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**ENGLISH PROFICIENCY OVER FOUR YEARS OF
UNIVERSITY STUDY**

ABSTRACT

There is an often expressed perception that the English abilities of CUHK undergraduates decline over the years of university study. To investigate whether this perception is in fact (1) widespread and pervasive and (2) congruent with the facts, a cohort of 982 students were surveyed on their language perceptions. Additionally, 66 third-year undergraduates were selected to resit the same English Placement Test they had taken three years earlier to verify or discount the perceptions. Results of the perception survey indicated that 63.5% of the undergraduates felt that their English abilities declined or remained the same during their time at CUHK mainly because of lack of use. However, a comparison of assessment results from the first year and third year of the sample indicated significant improvement in writing ability and note-taking, while the ability to perform on a standard reading comprehension test did not decline but remained consistent with their performance on entering university. These results demonstrate the importance of nurturing a positive attitude towards English study and use at university as a means of warding off the temptation to linguistic apathy, stagnation, and discouragement. This can be achieved by strengthening English study and use as a natural part of the institutional culture of the University.