Looking back – An increasing number of students pursues an academic degree in a foreign language. In the UK, 15% of undergraduates and 74% of taught postgraduates speak English as a foreign language, with the majority coming from China (over 87,000 in 2013-14). An implicit assumption is that their English is good enough, or would improve sufficiently over the course of their studies, so they can fulfil their academic potential. Yet, research suggests that international students achieve fewer good degrees than home students do (Morrison et al, 2005), with Chinese students particularly vulnerable (Iannelli & Huang, 2014).

Aim – This study examined how language abilities of newly-arrived Chinese students at a UK university impact on the development of two key academic skills – reading comprehension and text writing – as well as on the end-of-year academic results.

Method – Participants (65 Chinese and 65 English students matched on non-verbal IQ) were tested at the beginning (Time 1) and at the end of the academic year (Time 2). Phonological awareness, rate of articulation, vocabulary (productive and receptive), reading speed and comprehension and writing skills in English were assessed at both points.

Results – Chinese students had weaker reading comprehension, oral and written language skills on starting University. Although their literacy and language showed some improvement over time, the performance gap between them and the English students remained. Moreover, their verbal ability measures at Time 1 were a significant predictor of their key academic skills (reading, writing) at Time 2; their vocabulary and writing at Time 1 were significant predictors of their end-of-year academic success.

Looking forward – We consider challenges of pursuing an academic degree in an L2, and how linguistic research can inform university policies and strategies to ensure that educational experience and outcomes of L2 students are not compromised.

Keywords: reading comprehension, writing, academic success, higher education, international students.