listening
 Speaking
 Reading
 Writing
 Vocabulary
 Grammar
 Other: _____

Appendix B**Interview Protocol****1. Academic and Classroom Experiences**

1.1 Could you describe specific difficulties you have faced in the general English course?
 (e.g., teaching style, lecture speed, use of Korean in class, classroom participation)

1.2 How did you cope with or overcome these difficulties?
 Please provide specific examples.

2. Language Proficiency and Learning

2.1 Before coming to Korea, could you describe your English learning experiences in Mainland China?

(e.g., when you started learning English, how long you studied English in total, and how you typically studied English)

2.2 How have your Korean and English language abilities affected your learning experience in the general English course?

2.3 When using the English textbook or class materials, how well were you able to understand the content?

(e.g., which parts were easy to understand, and which parts were difficult?)

2.4 How comfortable were you participating in English-related classroom activities, such as discussions, group work, or presentations?

2.5 Can you describe a specific classroom situation in which your English ability affected your understanding or participation?

2.6 When you experienced difficulty understanding or using English in class, what strategies did you use to cope with these difficulties?

(e.g., translating into Chinese, asking classmates, or using online tools)

3. Recommendations for Improvement

3.1 How would you change the general English course to make it more effective for Chinese international students?

3.2 Are there any specific support programs or instructional approaches you would recommend to help international students learn English more successfully?