

# Native Language Support in Enhancing English Learning for Chinese Postgraduate Students: Insights from Online Instruction at a Thai Technical University

Cheng-Chun Tsai

School of Liberal Arts, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi,  
Bangkok, Thailand

*Corresponding author: cheng.tsai@kmutt.ac.th*

## Article information

<b>APA citation:</b>	Tsai, C.-C. (2025). Native language support in enhancing English learning for Chinese postgraduate students: Insights from online instruction at a Thai technical university. <i>PASAA</i> , 70, 545–559.
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## 1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of online education, accelerated by global disruptions, has transformed how English as a foreign language (EFL) courses are taught. While virtual platforms offer flexibility and easy access to resources, they also present unique challenges to effective language learning—especially in areas like speaking practice, where student anxiety can be intensified (Mishra et al., 2020). Instructors must find ways to overcome these challenges and engage students meaningfully, particularly those who already struggle with high levels of communication apprehension (Zafar et al., 2014).

At King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT), I was assigned to teach a graduate-level English remedial course exclusively for Chinese students, most of whom major in science or engineering. This course had

previously been taught by Thai instructors who encountered significant difficulties in explaining complex English grammar and technical vocabulary. These challenges were worsened by the linguistic distance between Thai and Chinese, necessitating the involvement of bilingual assistants to translate and clarify key content. As a native Chinese speaker with experience in English language teaching, I was assigned to teach the course to help bridge the communication gap.

The shift to bilingual instruction resulted in notable improvements. Students could understand complex grammar points, academic vocabulary, and assignment requirements more easily and efficiently when explanations were provided in Chinese. This approach aligns with research by van Hugten and van Witteloostuijn (2018), which highlights how strategic native language (L1) support can lessen anxiety, enhance engagement, and foster understanding. However, I remained cautious of the risks of over-relying on L1, as research shows it may impede students' long-term development of English proficiency (Pei & Wu, 2019).

Throughout the course, I used English as the primary medium of instruction, ensuring that approximately 95% of classroom interaction occurred in English. However, I used Chinese selectively to clarify difficult grammar points or complex task requirements. Despite these efforts, I remain concerned about how students would adapt to face-to-face learning in Thailand, where they may encounter lecturers who do not speak Chinese. This paper reflects on my experience implementing bilingual teaching strategies, offering insights into the benefits and challenges of native language support. It provides practical recommendations for EFL instructors navigating similar teaching scenarios, with a focus on balancing L1 use and English immersion.

## **2. Context and Key Challenges**

This remedial English course, lasting 3 hours a week for 15 weeks, was offered as a mandatory 2-credit component of the graduate curriculum at KMUTT.

It was designed to strengthen students' abilities in speaking, writing, reading, and listening. Specifically targeting students who had not met the university's English proficiency requirements upon admission, the course ensured they could effectively engage with academic content throughout their studies. The course was previously taught by Thai instructors who faced significant challenges in meeting the specific needs of Chinese students due to language barriers.

The 26 students enrolled in the course were all Chinese postgraduate students majoring in science or engineering. While they possessed strong technical knowledge in their fields, many struggled with English proficiency, especially in academic communication, which is essential for their graduate studies. From the very first class, two-thirds of the students reported significant challenges, particularly with speaking, which is widely regarded as one of the most anxiety-inducing aspects of foreign language learning (Zheng, 2008). This anxiety was compounded by the virtual nature of the course, where technical difficulties, lack of physical presence, and limited real-time interaction further discouraged students from actively participating in English (Mishra et al., 2020).

Chinese EFL learners are particularly inclined towards communication apprehension due to cultural factors that emphasize correctness, respect for authority, and fear of making mistakes in public (Chen & Bennett, 2012). These tendencies were especially evident among my students, whose technical backgrounds often left them less comfortable with language-focused tasks. Accustomed to the precision of scientific or mathematical problem-solving, they found the fluency of spoken English frightening. Additionally, many students expressed concerns about their grammatical mistakes being judged by peers or instructors, reflecting common anxieties among Chinese learners (Pei & Wu, 2019).

During the first few weeks of the course, many students were reluctant to unmute their microphones or engage in discussions. This mirrored findings from Zafar et al. (2014) who noted that fear of negative evaluation is a significant barrier

to developing oral proficiency. The sense of disconnection inherent in online learning further intensified their anxiety, leading to weakened motivation and reduced engagement (Torres, 2023).

On the other hand, the course had previously been taught by Thai lecturers who encountered challenges in explaining advanced grammar and academic vocabulary. Due to the linguistic gap between Thai, English, and Chinese, bilingual assistants were often needed to translate key concepts. However, these efforts were not always sufficient to ensure students' understanding. Recognizing the need for improved communication, I was assigned to teach the course, given my background as a native Chinese speaker and experienced English language teacher. With bilingual support, students quickly gained confidence, particularly when encountering complex grammar points, technical vocabulary, or task requirements. I used Chinese selectively to prevent misunderstandings and clarify difficult content, ensuring students felt comfortable engaging in discussions. Research by van Hugten and van Witteloostuijn (2018) supports this approach, noting that the strategic use of L1 can foster engagement and reduce anxiety. However, I also recognized the importance of gradually reducing L1 use to prepare students for English-only academic settings.

While the bilingual approach proved effective during online classes, I remained concerned about students' ability to adapt to in-person learning in Thailand, where they would encounter lecturers who do not speak Chinese. This highlights the need to strike a balance between L1 support and English immersion, equipping students with the skills and confidence required for independent learning.

### **3. Bilingual Teaching Strategies in Practice**

#### **3.1 Bilingual Explanations of Complex Grammar and Vocabulary**

Grammar can be particularly challenging for EFL learners, especially when the concepts do not align with structures in their native language (Alnuzaili &

Uddin, 2020). Chinese, for example, lacks certain grammatical features found in English, such as tense markers or subject-verb agreement, which makes it harder for students to grasp concepts intuitively. As a result, students often struggle to differentiate between similar tenses, such as the present tense, present perfect, and past tense. These tenses require not only an understanding of specific rules but also an awareness of differences in meaning and appropriate usage, which can be overwhelming for learners with limited exposure to authentic English contexts.

To address this issue, I provided side-by-side explanations in both English and Chinese, breaking down the functions and nuances of each tense. For instance, I explained the difference between the present perfect (“I have finished my homework”) and the past tense (“I finished my homework”) by giving parallel examples in Chinese that reflect similar temporal distinctions, even though such distinctions are often expressed differently or omitted in Chinese grammar. I also used real-world examples from students’ daily activities or academic tasks to contextualize how each tense is used in conversation or written communication. This approach ensured that students not only memorized rules but also understood when and why certain tenses were preferred in different scenarios.

The bilingual approach allowed students to understand subtle distinctions that might otherwise have caused confusion or led to fossilized errors. By hearing explanations and examples in both languages, they could mentally map unfamiliar grammatical patterns to familiar concepts in their native language. Pei and Wu (2019) emphasize that such L1 support fosters a sense of familiarity, reducing students’ cognitive load and helping them internalize new knowledge more effectively.

However, I was careful to avoid overusing Chinese as a crutch. I consciously limited the use of Chinese to clarifying complex points or preventing misunderstandings, ensuring that English remained the primary mode of communication. Strategic L1 use, as research suggests, should serve as a

temporary bridge rather than a permanent solution (Pei & Wu, 2019). I aimed to gradually increase the students' comfort with processing grammatical explanations directly in English, helping them develop the linguistic resilience needed for real-world academic and professional environments. This balance between native language support and English immersion allowed students to build confidence without sacrificing their long-term development in English proficiency.

### **3.2 Low-Stakes Speaking Practice in Breakout Rooms**

To encourage participation in speaking activities, I utilized breakout rooms during online sessions, where students engaged in non-graded, low-pressure Q&A discussions based on textbook topics. These activities were designed to help students speak English without the fear of making mistakes. The focus was on participation rather than accuracy, and I provided guidance and examples when students encountered difficulties. Research by Zafar et al. (2014) highlights the value of such low-stakes environments in reducing anxiety and improving oral performance.

The breakout room activities were explicitly non-graded, so students did not have to worry about their performance affecting their grades. To alleviate pressure, I reassured them that mistakes were a natural part of learning and that participation was more important than correctness. Students were encouraged to use both English (L2) and Chinese (L1) to clarify task requirements or express ideas. This bilingual flexibility helped them feel more comfortable experimenting with new vocabulary and structures. Additionally, I offered scaffolding—such as hints, questions, or examples—whenever students faced challenges, ensuring they stayed engaged and on track.

The content topics for the breakout rooms were grounded in real-life situations, such as:

*“What behavior do you find rude in other people?”*

*“Do you think younger people are less polite than older people? Why/Why not?”*

These topics were designed to spark conversation without overwhelming students with complex vocabulary. Initially, students relied more on Chinese, particularly when faced with challenging grammar or vocabulary. However, as the course progressed, they gradually used more English—particularly during group presentations and responses to my questions. This shift mirrors Ertek's (2022) findings, which suggest that bilingual practices can act as a bridge to full language immersion.

In the breakout rooms, students occasionally engaged in code-switching or translanguaging, especially when expressing more complex ideas. I explained that these practices were acceptable when students faced challenges but emphasized that their ultimate goal was to use English more consistently as their proficiency increased. A key element of the breakout sessions was peer interaction. Students collaborated by offering corrections and suggestions in English, which fostered a supportive, collaborative learning environment. This peer learning helped them become more confident and fluent in spoken English.

By the end of the course, there was a noticeable shift towards using more English. The reduced reliance on Chinese and increased English use helped students become more comfortable and confident in their speaking abilities. This shift was particularly evident in group reports and Q&A sessions.

In conclusion, the combination of low-stakes activities, flexible language use, peer collaboration, and scaffolding created a positive and supportive environment that facilitated students' development of spoken English skills. By the end of the course, many students showed increased fluency and comfort in using English in real-world contexts.

### **3.3 Providing Bilingual Feedback**

Feedback is a crucial part of language learning, yet providing English-only feedback can sometimes discourage students, particularly when they struggle to

comprehend corrections. Since the students in this class did not provide English language test scores before enrollment, I was unable to determine their initial English proficiency. To facilitate effective discussions and questioning, I switched to Chinese (their mother tongue) when the students struggled to express themselves in English or paused for too long. This approach primarily aimed to avoid wasting time and unnecessary waiting, thereby improving learning efficiency.

To further support students in processing feedback effectively, I employed a bilingual feedback approach, using Chinese to clarify misunderstandings and English to model correct responses. Research by van Hugten and van Witteloostuijn (2018) supports the notion that feedback in students' native language (L1) allows them to process their mistakes more effectively, fostering self-reflection and improvement. This method not only enhanced comprehension but also lessened the frustration that could arise from miscommunication.

The effectiveness of bilingual feedback was evident in the ways students responded:

1. **Error correction:** Some students quickly corrected their language errors after receiving L1 feedback. For example, a student made a grammatical mistake in writing, and I provided feedback in Chinese, pointing out that they should have used the past tense. After understanding the mistake, the student promptly corrected it and avoided making the same error in subsequent assignments.
2. **Improvement in performance:** Some students demonstrated noticeable progress after receiving feedback. For instance, I observed that a student relied on overly simple vocabulary in their speaking. By offering suggestions in Chinese and encouraging the use of more varied expressions, I helped the student gradually incorporate advanced vocabulary, making their speech clearer and more sophisticated.
3. **Reflection and self-improvement:** When students recognized that feedback had helped them understand their mistakes, they became more



reflective about their learning process. For example, after I used L1 to explain a misunderstanding in a listening test, the student not only corrected the mistake but also began analyzing other difficult points in their listening exercises. As a result, their listening comprehension improved significantly.

This bilingual approach was particularly beneficial for students with lower proficiency, who often required additional guidance to internalize feedback without feeling discouraged. By explaining corrections in Chinese, I ensured that students fully grasped the concepts, allowing them to view feedback as a constructive tool rather than a source of anxiety. However, I remained committed to using English as the primary language for delivering positive reinforcement and encouragement. This emphasis on English not only reinforced language use but also promoted a gradual shift toward greater proficiency, enabling students to build confidence and engage more fully in their learning process.

#### **4. Reflections on the Effectiveness of Native Language Support**

##### **4.1 Improved Comprehension and Engagement**

The bilingual approach led to noticeable improvements in both student comprehension and engagement throughout the course. By providing L1 support, I was able to effectively bridge the gap between students' existing knowledge and the new concepts they needed to master, making the material more accessible (Alnuzaili & Uddin, 2020). This was particularly evident during grammar lessons, where bilingual explanations clarified complex points and helped students avoid misunderstandings. As a result, they were able to apply new concepts with increased confidence, which was essential for building a solid foundation in their language learning.

Moreover, student engagement saw significant growth during class discussions. Many students who had initially been reluctant to speak demonstrated a greater willingness to participate in English discussions. This shift aligned with findings by Ertek (2022), who emphasizes that native language

support can create a sense of psychological safety, encouraging learners to take linguistic risks. As students became more comfortable with using English in a supportive environment, they were able to engage more deeply with the material and their peers, fostering a collaborative and dynamic learning atmosphere.

## **4.2 Challenges and Limitations**

Despite its numerous benefits, the use of native language support also presented some challenges that needed careful consideration. One primary concern was the risk of students developing an over-reliance on Chinese, which could limit their exposure to English and hinder their ability to achieve fluency in the language (Pei & Wu, 2019). This reliance on their native language became particularly evident during discussions, as some students tended to communicate primarily in Chinese. As a result, it became increasingly challenging to accurately assess their true English proficiency levels, raising concerns about whether they were adequately prepared for more advanced academic requirements.

Furthermore, the online learning environment posed additional difficulties for monitoring students' progress effectively. As noted by Torres (2023), online assessments can sometimes obscure language gaps, making it harder for instructors to gauge students' comprehension and skills accurately. This situation necessitated the use of a combination of formative and summative assessments to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of students' learning. While formative assessments allowed for ongoing feedback and adjustment of teaching strategies, summative assessments were critical in evaluating overall progress. Striking the right balance between these assessment types was essential to ensure that students received the support they needed while still challenging them to engage with English on a deeper level.

## **5. Recommendations for EFL Teachers**

Based on my experiences, I offer the following recommendations for teachers working with non-native English speakers in online contexts:

1. **Use native language selectively:** Employing L1 strategically can enhance comprehension, particularly when introducing complex grammar rules or vocabulary that may not have direct translations in English. However, it is essential to gradually reduce L1 use as students become more comfortable with English. Encouraging students to rely less on L1 during speaking practice can be challenging but achievable with consistent strategies. Setting clear expectations for when L1 is allowed and gradually increasing the complexity of English-speaking tasks can help students build confidence. Interactive activities, such as role-playing and group discussions, provide opportunities to use English in real-life scenarios, reinforcing the target language naturally. While L1 can serve as a valuable tool for clarification and confidence-building, overreliance may hinder language acquisition. Therefore, striking a balance between L1 and L2 is key to maximizing learning outcomes (Pei & Wu, 2019).
2. **Encourage active participation:** Creating a low-anxiety learning environment is crucial for fostering speaking confidence in online settings. Many students may feel intimidated by the lack of face-to-face interaction, making it essential to design activities that promote collaboration and peer support. Breakout rooms and small-group discussions encourage active participation by reducing the pressure of speaking in front of a large audience. Incorporating structured interactive exercises, such as role-plays, debates, and games, further enhances engagement. Additionally, teachers can introduce vocabulary and key phrases relevant to speaking tasks to minimize students' reliance on L1. Establishing a culture of encouragement and positive reinforcement ensures that students feel comfortable taking risks in their language use (Zafar et al., 2014).
3. **Provide clear bilingual feedback:** A balanced feedback approach can help students improve their English skills while maintaining confidence. Using L1 for error correction allows for precise explanations, clarifying misunderstandings and reinforcing learning. Meanwhile, providing positive reinforcement in L2 helps students associate success with the target

language. This dual approach creates a supportive learning environment while encouraging gradual immersion. Teachers can further enhance this process by integrating peer feedback activities, where students evaluate each other's language use and progress. By receiving both teacher and peer feedback, learners develop greater self-awareness and motivation to refine their English skills (van Hugten & van Witteloostuijn, 2018).

4. **Monitor student progress closely:** Regularly tracking student performance ensures that L1 support fosters, rather than hinders, long-term language proficiency. Formative assessments, quizzes, and self-reflection activities can provide insights into students' development and challenges. Additionally, setting personal language goals encourages learners to take ownership of their progress. One-on-one meetings or periodic feedback forms help teachers identify difficulties students face in transitioning from L1 to L2. By maintaining an ongoing dialogue, teachers can adjust instructional strategies to meet evolving needs, ensuring that students receive the right balance of support and challenge (Torres, 2023).

Ultimately, the key is to use L1 as a strategic support rather than a crutch. While it can facilitate comprehension and confidence-building, excessive dependence may slow down language acquisition. A structured approach that gradually increases students' exposure to English while providing meaningful L1 support can create an effective and motivating learning experience.

## 6. Conclusion

My experience teaching Chinese postgraduate students at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT) has clearly demonstrated that native language support can play a vital role in enhancing comprehension, reducing anxiety, and promoting engagement in online English courses. For many learners, especially those in non-English speaking countries, transitioning to a foreign language can be intimidating. Incorporating elements of their native language can help bridge this gap, making complex English concepts more accessible. When

students can relate new information to their existing knowledge, they are more likely to internalize what they learn, fostering deeper understanding and retention.

However, while native language support can serve as a useful scaffold, it is crucial to balance its use with progressive immersion in English to ensure long-term proficiency. Initial support in L1 can alleviate frustration and confusion, but over-reliance may hinder students' ability to communicate effectively in English. Thus, educators must thoughtfully design their curriculum and instructional strategies to gradually transition students from dependence on their native language to active engagement in English. This can involve setting clear goals for reducing native language usage over time while providing ample opportunities for authentic English practice.

As online education continues to expand, educators must adopt flexible strategies that cater to both the emotional and academic needs of their students, creating meaningful and effective learning experiences. Recognizing individual differences—such as prior knowledge, motivation, and anxiety levels—is key to tailoring teaching approaches that foster student success. Leveraging technology, such as discussion forums, multimedia resources, and virtual collaboration platforms, can further enhance engagement and interaction in online learning environments.

Furthermore, professional development for educators remains essential in this evolving educational landscape. Teachers should continuously explore new pedagogical strategies and technological integrations that promote inclusive and effective language learning. Sharing best practices and experiences with peers can help cultivate a community of learning that benefits both educators and students alike.

In summary, the thoughtful integration of native language support in online English education is not just a pedagogical strategy but an essential component of

fostering a positive learning environment. By remaining adaptable and responsive to students' needs, we can empower them to navigate their educational journeys with confidence and resilience, ultimately preparing them to thrive in a globalized world.

## 7. About the Author

Cheng-Chun Alan Tsai is a lecturer at the School of Liberal Arts, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, Thailand. He holds a Ph.D. in English as an International Language from Chulalongkorn University, Thailand. His research interests encompass English Language Teaching (ELT) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP), language assessment, and course and curriculum design.

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