CASE STUDY: LILING

Liling has been studying for an MSc in the Department of Education. She is in her early 20s and came directly to Oxford from an undergraduate degree in English Language and Literature in her native China.

Liling had already studied general linguistics as part of her first degree, and the MSc course offered her the opportunity to apply linguistics to education, as she was considering becoming a teacher. She was attracted to Oxford in part because of its reputation: "It is with no doubt one of the most famous universities in the world and it has been my dreamland since childhood. […] I think one year of studying education here will enable [me] to enrich myself and fulfil my theoretical experience." She is now studying for a PhD in English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics at another university in the UK.

Liling's case study gives an insight into the challenges faced – and overcome – by an overseas student for whom English is a second language and who has had to adapt to a different educational culture from the one with which she was familiar. It also shows the importance of technology for keeping in touch with her family and friends and, conversely, the barriers that it can raise in this respect.

Adapting to a different educational system

The main differences between Liling's previous university in China and Oxford were the greater extent of interaction and the use of PowerPoint as a teaching and learning aid on the Oxford course:

> "In the previous university, we usually had many students sitting in a classroom and we did nothing but listened to the teacher talking for the whole class. There are more interactions in Oxford. Here the teachers used a lot of techniques to aid the sessions, such as PowerPoint or videos."

However, she recognised that PowerPoint is not necessarily conducive to learning, as she was less likely to make notes during a lecture if she already had a handout of the PowerPoint slides.

The difference between the two systems was one of the reasons why Liling found it difficult to take an active part in discussions:

> "If you want to say something you just say it. It's very free, the atmosphere in the class. But you know, sometimes I think maybe because it's so different from the way I was having class before so I don't tend to ask just very interactively if I don't get the meaning. It's just a habit that I prefer to maybe write it down and sort it out by myself or ask the other students later."

She was also unused to regulating her own learning. Even though she recognised at the start that she would need to work hard (she had estimated that she would need to work more than 20 hours a week in addition to the actual classes), Liling found the course "more demanding as well as difficult to follow. It requires a lot of autonomy." In the early part of the course, Liling didn't have a particular strategy for managing her learning, although she would reflect on her studies in her private journal. Moreover, on top of her studies she also took on a part-time job, working between 4 and 8 hours a week teaching Mandarin to British adults, as she felt that the teaching experience would be useful for the future.

Liling began to adopt a more organised approach to her learning after she realised that she had spent two weeks without doing anything very productive. So she divided her work into manageable chunks: "I made plans for myself everyday. I set [a] certain amount of work that must be done within some time. In general, I made my workload quite organised." She also gave up some of her social activities in order to have time to study. Even so, she

confessed that she could get to the end of the day without having done everything that she intended, and therefore often worked late into the night.

All in all, Liling's year in Oxford had been different – though not in the way she had expected – and ultimately satisfying: "it's better and it's more challenging and demanding than I thought. I thought it would be completely different but still it was so different."

Living with two languages

Liling had been learning English from her mother (a university teacher of English) since the age of two, but even so learning a language in one country is very different from learning *in* that language in another. The MSc course has a large number of students for whom English is a second language; nevertheless, discussions often proceeded at the pace of the native speakers and Liling found it hard to follow them at first:

> "On my first day, I felt totally disoriented and it was difficult to join their discussion sometimes. I still find it's quite difficult, so the… all the taught modules have finished but if now you ask me to attend on a course again I feel like maybe I still cannot just act very actively in the class. And because they… it's my second language and there are quite a few native speakers there and it's different, you know, they think so fast and they just respond so fast and just even before I have reacted what happened. And they have already moved on to another topic. So sometimes I cannot get their answers."

When writing, Liling would think in either English or Chinese, depending on the complexity of the cognitive task:

> "…if I'm doing a quite easy part like the methodology or just reporting the results, I think I think in English. But when it comes to some difficult parts like I need to read a lot of articles to construct the literature review, or when I was doing my nine assignments[1] before, I had to admit that there are some times I am thinking in Chinese and translate."

Although Liling used online bilingual dictionaries, the definitions they offered were sometimes too simplistic for her purposes, and so she would look up Wikipedia to learn the broader context in which a word can be used: "From Wikipedia you can know many… just many things behind these words like its history or other words related to it."

Liling's bilingual life was reflected in part in her use of digital technologies. She was at home using both English and Chinese mobile phones. Indeed, before she came to Oxford she would sometimes set the menus to display in English "because at that time I thought it was cool." Over here, she had an English-language mobile phone and used it to text both her English and her Chinese friends in Oxford in English. When she went back to China to do the field work for her dissertation, she took the English phone with her. However, this meant she could not text her father or her friends very easily as the phone did not provide the necessary support for pinyin "tones":

> "I can text English with my mother because she's an English teacher. And… but my father, no I can't and sometimes I text him in pinyin and […] he had to spend a lot of time decoding it because pinyin, without the tones it's sometimes hard to understand. And all my friends are complaining to me so I had to change the phone when I was in China."

The need to know pinyin (i.e. Chinese characters rendered in the Latin alphabet) in order to use a mobile phone or computer has created a particular kind of "digital divide" in China. Typing pinyin is a laborious process that involves typing first the desired combination of

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[1] The taught part of Liling's course was assessed by four written assignments at the end of each of the first two terms; the ninth assignment was the assessment of an optional English-language teaching module. In addition, there was a formative exercise undertaken during the first term so that students could receive feedback and guidance on their approach to writing in an academic style. Therefore altogether a student have to write 10 assignments if he/she chooses the optional module too.

letters and then selecting the "tone" that distinguishes that particular combination from other phrases (hence Liling's problems attempting to communicate in pinyin on her English phone). There are different software tools for typing in pinyin, such as Google Pinyin, which Liling prefers to use most of the time. However she has used other typing tools too, such as Sogou (a Chinese tool). To type Chinese in Microsoft Word, she has to switch the typing tool from English to Chinese (either Google Pinyin or Sogou) and then start to type. Nowadays – in the digital age – children learn pinyin at primary school, but older people do not necessarily know it: "people who [were born] after 70s I think they have no problem in learning this, but before that for those who were not so very well educated […] it's like a gap there."

In contrast to Liling's adeptness in switching between languages in mobile telephony, her life in Windows on her laptop was more monolingual. Liling was more comfortable with the Chinese-language interface, to the extent that she found the English interface quite alien:

> "I am so bad at the English version. When I went to my classmate – a British person – he just ask me to check on his laptop, he had some problems with the printing machine. And when I looked at his I knew nothing. I even don't know the control panel."

As a consequence, she rarely used the computers in the Department of Education: "Sometimes I just use it for renewing the books on the [online library catalogue] and look for some articles there. But it is the same, I just use the Internet Explorer, it's the same as… pretty much the same." The familiarity of the Microsoft icons was thus sufficient for her to find her way around the browser.

The importance of friends and family

A key theme of Liling's contributions is the importance of relationships, and the different ways in which she shared her experiences with her friends and family in China.

Keeping in touch

Keeping in frequent touch was important both to Liling and to her family and friends: "You know I talk to my mother every day. If there is one day that she didn't get any message from me should would freak out I think." Her mother was more concerned to keep in touch than she was when Liling was at university in Shanghai, so while Liling was in Oxford she took care to let her mother know if she was going away and would not be able to email or speak to her online:

> "…if I just go to London or go to other cities and I tell her in advance that I will not be online tomorrow or the day after tomorrow […] So I would tell her; otherwise, she would just call me. And I can still send these international messages to her on my mobile phone. So yeah, when she cannot get in touch with me she will text me or call my mobile phone here."

To communicate with her family, Liling used the voice chat in MSN to speak to her family. She also used Skype either to send short messages or to speak with them directly. Liling also used a blog in Windows Live Space to keep her friends informed of her activities, writing in it every couple of weeks or so. However, they thought she should write more often!

While Liling was in China doing her fieldwork in May 2008 it suddenly became important for her British friends to get in touch wither her. Although the catastrophic earthquake struck in Sichuan province, far away from Shanghai, her supervisor and English friends still sent anxious emails:

> "during that few days I was so busy just watching the news on TV I forgot to check my mailbox, and when I opened it one day – oh my gosh, so many mails, and my supervisor was so worried, tell me, tell me, where are you?"

The internet is thus a key lifeline to the outside world, and Liling feels uneasy when she doesn't have a connection for any period of time:

"I'm kind of an internet maniac because I don't feel safe if I can't get online. […] I moved three times since I came here and on the first night I really cannot get the internet at first. And then I just feel so empty."

She likes to be connected even if she doesn't actually want to communicate with anyone:

"But I don't want to just chat online with people, sometimes I… when I'm on MSN I'm still appearing offline. But I don't chat, and sometimes I'm just writing assignments or the dissertation I don't just open a web page or something. But it just makes me feel secure when I'm online."

Real friends, fake friends and Facebook

Liling admitted that she isn't someone who likes to socialise, but she clearly places a high value on her friendships and has no time for superficiality, either in real life or online:

"I remember once when one of my classmates […] said I don't need fake friends. I don't need those people that you gather together once and maybe for formal dinner or for an activity in college and you talk all the night, but the next morning when you woke up you cannot remember his or her name. […] I think she is right because I have got my own friends. I've got my friends back in China and I've got some friends in London and other cities because they were my former classmates. And I also have one or two quite close friends here. I think that's enough. I don't want to be in a large crowd of people that they just do everything together. It's very time consuming."

In contrast, a number of the other Chinese students had been absorbed into the social "in crowd:"

"Most of my classmates they do this all the time. And many are like Chinese students who are maybe not… were not very sociable before they began to be integrated into this type of other stuff. But gradually I felt that it would be a threat to me."

In this light, Liling's perspective on Facebook is thought-provoking. She signed up on the encouragement of her fellow students (the cohort had a Facebook group), but considered it a waste of time and a threat to one's privacy:

"It is kind of boring and meaningless to play games or send gifts on Facebook. I have an account but I seldom sign in. […] There is no privacy there which I hate. People waste so much time on it and I don't see how it improves my social life."

Moreover:

"…if they are your real friends you would have their email address, you would have them on MSN, you would have their mobile numbers. You have loads of ways to contact them. I don't know why they want to leave messages on the Funwall on Facebook that you want other people to see your message."

She really only used Facebook to look at news and photos uploaded there by other students on her course but she really didn't like other people putting photos of herself on Facebook and tag them with her name, feeling that it deprived her of control of her online identity.

It was part of Liling's overall sense of achievement that she had got through the course without compromising the integrity of her personality: she had resisted any pressure to conform socially and had remained true to herself: "yes, I'm glad that I did this, yes, without changing myself, without just making myself and trying to be in that kind of circle."

Life on the laptop

As with other students in the Thema project, Liling's laptop was very much an extension of herself: "I can't live without it, even though it's very old." She keeps it on all the time, even when she is not using it: "I think I spend so much time on it I even don't switch off when I'm sleeping. I think just as long as I am in my room I am sitting in front of the computer."

However, for security reasons she kept her laptop in her room while she was living in Oxford and used the University's computers during the day.

The range of tools on Liling's laptop clearly showed how extensively it is integrated into her daily activities. She showed us, for example, a money-management program, software for sending texts to the mobile phones of her friends in China, a Chinese website for watching US and British TV programmes and a Chinese program (roughly translated as "Image Magician") similar to Photoshop for modifying pictures. She shares her photos with her friends on Picasa and on her blog. Other tools included Google Calendar and other Google desktop gadgets (including clock, weather and news) and a PDF conversion utility. She had also recently installed MS Outlook on her computer and was using its online calendar and the email client to read messages sent to her personal email address.

Even though she was clearly proficient at finding and downloading useful tools from the Web, Liling was very modest about her skills on the computer:

> "I think it's just very basic the things, I think everybody is using this. I am not that… if you asked me to update a web page I don't know, and I'm not a proficient Excel user. […] When looking for a job they say you must be very good at Excel, I say oh God no; and can you maintain a web page, no I can't, I don't know how to create a web page. I use these things that I think are quite basic."

There was a distinction between Liling's skilled personal use of digital technology and the digital technologies that she needed for her course: principally, the SPSS statistical analysis package. She had administered paper-based questionnaires to the students participating in her research project, and typing all their responses into the computer was only the first step. She was able to get guidance on what types of tests to perform from her supervisor, but SPSS added another layer of complexity. Fortunately, the department had asked DPhil students to run training sessions in the use of SPSS for the MSc students, and at the time of her interview Liling was looking forward to attending one of these.