

# **How English Competence Impacts Chinese Expatriate Adjustment in International Business**

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## **Abstract**

China is now becoming an engine of world economic growth. A large population of Chinese expatriates work overseas. How these expatriates adjust to the overseas assignments and how their English competence affects their adjustment are crucial to the global operation of the organization in which Chinese expatriates work. However, little research has been conducted on this topic. The aim of this study is to investigate how different English proficiency of Chinese expatriates impact their adjustment to overseas assignments. The author first provides background by drawing on two areas of literature: expatriate adjustment and English competence. Then a theoretical model is proposed to describe the relationships between Chinese expatriates' adjustment and English competence. From this model, a series of hypotheses are generated and tested.

## **Introduction**

With the rapid growth of the Chinese economy, research interest has shifted in the past decade from Western multinational companies (MNCs) in China to China-based MNCs. Such a change is described as "a huge step forward for both macro economy in China and individual Chinese companies" (Wang, 2004, p. 3). Extensive research on Western MNCs focused on expatriation, and findings suggest that expatriation failure due to maladjustment not only results in huge costs to the companies--for example, the cost of a failed expatriate assignment is \$50,000 to \$150,000--but also causes damage to corporate reputations and results in loss of business opportunities (Black & Mendenhall, 1990). However, such important issues are rarely discussed in domestic studies of Chinese MNCs. Current research in Chinese MNCs usually address macro-level issues such as corporate development trends, industry analysis, internationalization strategies, global operations, and the political environment (see, for example, Deng, 2004; Li, 2002; Liu & Shi, 2003; Wang, 2004; Wang, 2006). There studies offer in lack of practical guidelines or references for Chinese MNCs' overseas operations. Obviously, in-depth research in Chinese expatriate adjustment is urgently needed.

Similar to their Western counterparts, Chinese expatriates find the language barrier is one of the biggest negative factors in their adjustment (Goodall, Li, & Warner, 2006; Selmer, 2006), although the standard of English proficiency is rising in China (Selmer, 2006). The purpose of this study is to explore how Chinese expatriates' English competence affects their adjustment.

## **Review of Literature**

To investigate how English competence impacts Chinese expatriates' adjustment, the paper first reviews the multi-dimensionality of expatriate adjustment and how expatriation practices of Chinese MNCs influence the multiple facets of adjustment, and then discusses how English competence affects different dimensions of expatriate adjustment.

### **Expatriate Adjustment**

Expatriate adjustment has been widely recognized as a multi-dimensional process (Aycan, 1997; Black, 1988; Shaffer, Harrison, & Gilley, 1999). Further review of literature on expatriate studies shows that four variables are related to expatriate adjustment, which are job satisfaction, ability to cope with stress, interaction with headquarters, and relationship with locals.

Black and Gregerson (1991) defined expatriate adjustment as "the degree of psychological comfort with various aspects of a host country," (p. 463), in which the aspects referred to adjustment to the work roles, general adjustment to the living environment, and interacting with host country nationals. In Black's (1988) empirical study on American expatriates working in Japan, an 11-item scale was developed to measure these three aspects of adjustment. To measure work adjustment, respondents were asked to indicate how they felt with their jobs and responsibilities, and how they feel about workplace interacting with Japanese peers as well as subordinates. To measure the adjustment to everyday life, respondents were asked to report how they felt they had adjusted to general living conditions, the transportation, the food, shopping, the weather, and entertainment. To measure interaction adjustment, respondents were asked to indicate their degree of adjustment to working with Japanese individuals outside their company and their perceived adjustment to interacting with Japanese people in general everyday situations.

However, the three-aspect model seems inadequate to interpret Chinese expatriate adjustment. As for work adjustment, Black's (1988) findings do not disclose on what basis work adjustment could be achieved and do not relate the fit between work requirements and the needs of expatriates. Job satisfaction, which includes both task satisfaction and emotional satisfaction (Breiden, Mohr, & Mirza, 2006), could be a better variable to denote the outcome of the correspondence between an employee's work abilities and the requirements of a particular job.

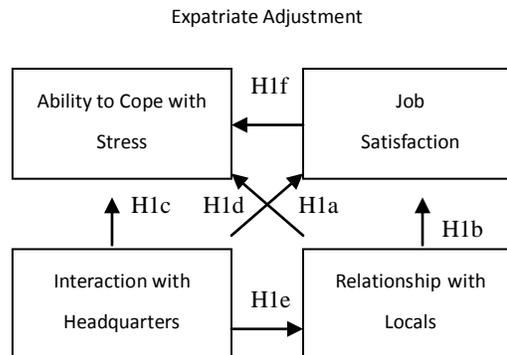
The measure of adjustment to the living environment is also challenged by the changing expatriation practice of Chinese MNCs. First, more and more Chinese expatriates nowadays take their overseas assignments based on projects, rather than undertaking long-term services in just one country. They have to adjust to the stress brought by a new environment rather than to specific living conditions. Second, previous research showed that a spouse's adjustment to the general living environment often is the factor that most affects the adjustment of Western expatriates (Aycan, 1997; Black & Gregersen, 1991; Caligiuri, Hyland, & Joshi, 1998; Harvey, 1997; Herleman, Britt, & Hashima, 2008; Takeuchi, Lepak, Marinova, & Yun, 2007). While a majority of Chinese expatriates do not take their families with them due to the cost, they may spend more time adjusting to the stress brought by family separation rather than by the general living environment. Third, expatriation is a stressful event because it involves substantial changes in social and professional life" (Aycan, 1997, p. 445). Expatriates' ability to cope with stress in general, therefore, should be a significant predictor for adjustment.

Another aspect that was neglected in Black's study was expatriates' interaction with headquarters. His research, together with previous similar research, assumed expatriate adjustment was an isolated process taking place in the host country. Actually, expatriates play multiple roles in the interplay between headquarters and local unit, i.e., "agent of direct control, agent of socializing, network builder, transfer of competence and knowledge, boundary spanner and language node" (Dowling, Festing, & Engle, 2008, p. 92-95). Obviously, fulfillment of all these activities requires effective interaction between expatriates and headquarters. Meanwhile, compared to their Western counterparts, most Chinese MNCs centralize resources and power in headquarters at initial stage of internationalization. Maintaining good interaction with headquarters would affect their adjustment to both work and life.

The problem with measures of interaction adjustment is that they assume that the way expatriates interact with local people who are not involved in their work will be different from the way the expatriates communicate with their host country colleagues. But the insider effect on the communication of Chinese makes a clear distinction between insiders (zijiren) and outsiders (wairen), and the distinction between the two helps Chinese position themselves in established hierarchical and role relationships (Gao, Ting-Toomey & Gudykunst, 1996). Host country nationals, whether in a workplace or not, are usually not considered as insiders, but rather as outside the Chinese expatriate community. Therefore, the expatriates' relationships with locals in general, not simply locals in non-work scenarios, need to be more precisely identified in order to measure how well the Chinese expatriates get along with local people.

In sum, four variables are identified to investigate the multi-faceted Chinese expatriate adjustment: job satisfaction, ability to cope with stress, interaction with headquarters, and relationships with locals. A model of Chinese expatriate adjustment is proposed as shown in Figure 1 and a set of hypotheses on inter-item correlations are generated to test the validity of the proposed adjustment model:

**Figure 1 : A Model of Chinese Expatriate Adjustment**



**H1a:** Chinese expatriates who have better interactions with headquarters have greater job satisfaction.

**H1b:** Chinese expatriates who have better relationships with locals have greater job satisfaction.

**H1c:** Chinese expatriates who have better interactions with headquarters have a greater ability to cope with stress.

**H1d:** Chinese expatriates who have better relationships with locals have a greater ability to cope with stress.

**H1e:** Chinese expatriates who have better interactions with headquarters have better relationships with locals.

**H1f:** Chinese expatriates who have higher job satisfaction have a greater ability to cope with stress.

## English Competence and Expatriate Adjustment

As a worldwide business language, English has been recognized as important to multinationals. Asuncion-Lande (1998) commented that English has developed its own momentum, aided by information technology and growing interactions in world economy that no other language has achieved similar status in the world. The International Research Foundation (TIRF, 2009) for English Language Education reported, “proficiency in English as a second or foreign language in particular, matters greatly in the global economy, and they matter to employers as well as to individuals” (p. 4). This increasing requirement of English competence poses salient challenges for Chinese MNCs (Chen, 2004; Ma, 2004). It could be inferred that English proficiency affects Chinese expatriate adjustment when they participate in international business activities.

**H2:** English competence is correlated with expatriate adjustment.

The single term of English competence, when examined closely, is not sufficient to describe the required English proficiency of expatriates. Expatriates with a good command of General English can deal with basic needs in their daily life, but they may find it difficult to participate in an in-depth business negotiation or profession-specific conversation. Such work-related English proficiency is related to workplace discourse.

Workplace discourse is categorized into genres. Bhatia (1993) proposed the concept of “genre” and defined genre as “a recognizable communicative event characterized by a set of communicative purpose(s) identified and mutually understood by the number of the professional or academic community in which it regularly occurs” (p. 13). Du-Babcock (2007) applied genre studies to re-interpret management work in her research into business and organizational communication. She noted the techno-structure and showed how service staff and middle-line managers develop distinctive professional genres that vary in form among the different organization types. She argued that language can be categorized as Language for General Purposes (LGP) and Language for Specific or Professional use (LSP). According to this categorization, English competence consists of competence in General English and in Professional English.

A related problem needs to be addressed. A Chinese expatriate may be able to articulate technical problems with fluent Professional English, but he or she may not be able to carry out effective small talk with clients at the dinner table to foster a personal relationship. Another term is needed to describe English in social situations that involve the exchange of ideas about history, economy, the political environment, and the culture in a host country. As a supplement to General English and Professional English, this research proposes the term “Social English” to distinguish General English in common social life and English use in high-end social interaction.

As General English proficiency builds Chinese expatriates’ confidence in communicating with host nationals (Xu, 2007) and facilitates their exposure to local culture, their anxiety and uncertainty could be reduced in the initial stage of their expatriation (Gudykunst, 2004).

***H2a:** Chinese expatriates with a higher level of General English proficiency have a higher ability to cope with stress.*

***H2b:** Chinese expatriates with a higher level of General English proficiency have better relationship with locals.*

Chinese expatriates with higher Professional English proficiency are expected to fulfill their tasks, avoid frustrations, and achieve higher job satisfaction. Professional English proficiency could also increase Chinese expatriates’ association with host nationals, both in the workplace and at social occasions.

**H2c:** Chinese expatriates with a higher level of Professional English proficiency have a higher degree of job satisfaction.

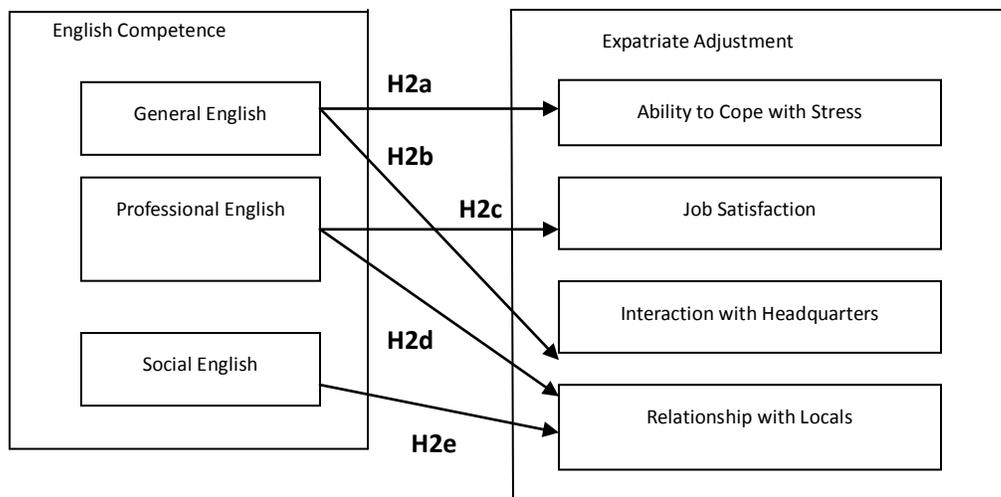
**H2d:** Chinese expatriates with a higher level of Professional English proficiency have better relationships with locals.

Social English could foster Chinese expatriates' relationships with host nationals, especially with their clients because extensive social interactions help build positive images of expatriates in the perceptions of host nationals, facilitate mutual understanding, and expand the personal link from workplace to household.

**H2e:** Chinese expatriates with a higher level of Social English proficiency have better relationships with locals.

The correlations proposed above are projected in Figure 2 as follows:

**Figure 2: A Model of English Competence's Impact on Chinese Expatriate Adjustment**



## Methods

### Research Design—Case Study Approach

This study sought to examine the impact of English competence on expatriate adjustment. A case study approach was adopted, and data was collected from a large China-based multinational company for the following reasons. First, a majority of Chinese MNCs follow a self-development strategy in overseas operations instead of entering into mergers or acquisitions, but little empirical research has been

conducted on their expatriates' adjustment. Second, previous research into Chinese expatriates has usually been based on a sample from a variety of industries, and industry-specific features may have been neglected. Individual companies may find it is not easy to apply general research findings to their own settings. In-depth investigation within a case company helps extend an understanding from a micro-perspective. Third, the subject Chinese multinational company is one of the most successful Chinese companies in terms of internationalization, with rich data about expatriation practices. The company started its international business in the mid-1990s. Today, the company does business in over 150 countries with approximately 6,000 employees working in the overseas market. Over 60 percent of the international employees are local.

A quantitative research method was used. Data on informants' perceptions of overseas adjustment and English competence were collected through a questionnaire survey, and follow-up interviews were completed based on the survey results to further the researcher's understanding of their responses.

To avoid a low rate of response, the researcher took the advice given by the company and conducted on-site surveys with assistance from related departments. In the beginning of 2009, during the peak season when a large number of Chinese expatriates returned home for meetings, training, and visa renewal; the researcher distributed and collected 190 questionnaires within eight weeks. Missing items that were left blank were processed as missing cases. Code numbers were assigned to surveys in order to match the expatriate surveys to interviewees upon receipt of the completed survey.

### **Sample**

The survey sample of expatriates was selected at random. The sample of interviewees came mainly from informants participating in the survey. When collecting data, the researcher browsed the feedback responses quickly and solicited explanations for unusual responses. In total, about 20 informants were interviewed briefly based on their on-site questionnaire responses.

### **Measures**

The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part measured the four dimensions of cultural adjustment, which included job satisfaction, ability to cope with stress, interaction with headquarters, and relationships with locals. Subjects indicated how well adjusted they felt by using a 4-point Likert scale with "1=strongly disagree" and "4=strongly agree." The even-numbered scale was adopted to force Chinese participants to give a clear and specific judgment (Krosnick & Fabrigar, 1997). The second part adopted two methods to measure English competence of Chinese expatriates. One was to collect self-reported data on their proficiency with General English, Professional English, and Social English. The other was to measure Chinese expatriates' attitude strength on importance of General, Professional, and Social English proficiency to their adjustment (Krosnick & Fabrigar, 1997).

## Data Analysis

This study analyzed the reliability of the scores measured in the questionnaire. Cronbach's coefficient alpha of expatriate adjustment was .702, and the alpha of English competence, measured in two sets of questions, was .890 and .795, respectively. The measure with higher alpha was adopted. Therefore, English competence was measured based on self-reported proficiency in General, Professional, and Social English. A Pearson Correlation Coefficient was also performed to test the hypotheses 1a-1f and 2a-2e.

## Results

Among the 190 respondents, 60.5 percent worked in countries where English is not spoken as an official language; 90 percent held professional or technical positions in HR, financial, administration, IT, engineering, sales & marketing, and logistics, and 10 percent held managerial positions on a country level or regional level; 57.5 percent had worked for more than two years on their overseas assignments, which indicated above half of the respondents should have given full performance (Du-Babcock, 2000).

Hypotheses 1a-1f examined the interaction among four predictors of expatriate adjustment. Pearson correlation coefficients were completed among job satisfaction, ability to cope with stress, interaction with headquarters, and relationship with locals. The results of the correlation analysis presented in Table 1 show that all the correlations were significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). To be specific, ability to cope with stress (AS) was positively correlated to their job satisfaction (JS) with moderate strength; interaction with headquarters was positively correlated to both job satisfaction and ability to cope with stress but with limited strength. Similar correlations were found between relationship with locals (RL) and job satisfaction, ability to cope with stress, and interaction with headquarters (IH). In general, support was found for H1a-1f.

**Table 1. Correlation Matrix of Expatriate Adjustment**

Variables	JS	AS	I H	R L
Job Satisfaction (J.S.)	1			
Ability to Cope with Stress (A.S.)	.518**			
Interaction with Headquarters (I.H.)	.299**	.390**		
Relationship with Locals (R.L.)	.344**	.363**	.392**	1

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

Hypothesis 2 examined how English competence affects expatriate adjustment. Inter-item correlations of each independent variable were tested. The high positive correlations supported the construction of the independent variable of "English competence" as shown in Table 2. General English (GE) proficiency was

strongly correlated to both Professional English (PE) proficiency and Social English (SE) proficiency; Professional English proficiency was also strongly correlated to Social English proficiency.

**Table 2. Inter-item Correlations of “English Competence”**

	GE	PE	SE
General English (G.E.)	1		.
Professional English (P.E.)	.844**	1	
Social English (S.E.)	.647**	.726**	1

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

The results showed that English competence was significantly correlated to expatriate adjustment at the .05 level as illustrated in Table 3. There lies a correlation between Expatriate Adjustment and English Competence. Therefore, hypothesis 2 was fully supported although the correlation was not very high.

**Table 3. Correlation Matrix of Independent Variables and Dependent Variables**

	EA	Eng. Comp.
Expatriate Adjustment (EA)	1	.179*
English Competence (Eng. Comp.)	.179*	1

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

The correlations between the three types of English proficiency and expatriate adjustment are shown in Table 4. General English proficiency was positively correlated to ability to cope with stress (AS), interaction with headquarters (IH), and relationship with locals (RL). Professional English proficiency was found positively correlated to interaction with headquarters (IH) and relationship with locals (RL). Social English was just positively correlated to relationship with locals (RL). It was noticed that the correlations were significant but not very strong, which confirmed the complexity of adjustment process and indicated that other factors co-function with English competence.

**Table 4. Correlations between Sub-variables of English Competence and Expatriate Adjustment**

	JS	AS	IH	RL
General English	.122	.174*	.170*	.184*
Professional English	.083	.130	.159*	.157*
Social English	-.037	.052	.078	.157*

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

## Discussion

The results of this study lend some support to the theoretical argument that expatriate adjustment is a multi-faceted process and closely related to headquarters' intervention. This is further supported by the qualitative data from the interviews with informants participating in the questionnaire survey. According to the informants, major factors that affect interaction between headquarters and subsidiaries are time differences, English competence, and cultural awareness of interface staff at headquarters. Time differences lead to delayed responses, prolonged working hours, and low communication efficiency, which result in low job satisfaction and increased stress. The lack of English proficiency of the people at the quarters blocks direct information flow to and from foreign employees, making them underperform; language barriers also complicate coordination and obstructs knowledge transfer (Welch & Welch, 2007), and bring an extra translation burden to Chinese expatriates. As a result, interaction with headquarters becomes important for Chinese expatriates to work effectively with their local colleagues. Insufficient cultural awareness of headquarters often puts expatriates in a stressful dilemma between following standard policies and conforming to local practices. Effective negotiations may enable expatriates to deal with cultural-specific issues with more alternatives. In addition, frequent contact with headquarters helps relieve expatriates' loneliness, increase the chances of business trips back to China to be with their families, and create more opportunities to find suitable positions after they repatriate.

Concerning the impact of English competence on Chinese expatriate adjustment, as hypothesized, General English proficiency was correlated to Chinese expatriates' ability to cope with stress and develop relationships with locals. However, it is strange that General English proficiency was also significantly correlated to interaction with headquarters. Such a correlation perhaps suggests that expatriates with higher General English proficiency tend to have good relationships with locals and function as an effective bridge between the parent company and its subsidiaries. While the hypothesized correlation between Professional English proficiency and relationships with local staff was accepted, Professional English proficiency was not correlated with job satisfaction but was significantly correlated to interaction with headquarters. Such results may indicate that expatriates with a higher proficiency of Professional English possess a higher level of field knowledge, which forms an advantage in petitioning headquarters for support.

Meanwhile, job satisfaction is likely affected by factors other than English. For example, the company expatriation policies and the individual expatriate's personal traits quite possibly affect expatriates' satisfaction with their work. Social English proficiency was found to be significantly correlated to expatriate adjustment. The inter-item correlations show that proposed Social English functions as a valid component of English competence. Surprisingly, among the three competences, General English acts as the most important one as it is significantly correlates to three predictors of adjustment. A possible explanation might be that General English can be applied to more occasions and affect expatriate adjustment more visibly.

Although expatriate adjustment has been widely researched, this study reveals that there still exists a need for more empirical research into language related factors that facilitate or impede expatriate

adjustment. This could also find support in recent studies in international business (see, for example, Harzing & Noorderhaven, 2008; Selmer, 2006; Thomas, 2008; Welch & Welch, 2007). In this study, different English competence was found to be positively correlated with expatriate adjustment, which could have important implication for competency identification and development when selecting and training expatriates in the company, where expatriates are usually selected based on their technical ability or company tenure.

Second, this research unearthed the involvement of headquarters in Chinese expatriate adjustment to overseas assignment. The significant correlation between interaction with headquarters and expatriate adjustment implies that improvement in organizational communication could possibly facilitate expatriate adjustment. Expatriate adjustment should not be regarded as only an individual action, but a process of organizational operation as well.

### **Limitations**

A few limitations to this study should be considered. First, the use of self-reported data to measure adjustment and English competence may be moderated by informants' psychological reaction. Some informants may associate their answers with the company's appraisal of them, and therefore they may be reluctant to give objective information. Second, there were few samples from the sales group, and yet this population has the most exposure to local culture over expatriates in other positions. For future research, a test is recommended to find out whether similar results could be obtained after supplemental data on sales expatriates is added to the current database. Lack of pre-sales data may result in a weaker correlation between English competence and their adjustment as this group of people tends to be more aware of the influence of language in international business.

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