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Diagnostic Assessment of a Chinese ESL Learner: A Four-Skill Case Study and Pedagogical Implications

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Abstract: This study conducts a diagnostic assessment of a Chinese undergraduate ESL learner and investigates potential sources of his language difficulties, including internal and external factors. Using Cambridge B2 First tasks and a semi-structured interview, the study evaluates Z's listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, along with his motivation, social context, and previous education experience. The results indicate that Z has attained an overall B2 proficiency level while shows weaknesses in spoken accuracy, lexical range, semantic confusions, complex-sentence parsing and listening for detail. The paper argues that these uneven sub-skill profiles are shaped by first-language transfer, exam-oriented schooling, limited naturalistic exposure, and language anxiety. Therefore, valid assessment and effective pedagogy must integrate diagnostic testing with contextualized qualitative data. Based on a detailed, multi-dimensional analysis of the four skills, the paper identifies the learner's strengths and proposes targeted suggestions such as peer feedback, intensive dictation, close reading, and genre-based writing. These diagnoses are drawn with suggestions for practice and further research.

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标题: 中国英语二语学习者诊断性测评：基于四项技能个案研究及教学启示

摘要: 本研究对一名中国本科英语二语（ESL）学习者进行了诊断性评估，并探讨了导致其语言困难的潜在内外因素。研究采用剑桥通用英语第二级（B2 First）测试任务及半结构化访谈，对受试者Z的听、说、读、写技能，以及动机、社会环境和既往教育经历进行了综合评估。结果表明，Z的总体英语水平已达到B2等级，但其口语准确性、词汇广度、语义辨析、复杂句解析能力以及细节听力方面仍存在明显不足。本文认为，这种不均衡的子技能分布受到母语迁移、应试教育模式、自然语言输入匮乏以及语言焦虑的共同影响。因此，科学有效的语言评估与教学实践必须将诊断性测试与情境化的定性数据相结合。基于对听、说、读、写四项技能的细致、多维分析，本文识别了该学习者的优势，并提出了具有针对性的教学建议，包括同伴反馈、强化听写、细读训练以及体裁导向写作等。最后，本文在诊断分析的基础上提出了相关教学实践建议，并对未来研究方向进行了展望。

关键词: 诊断性评估；ESL学习者；第二语言习得

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1. Introduction

English proficiency is a key gateway to academic mobility and professional opportunities in China, where national policies have mandated early English education since 2001 (Ministry of Education, 2001). However, decades of classroom-based instruction remain largely exam-oriented, prioritizing reading and grammar over communicative competence. Research shows that such testing cultures, while improving receptive skills, often lead to uneven second-language development, fossilized grammatical errors, and persistent anxiety that impedes oral fluency (MacIntyre, 2017; Arnold, 2000).

Because individual learners bring diverse motivational profiles and sociocultural experiences to the classroom, a single standardized test cannot capture their true abilities or needs (Harmer, 2007; Duff, 2020). A case study approach whose focus is on conducting an “in-depth and contextualized” investigation of “particularities” (Duff, 2020, p. 146; Rose, McKinley & Baffoe-Djan, 2020) enables

the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the characteristics, strengths and weaknesses of learners in each English skills area. However, empirical work that integrates formal testing with qualitative inquiry into the learner's background remains limited in the Chinese ESL context, leaving a gap in understanding how exam-driven schooling and first-language transfer jointly shape individual skill profiles.

This case study addresses that gap by combining Cambridge B2 First tasks with a semi-structured interview to examine the four-skill performance of a Chinese undergraduate. This study argues that valid assessment and effective instruction require more than numerical scores. Instead, they must synthesize diagnostic test data with the learner's motivational history and sociocultural environment to design truly learner-centred interventions.

2. A summary of the learner's language practices

This study adopts a qualitative diagnostic design that combines standardized four-skill testing with a semi-structured interview in order to investigate not only the learner's measurable proficiency but also the sociocultural and motivational factors shaping his performance.

The learner interviewed and analyzed in this study is a 21-year-old male studying in a sino-foreign cooperation university majoring digital media art in China. He is referred to as Z for the purpose of guaranteeing her confidentiality and anonymity.

2.1 Language background and learning experiences

As a Chinese, Z uses Mandarin as his first language (L1) and English as his second language (L2). Z uses English mainly for academic reasons since there is no specific reason and context to use it outside of school. It is worth mentioning that he has taken the IELTS exam and got a band 6 (Reading 6, Listening 6.5, Speaking 5, Writing 5.5).

In January 2001, The Ministry of Education in China published 'Guiding Proposals of the Ministry of Education for Active Promotion of Offering English Courses in Primary Schools' (Ministry of Education, 2001). This meant that English would be taught to Primary three pupils across the country, beginning in cities and suburbs. Therefore, Z has been learning English since Grade 3. In addition, Z's parents enrolled him in extracurricular English tutoring classes from the third grade in primary school. However, Z did not consider the English education he received during primary school as a helpful practice of improving his English competence. He thought English teachers placed a greater emphasis on teaching reading and writing skills through textbooks, implying that professional listening and

speaking training received less priority. It is because reading has always been the key to success for Chinese students in English acquisition (Jiang, 2019).

Z regarded college as an essential stage that developed Z's English. English was a compulsory course in his first and second years of the university. Furthermore, he has participated in IELTS extracurricular tutoring every weekend. Although the tutorial class was exam-oriented, it enabled Z to enhance his listening and speaking competence due to a certain amount of listening and speaking exercises. Regular interaction with teachers and classmates in his speaking courses strengthened Z's oral confidence and fluency. This supports Hall's (2010) argument that teacher–student and peer interaction is integral to language development.

2.2 Personal factors affecting English learning

Z's personal motivation, language anxiety, and various external factors have played a decisive role in shaping his current English proficiency and the skill-specific strengths and weaknesses revealed later in the study.

2.2.1 Motivation

Motivation, defined as the driving force that determines the pursuit of goals and the subsequent continuous efforts required to achieve them (Williams & Burden, 1997), is a promoting factor for Z's L2 development. In Z's words, his motivation for learning English was to get good scores in exams during junior and senior high school, which is defined as extrinsic motivation (i.e. learn L2 to 'attain some separable outcome') (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 60). He admitted that it was a passive process in which he accepted the knowledge taught by the teacher without thinking. Notwithstanding, he acknowledged cramming helped him improve his English to some extent.

As Dörnyei (1998) pointed out that successful second language acquisition reveals the importance of motivation. After entering college, Z's motivation began to change into pursuit of personal purpose, that was, to further his education abroad. He was looking forward to using English as a tool to quickly integrate into local society in the United Kingdom in the future. Therefore, English learning became an active process. He started to consciously read foreign magazines and watch English movies to accumulate authentic English expressions. He mentioned that intrinsic motivation, is considered as someone who is inspired to achieve something because of inner goal and satisfaction (Ryan and Deci, 2000), greatly improved his English competence.

2.2.2 Language anxiety

Language anxiety, generally perceived as a hindrance to L2 development (MacIntyre, 2017), also has an impact on Z's English learning. High level of language anxiety can affect L2 learners' language

development and created a vicious circle (Lou & Noels, 2020). Z recalled that during senior high school years, he was afraid of speaking in public and seldom expressed his opinions in English during group discussions except when he had to do group presentations. Z attributed this to Chinese educational practice, the exam-centered culture cultivated a learning environment that was mistake-intolerant, which valued accuracy over fluency (Gu & Zhao, 2021).

2.3 External factors

Parents' involvement is positively associated with English as the second language (ESL) learners' learning process (Kim & Barrett, 2019). Z's parents played a vital role in Z's English education. As English is a compulsory subject Z's parents paid a lot attention to Z's English competence, they played English tapes on weekends and asked him to read original English books during holidays.

Moreover, Z's teachers have affected his interest in learning English. Language teachers play a crucial role in ESL teaching and learning, influencing students' persistence, effort and autonomy (Mantiri, 2015; Martin et al., 2018). Z believed that teachers' teaching style greatly affected his enthusiasm for learning. For instance, his English teacher in the college used interactive teaching methods, such as organizing debates and role playing, Z was more willing to participate in and focused more on her classes. On the other hand, his middle school English teacher only imparted knowledge rigidly and made the class completely teacher-centered, it was difficult for him to concentrate.

3. A summary of the diagnostic assessment procedures

The diagnostic assessment consists of two parts, including an interview and an English test drawn from the B2 First authentic practice exams. The reason for choosing this exam is that the Z's IELTS band 6.0 corresponded to the B2 level of Cambridge English Qualifications (Cambridge, 2019). The exam consisted of four subtests which tested Z's listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. Z was informed clearly of the format of the test.

3.1 Interview

In order to understand interviewee's perceptions more comprehensively and deeply, it is necessary to conduct a semi-structured interview (Creswell et al., 2006). Therefore, the author carried out an online interview in Chinese, as this language choice facilitated more accurate expression of complex ideas. The interview covered his educational background, daily use of English, English learning experience, factors that influenced his English learning, and his future desires and needs in using English. It was audio-recorded, transcribed and translated.

3.2 Speaking

The speaking test is consisted of four parts. The first part is related to daily life, including questions about media and special occasions. Then, Z was asked to demonstrate two given pictures and comment on the theme of the photos (i.e., help) for 1 minute in Part 2. Z answered a question related to garden as well. In the third part, Z discussed some strategies of attracting more visitors to a town with a learner at the same English level. In the last part, 5 further questions relative to the topic in Part 3 were asked and Z replied them. The speaking test was recorded and transcribed. The author will analyze Z's speaking ability from following five aspects: grammatical range and accuracy, discourse management, pronunciation, interactive communication, and lexical range and appropriacy (Cambridge Assessment English, 2021a).

3.3 Listening

The listening test lasted around 40 minutes and had four parts. Each part was played twice. The text was consisted of monologue and conversation, and test questions were in forms of multiple choice, sentence completion and multiple matching (Cambridge English Assessment, 2021a). The test was designed to assess learners' different listening sub-skills, such as listening for details and listening for the gist.

3.4 Reading

The reading test lasted 45 minutes and contained three passages from Part 5, Part 6 and Part 7 of the Reading and Use of English paper of the B2 First test as these three parts focused on the assessment of reading skills. The learner answered multiple-choice questions, gap-filling questions, and matching questions. All of these questions tested Z's reading subskills at three different aspects (i.e. discourse, sentence, word).

3.5 Writing

There were two parts in the writing test that required the completion of two essays of 140-190 words each within 1 hour and 20 minutes. In response to Part 1, Z wrote an opinion essay to answer the given question of "Can pollution and damage to the environment be solved?" by using two provided notes and creating one new viewpoint. In Part 2, Z chose to write an email to a friend seeking some advice on a touring holiday. Z have written these two genres of essays before, which enhanced the validity of the test (Hyland, 2019).

4. An analysis of Z's language skills

4.1 Speaking analysis

4.1.1 Grammatical range and accuracy

Generally speaking, Z's speech was understandable while lacking grammatical accuracy. There was subject-verb inconsistency in his words (e.g. *the show tell.../this old woman give...*). Furthermore, mistakes from omission of articles (e.g. *give the policeman map/ let visitors live in better...*) to omission of verbs (e.g. *hands lingering fragrance*) occurred in his utterances. Another problem was the misuse of tense. The grammaticalization of tense morphology is one area where Mandarin Chinese and the Indo-European languages diverge significantly, as Chinese does not have grammaticalized tense morphology (Lin, 2002). Consequently, it is common for Chinese learners to make mistakes in tenses when speaking English. Tense inconsistency appeared in Z's speech (e.g. *I was afraid that...think I'm .../When I got lost, I usually ask...*). He had command of basic and simple sentence patterns while the grammar he used in the speaking test lacked diversity. First, he used only two tenses, present simple and past simple. Second, he rarely used compound sentences and complex sentences.

4.1.2 Discourse management

Z showed his willingness to speak at length and his answers were related to the task. He conveyed his opinions in an explicit way and made his words intelligible. In addition, he organized his ideas using some basic linking words (e.g. *first* and *also*) and discourse markers (e.g. *in my opinion* and *well*). By using discourse markers, the speaker manages to make boundaries in his conversation with the other candidate and make the speech more coherent (Carter, 2002).

However, he kept using repetition, self-correction, slow speech to maintain his flow of speech and he was fluent in simple speech but more complex sentences triggered problems. For example, he used fillers like *um* frequently in order to gain more time to organize his answers for questions in part 4.

4.1.3 Pronunciation

Z's pronunciation was intelligible in most cases. He produced most phonemes clearly, despite occasional errors. To start with, Z needs to improve his accuracy in pronouncing vowels and diphthongs. Specifically, he mispronounced the /ɒ/ in *cost* as /əʊ/, the /ɪ/ in *select* as /ə/, the /ɑ:/ in *bath* as /eɪ/, the /i:ə/ in *really* as /eɪ/, and the /ɪə/ in *experience* as /e/. Moreover, he sometimes made mistakes in consonants as well. He always confuses the pronunciations of /r/ and /l/. For example, he pronounces *world* as /wɜ:rd/. Additionally, he had trouble with the pronunciation of *view* /wju:/ like most Chinese ESL learners do because there is only a similar consonant /w/ in Chinese Pinyin that sounds like /v/ in English (Han, 2013).

In terms of stress, most of the words were correctly stressed in his speech, except the situation that he placed the stress of 'comfortable' on the second syllable and he used increase as a verb but stressed it on the first syllable.

4.1.4 Lexical range and appropriacy

Z's vocabulary was sufficient to support him express in various topics while his lexical flexibility was limited. He kept reusing some words, such as 'like' and 'think'. Additionally, there were some lexical inaccuracy. To begin with, semantic confusion occurred in his speech. This kind of mistake originated when a learner confuses two L2 terms that have semantic relationships (Zhao & Li, 2022) (e.g. Z said '*having very shops*' while he wanted to express 'having many shops'). Furthermore, mistakes associated with word class frequently occurred (e.g. '*exam is an extreme common form of competition*'). In addition, Z misused the intransitive verb '*travel*' as a transitive one. Last but not least, improper choice of prepositions should be given notice (e.g. '*listen for the radio*' and '*more tourists will visit to the resort*').

4.1.5 Interactive communication

He interacted effectively with his partners and most of his words made sense. In the dialogue, Z used a lot of back-channeling (e.g. 'uh-huh', 'Yeah exactly', and 'I agree'). Previous study indicated that most commonly used types of back channeling were continuers and signals of acknowledgment (Shelley&Gonzalez, 2013). Therefore, Z successfully made his partner clearly feel the attention and made the conversation flow.

In addition, when talking about the development of the resort in the third part, Z demonstrated effective use of turn-taking. He listened attentively while the other candidate was speaking and provided active, supportive responses that served as signals to sustain the conversational flow. This aligns with Schegloff's (2000) conceptualization of turn-taking as an organizational device that facilitates "one-party-at-a-time" speaking while allowing participants to collaboratively manage transitions, minimize overlaps, and avoid prolonged silences.

4.2 Listening Analysis

4.2.1 Analysis from speaking test

To begin with, it can be found from the speaking test that Z can understand the examiner and the other candidate most of the time. To be specific, he gave timely and relevant answers to my questions and expressed his opinions clearly. Additionally, Z applied the metacognitive listening strategy of monitoring in the speaking test, which was identified by previous research as an effective skill in increasing L2 listening proficiency (Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010). Moreover, Z fully participated

in the discussion, usually by agreeing or disagreeing with his partner's opinions, which is another listening skill he demonstrates.

4.2.2 Analysis of listening test materials

Overall, Z correctly answered 22 out of 30 questions, which indicated that his listening proficiency was at B2 level. Firstly, Z employed the cognitive and metacognitive listening strategies, especially prediction. Specifically, Z demonstrated strong predictive listening skills by anticipating the main idea of the listening text based on the question stem and multiple-choice options before hearing the content. This approach allowed him to form a mental framework and listen with purposeful attention, reflecting effective use of top-down processing driven prior knowledge. Such a strategy aligns with the view expressed by Kveraga et al. (2007) regarding the critical role of top-down mechanisms in cognitive processing: although originally applied to visual perception, their emphasis on the importance of feedback and expectation-driven processes applies equally to listening comprehension.

Secondly, Z was good at listening for global understanding. He paid attention to the main points of the dialogue to get a general understanding of what was being said. While listening the material, Z tried to identify topic sentences and key information that helped him understand the conversation generally.

In comparison with global understanding, listening for details was Z's weakness. He only got marks on 60 percent of questions designed to test this sub-skill. One possible explanation is that he is not inclined to adopt a bottom-up approach. He does not focus his limited attention on decoding sound streams into meaningful units, processing blocks and parsing syntax, which is largely automatic for an experienced audience (Field, 2009). Instead, he tends to pay attention to the overall meaning through top-down inference (Blau, 1990). Another reason might be that Z is sometimes distracted by irrelevant details and fails to grasp the important ones. For instance, Z does not understand the meanings of some conjunctions, especially transitional words like 'while', 'though', and 'but', while important detailed information is always given after these expressions (Celce-Murcia et al., 1983, p. 854).

4.3 Reading

4.3.1 Word Level

Z was good at inferring the meaning of unknown words based on the context. Z mentioned that due to his limited vocabulary, there were a range of unfamiliar words in the reading text. He usually used intensive reading to understand 1 or 2 sentences before and after the sentence with the unknown word and then made the inference. One example was that Z did not know the meaning of "ritual". But with

the adjective “daily” and the phrase “stars at an early age” in the previous passage, Z deduced that ritual was a noun, and that it meant “routine” in the passage. Nevertheless, there were some cases in which Z could not infer the meaning of a word from the context. For example, in Question 47, Z thought that Paragraph C contained the information “Duncan caught up with his team-mates” because he did not know the word “opponent” and there were no clear clues to help him decide the meaning of the word. Consequently, he misunderstood the meaning of “opponent” and thought it was a close synonym for team-mates. Therefore, it is necessary for Z to expand vocabulary, as Alqahtani (2015) stressed, vocabulary learning is an important part of foreign language learning since the meanings of new words are often emphasized.

4.3.2 Sentence Level

Reading at the sentence level was Z’s weakness. It is tough for him to extract detailed information from sentences and he rarely uses various techniques to understand complex sentences. Specifically, he is unable to determine the meaning by using grammatical structures (for example, associating the passive “be made to” in a question with the “force” in the original text), and it is very difficult for him to deconstruct sentences with complex grammatical structures. For instance, in Question 32, it was necessary to parse a complex sentence (Now, Dad normally hates being disturbed...) to understand writer’s implication. The sentence contained both an attributive clause and an adverbial clause while Z was unable to identify the trunk of the sentence and could not fully understand the sentence.

4.3.3 Discourse Level

It is noteworthy that Z had discourse analysis ability, but sometimes he did not make good use of some skills. First of all, Z used to determine the intention of the question in his mind, and adopted the corresponding reading strategy. In the process of answering the question in the fifth part, Z recognized his emphasis on following discourse links. Specifically, Z paid attention to conjunctions, which enabled him to locate the answer more quickly. For instance, he used skimming to accurately locate the answer in the part following the conjunction “but”.

The gaped text in Part 6, with the aim of testing H’s knowledge of cohesion and coherence, was where Z lost the most scores, mainly because he failed to make use of referencing and signposting. Instead of focusing on the whole context, Z only concentrated on one specific keyword. For example, Z identified “technology” as the keyword to answer question 39 after skimming the fourth paragraph. Therefore, he chose sentence C that seemed to be relevant to technology. The reason why he gave wrong answers was that he overused the skimming skill and scanning key words instead of reading carefully.

4.4 Writing

4.4.1 Discourse level

Overall, Z responded well to the writing task. First of all, both of his essays met the requirements of the task and were relevant to the topic. Furthermore, his writings had clear and organised structure. To be more precise, the first essay started with an overall and general answer to the topic as an introduction. Then there were three main paragraphs centered on different viewpoints, each of which are elaborated on with in-depth discussions. The last paragraph was the conclusion of the essay.

The second essay was presented as an email and was formatted accurately. He started by expressing his willingness to help, then gave appropriate answers to two queries, and finally expressed his intention of providing more information.

However, the essay lacked coherence, as some arguments were not expressed clearly or fully developed. For example, in the second main body paragraph, Z directly integrate two ways to solve the problem of environmental pollution in terms of oceans and rivers, that were strict regulations and promoting community-led initiatives for river and beach clean-ups, without providing any explanation or supporting evidence, resulting in lower intelligibility.

Remarkably, Z made good use of linking words and discourse markers, which demonstrated his cohesion skills in writing. In the first essay, he wrote *'firstly'* and *'secondly'* to distinguish different points of view, and ended the essay with "in conclusion" in the last paragraph to make the essay more systematic and well-connected. In the email, discourse markers such as *'alternatively'*, *'additionally'* and *'however'* were used as well. Nonetheless, some omission of conjunctions made his essay lack logical connection. In the second sentence of the first essay, there was a concessive relationship between two successive sentences while he did not use any adversative transitions.

In terms of register, given the target readers and the genres, the essay should have adopted a relatively formal style, while Z used abbreviation of "information" in the email, which could be regarded as informal.

4.4.2 Sentence level

Z made full use of a variety of sentence patterns. Specifically, the first essay contained different grammatical structures like subject clause (e.g. *'adopting eco-friendly vehicles...'*, *'could greatly reduce...'*); the passive voice (e.g. *'need to be enforced'*) and the accompanying gerund clause (e.g. *'with collaborative efforts involving governmental'*). The proper use of a wide range of sentence structures indicated Z's proficiency in English writing. However, Z sometimes failed to use correct grammar in his sentence-level writing sometimes. The author noticed his occasional failure of omitting prepositions

(e.g. *'educating people the importance...'*). Additionally, due to the influence of L1, Z made mistakes in the plural form of the noun. For example, the sentence "*In spite of these opinion*" is incorrect since 'opinion' is a countable noun. This kind of mistake can be attributed to Chinese ESL learners' L1, since the singular and plural forms of a noun are the same in Chinese. Therefore, Chinese learners often omit "s" when forming plural nouns (Zheng and Park, 2013).

4.4.3 Word level

Z demonstrated his command of vocabularies in the writing test, which differed greatly from his performance in the speaking test. To start with, instead of using the same word repeatedly, he wrote synonyms to express the same meaning. (e.g. *environmental issues/environmental challenges; challenging/daunting*). Additionally, he used a lot of expressions that were highly relevant to the topic. For instance, in the first essay related to environmental issues, he wrote *'eco-friendly'*, *'harmful emission'*, and *'sustainable lifestyles'*. Similarly, when responding to a friend's email, he wrote *'treasure trove'*; *'historical landmarks'*, and *'heritage village'*. Moreover, he spelled every word correctly, which implied that he had a basic understanding of these words.

On the other hand, he made errors at the word level. For instance, he misused the verb *'adopt'* in the phrase *'adopting eco-friendly vehicle'*. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (1989), *'adopt'* means to start to use a particular method or to show a particular attitude towards someone or something. Therefore, it cannot be used with a specific object like *'eco-friendly vehicle'*, but rather with approaches, methods, or attitudes. In the meanwhile, he had difficulties in dealing with articles (e.g. *'visit museum'*, *'yet I believe it can be addressed to significant extent'*), partly owing to the absence of this notion in Chinese (Swan & Smith, 2001).

5. Applying the lessons of assessment

The uneven skill profile is best explained by a constellation of learner factors. Diagnostic assessment can not only examine learners' academic performance but also demonstrate the effectiveness of teaching, helping teachers better plan their courses. Further suggestions for improving Z's English proficiency must be learner-centered, and effective advice should be put forward based on his educational background, learning motivation, needs, as well as his strengths and weaknesses.

5.1 Speaking

Z should prioritize pronunciation accuracy and lexical range. Prior to university, he had limited systematic exposure to English. As a result, he has a limited range of vocabularies (for example, he used *'like'* and *'think'* nine times each in the speaking test). To address these weaknesses, I recommend a combination of interactive practice, focused noticing, and targeted pronunciation work.

Active participation in guided group discussions is an effective way to promote both accuracy and fluency. In such settings peers can provide immediate, task-focused feedback during or after interaction, helping Z to notice recurring errors and to experiment with alternative grammatical forms and lexical items (Hyland & Jiang, 2021; Vuogan & Li, 2022). Structured peer feedback tasks (e.g. error-spotting, corrective recasting, or feedback checklists) will make the feedback more pedagogically useful.

Regular online conversation with native or proficient English speakers is also recommended. Z currently studies in China and therefore lacks frequent exposure to naturalistic English, online exchanges offer flexible opportunities for authentic interaction. Given Z's reported L2 anxiety, online one-to-one or small-group conversations can reduce social pressure and encourage greater willingness to take speaking risks, thereby increasing opportunities for language knowledge. This kind of communication contributes to the improvement of his pronunciation as well. He can listen to how the phonemes mispronounced by himself are pronounced by expert speakers and 'notice the gap' (Schmidt & Frota, 1986; Pennington, 2014).

5.2 Listening

Diagnostic results show that listening for detail is Z's main weakness. Intensive listening tasks such as full-text dictation of news reports can sharpen perception of connected speech and highlight unknown words. After transcription, checking the original text and analysing misheard segments fosters bottom-up processing (Hunt & Pickles, 2014).

To speed speech processing without loss of comprehension, Z can combine pre-listening transcript reading with fast-rate listening (Vandergrift, 2007). Gradually removing the transcript will help him adapt to natural speech rates.

5.3 Reading

In the process of reading, it is possible for Z to develop his ability to read intensively and gradually reduce the excessive use of skimming. Reading more English newspapers, magazines and journals will strengthen Z's ability to locate detailed information and expand vocabulary. Careful reading exercises, such as underlining discourse markers and parsing long sentences into clauses, can improve his handling of complex syntax and cohesive devices (Halliday & Hasan, 2014; Ballard, 2022). Meanwhile, Z's limited vocabulary will be expanded through reading more different types of English materials. For example, if he wants to deepen his understanding of terminology, he can read more journal articles, which will also help him achieve the language learning goal of acquiring professional knowledge and reduce the probability of encountering words he does not know in the future reading process. Finally, given the fact that Z plans to resit the IELTS, he should also practise timed careful

reading to balance speed and accuracy, while extensive reading of academic articles can increase discipline-specific lexis and overall fluency (Grabe & Stoller, 2019).

5.4 Writing

Z's writing is generally sound but needs stronger cohesion and a more appropriate academic register. He should support main points with examples or sub-arguments and use clear sequencing to improve textual coherence (McCarthy, 1992). Pre-writing activities such as outlining will help organise ideas logically.

Analysing model texts of target genres can raise awareness of discourse patterns and register, enabling him to imitate effective structures and lexical choices. Sustained reading will expose him to natural collocations and formal style, while maintaining a vocabulary and grammar notebook promotes noticing of recurrent issues (Krashen, 1985; Swain, 1985).

6. Conclusion and reflection

Conducting this diagnostic assessment allowed the author to examine an English learner from the perspective of a native Mandarin speaker and to recognise that language proficiency cannot be defined by test scores alone. Z's uneven skill profile, particularly the gap between his relatively strong receptive abilities and weaker speaking performance, shows that sub-skills within one individual develop at different rates. Such differences arise from multiple factors, including personal motivation, learning experiences, and external influences such as family and teachers. Recognizing these complexity highlights the broader significance of diagnostic assessment in the ESL context.

For practice, the study highlights three priorities. First, teachers should identify individual strengths and weaknesses through ongoing observation and dialogue. Second, they need to address language-learning anxiety and foster resilient attitudes toward difficulty. Finally, bridging theory and practice. It is essential for teachers to design learner-centred instruction that cultivates intrinsic motivation and sustained language growth. By demonstrating how the profiles of individual learners reflect complex internal and external factors, this study helps to gain a more detailed understanding of second language assessment and provides a model for customizing teaching in different ESL settings.

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