

## Case Study of a Foreign Language Training Centre in P. R. China

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### Abstract

English as a second language (ESL) training in China has never been as marketable as it is today, especially in the last five years with China's entry into the WTO and its successful bid for the 2008 Olympic Games to be held in Beijing. An examination of ESL performance in China is therefore very timely. Specifically it is useful to discover whether the original intention of the government in adjusting from knowledge-based English learning to communicative ability-oriented English training has been achieved by encouraging the establishment of nationwide non-government foreign language training entities across the country. In this study a typical foreign language training centre in a north-eastern Chinese city was investigated and analysed in the form of case study.

**Keywords:** EFL, China, communicative, knowledge-based

### Introduction

This paper begins with an introduction and description of the background of a foreign language training centre. The discussion will continue with class observations made of the practice of Communicative English. The paper will discuss interviews with four participants at the centre in the hope of exploring some issues and insights. Finally, the discussions will examine the practice in this non-government English training centre.

The centre was established in September 2003 in the capital of a province in the northeast part of China. Although the centre claimed to offer trainings of many foreign languages, but only English had been taught there. At the time it was investigated, the centre had around four hundred and three (403) students and eight (8) staff members including four (4) full-time and four (4) part-time teachers. Classes were held in the evenings or on weekends as the students of the centre, aged in the range from six to sixteen, had to attend kindergarten, primary or middle school in the daytime. The young students had diverse levels of English proficiency due to years of their engagement in learning English. Classes were arranged by English level rather than age. Most of the teachers held a diploma of English, graduating not from a course of education or teaching at a university but from a self-learning examination course which is designed for those failing to pass the Chinese National Examination for entry to university. There were also two part-time foreign English teachers. One was from Australia, a 20-year-old university student with no teaching qualification and experience, and the other was an American in his fifties, with many years teaching experience in China.

Textbooks used in the language centre were intended for Communicative English training. These included the Younger Learner Cambridge English, Singapore English for Younger Learners, Oxford English for School Students and New Concept English: all texts that were used very prevalently in English training organisations in China. These books contained more English conversations, and reading and listening comprehension, but less grammar knowledge than textbooks used before the nineteen nineties.

## Background

In 2001, China's entry into the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the successful bid to host the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games not only merged China further into the world economy, but also instigated Chinese nationals' enthusiasm to learn English. In 2001, the Minister of Education of PRC promulgated the 'Fundamental Education Curriculum Reform Scheme' (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2001), stating that the overall goal of English courses in the fundamental education phase was to develop student's communicative ability in English. Thereafter, from kindergarten-aged children to university students, communicative ability-oriented English learning has been a hot topic and students have actively engaged themselves in all kinds of extra-curricular English classes and activities, believing that those unable to speak good English would not have good prospects. English is valued as almost all primary and secondary school students take part in English training classes out of school. Under such circumstances, English or foreign language training centres and schools in China increased at a rapid pace. By May 2005 Shenyang, the capital city of Northeast China with a population of 7.2 million, had over 759 foreign language training entities of all types (SYN, 2005). A foreign language training centre from this city was chosen for the study.

Prior to discussing the research framework of the paper, it is necessary to explain the concepts of knowledge-based English training and communicative ability-oriented English training. Knowledge-based training refers to students bringing all their energy to bear on gaining high marks, or achieving good performance evaluated by the school, with a bias in favour of paper tests. Communicative ability-oriented English training or Communicative English (Anand & Khanna, 2005) focuses on the improvement of the integrated ability of English in terms of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

## Research framework

This study was conducted using the case study approach. 'The case study is rather a portmanteau term but typically involves the observation of an individual unit, e.g. a student, a delinquent clique, a family group, a class, a school, a community, an event or even an entire culture' (Burns, 1994 p312). Abramson (Abramson, 1992) further pointed out that the case study was the preferred strategy when 'how', 'why' or 'what' questions were being asked, or when the investigator had little control over events, or when the focus was on a contemporary phenomenon within a real life context. In brief, the case study allows an investigation to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real life events. The main techniques of case study are observation, interviewing and document analysis (Gillham, 2000).

A combination of classroom observation and interview was adopted in this study. The former was used to observe four classes in the language centre to investigate a plethora of features of the classroom context, as an essential and key component in understanding classroom processes and in unravelling their complexities (Allwright, 1988). Interviews with four participants including a principal, a teacher, a parent and a student were adopted as a verbal interchange to elicit information, opinions and insights (Burns, 1994). In this study, a non-participant observation was used to prevent any potential for any bias from the investigator becoming too closely involved and losing detachment. This research also used the unstructured or open-ended form of interview, so that the respondent was more of an informant than a respondent in order to explore his or her mind for insights.

In this study, there are four main components in the research design. To begin with the research question: whether English communicative ability-oriented training or Communicative English had been successfully conducted as a replacement for knowledge-based English learning by encouraging the establishment of more foreign training schools or centres by the Chinese government in communities in China? Secondly, the aim of this study was to examine the extent to which communicative ability-oriented training could improve students' English in this foreign training centre within the current English evaluation systems of China. Thirdly, participation: the study had around eighty students aged from eight to twelve involved in four classroom observations, and four interviewees including a principal, a teacher, a parent and a student engaged in four interviews in September, 2006 in a capital city of north-eastern China. Lastly, some discussions were added by linking evidence or data from classroom observation and interviews to the research question and proposition for interpreting findings.

## Classroom observation

There are many ways in which researchers approach and use classroom observation and indeed a variety of perceptions of what classroom observation actually entails (Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Labov, 1972c). The classroom observation in this study was designed simply to identify the ways in which the language centre put the communicative ability-oriented English learning into practice. The classroom observation was carried out in four classes which were randomly chosen from twenty. 'A random sample will give each of the individuals concerned an equal chance of being selected. (Bell, 1999 p.126)' In the centre, there were guiding principles for teaching to ensure a consistent teaching style designed for Communicative English was implemented across the board. To minimise the variations between these classes and to maximise the identification of some consistent teaching methods, the classroom observation recorded four different classes via a protocol and then recordings were compared to identify an identical teaching procedure.

Four class observations turned out to form a fairly clear picture of how the practice of Communicative English was conducted in the English language centre. From the observations, it was found that each class had 90 minutes class including 10 minutes break in between, together with extra 10 minutes immediately before class. The general procedure of the four classes was identified as follows:

- 10 minutes for English Corner English Practice before class, guided by the teacher;
- 15 minutes for free speech, in which one student gave a 10 minute presentation, together with 5 minutes for answering questions others come up with. No recitation was allowed in the presentation. The topic stemmed from what he or she had learned in the last class. The presentation could be a short story or an expository article, in which three vocabularies were required to use and new sentence structures were also encouraged to apply. In question-answering times, students in the audience were encouraged to ask any questions about the topic they did not understand or did not agree with;
- 5 minute's quiz of vocabulary and sentence-making;
- Homework comments;
- The introduction of new knowledge by relating it to prior knowledge and practice. Sometimes, cultural issues of English were also involved;
- The final 5 minutes was devoted to reading the vocabulary for familiarity with pronunciations;
- Assignments were made around writing one line for each new word and a sentence-making with it.

From the class procedure, it can be seen that a good part of time in class, about thirty out of eighty minutes including English corner, was allocated to practising spoken English. It was evident that the language centre had a strong intention and spent a lot of time in providing Communicative English training, compared with classes in government schools in China where, it is all known, that there was little English oral practice conducted in class. It was thus concluded that comparatively Communicative English training was used extensively in this English language centre.

## Interview

This study adopted the unstructured interview to allow the participants to talk freely in order to get insights and opinions about Communicative English from the participants. The unstructured interview, described as 'a free-flown conversation' (Burns, 2000 p. 425), is an interview without fixed questions which means that different information is collected from different people with open-ended questions. There is always the danger of bias creeping into interviews, largely because, as Sellitz *et al.* (1962) point out, 'interviewers are human beings and not machines', and their manner may have an effect on the respondents. Therefore, the way questions were put was given particular attention in this case study. Direct questions were minimised and nondirective probes were used in this study in order to avoid this type of bias, e.g. 'What do you think about Communicative English as principal?' 'What happened next?' Four people chosen to be interviewed were the principal, a teacher, a parent and a student.

In processing the qualitative data from the interviews, the bottom-up approach was adopted in which analysis proceeds from raw materials to theories. A bottom-up approach assumes that a topic is designed from the individual evidence topics up through to the top-level topics that will be defined. This approach starts with data or evidence from interviews containing a good representative sample of the words or phrases related to the research aim, and then these words are grouped by successively higher classifications (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2003). In this process, three issues emerged from the interviews pertaining to the study topic: dubious quality teaching, conflicting motivation, and slow-moving teaching schedule. In what follows, these issues were presented with direct quotations from the interviewees.

### Dubious quality teaching

Among all the key factors for maintaining quality teaching in school, generally the quality teaching is always regarded as most important. By interviewing a principal and a parent, it was soon realized that teaching quality was just what caused the biggest problem in the centre. As we saw in the introduction, almost all the teachers were very young, aging from twenty to thirty, and had not received university English or education training. The teachers in the centre were generally unable to be accepted by government schools in which teachers' registration was required, as teachers with university degree of English were more likely to work in government schools. Therefore, it is almost the fact that teaching in an English language centre or school was not regarded as a decent job in China. In fact, English language centers or schools were categorized in the private sector, most of which operated on a small scale. As a result, the teaching quality in such a language centre is quite dubious. In addition, the stability of a teaching team is also frustrating, as a teacher would leave once he or she had found a decent job in other sectors or had a chance to go back to university for further education. This in return considerably affects the morale of teachers and teaching quality. As the principal being interviewed said:

*What most bothers me was about teachers. I can hardly find good teachers...even though I find one with great painstaking, it is also hard to keep her/him to stay long.*

This was evidenced by a parent's words:

*I don't care about English schools, because there are so many of them in the city. I just care about teachers. If I find a good English teacher, I will take my child to him/her. But it is very hard to find a good teacher.*

The principal expressed another concern about teachers:

*If an individual teacher gains some reputation for teaching excellence among students and their parents, I soon have to face a risk of losing them. Because it quite often happens that they will leave me and operate his or her classes by making money directly from students, instead of earning salary from me...and also I am so worried about providing training to teachers in the centre in case one day they leave when they think they are good enough.*

English native speaker teachers were found to be very helpful in providing Communicative English training in the interviews. A teacher told me:

*In general, we Chinese English teachers teach grammar and words and we ask foreign teachers to practice them with our students. Foreign teachers, they are very helpful and children are very active to talk with them.*

A boy student said:

*It's so exciting to talk with foreigners. I love talking English with foreign teachers*

Notwithstanding, it was also found that some English native speakers were not very desirable. Problems emerged from a lack of relevant teaching skills and a strong accent. The principal recalled:

*We even had a New Zealander in his fifties. He said he taught English to an old Chinese lady in New Zealand. But when speaking English, he had a strong accent and could not help talking too fast for students to understand. When students asked him to spell words he used, he couldn't make it...some English natives come here without teacher's qualifications of their own countries won't work well. But for us, finding good Chinese English teachers is hard, not to speak of native English teachers.*

## Conflicting motivation

'Motivation is an internal state or condition (sometimes described as a need, desire, or want) that serves to activate or energize behavior and give it direction' (Kleinginna & Kleinginna, 1981a). Motivation is believed to be involved in the performance of all learned responses, that is, a learned behavior will not occur unless it is energized. It is widely recognized that motives greatly influence the learning outcomes of students (OECD, 2003). As reflected in interviews with the principal and the parent whose views on English Learning played a key role in guiding children, the motives of the parent and students appeared to conflict: on the one hand, they realized that English was a tool of communication, requiring an ability to communicate that could be only mastered by practice; on the other hand, they wanted high marks in school which were always upheld in knowledge-based testing systems in China. Under the educational circumstances of China, these two motives seemed to be incompatible.

The principal expressed his awkwardness about this concern:

*We focus on English oral practice, so there are always not many words written on the blackboard, as we spend most of class on oral practice. But some parents prefer the way of writing one blackboardful of words after another by a teacher, and then they feel their children can get what they pay for. But they don't know if their children can't practise them and they will forget them.*

The parent also made a comment on this issue:

*I know good oral English is good, but I need high marks in school much more. It is because my child needs to go to a good high school and later good university in the future, those ask high marks.*

## Slow-moving teaching schedule

With a focus on practising Communicative English, the centre allocated more time to oral English practice, compared to government schools, which led to a slow-down for its teaching schedule. A teaching schedule, as the term suggests, is a time schedule to which a teaching program is carried out. In general, a teaching schedule is designed by considering a series of factors like the complexity of textbooks, comprehension of individual learners etc. In China, government schools often adopt a uniform set of textbooks and teaching schedule of English in order to better monitor and assess students' English progress. However, the teaching schedule of the language centre was left far behind the government school schedule, because it put a bigger portion of class in undertaking spoken English practice in the method of Communicative English.

To improve Communicative English, the centre believed that students must first have the courage to speak, i.e. self-confidence. In order to develop self-confidence in students, two measures were taken in the centre, the first of which was to create a non-critical environment for encouraging students' to talk in the first months in the centre. During this period of time mistakes in their oral English were almost overlooked until they felt free to speak in front of people. However, students themselves could always find out mistakes as soon as they had made them; later a critical environment was provided, in which students were encouraged to notice errors of their classmates. As a result of this practice, both parents and students were pleased to see the progress in the students. Students were more active in participating in class activities and even had more courage to challenge teachers with a variety of questions. They were also anxious to talk with native English speakers whenever and wherever they met. The students tended to express themselves with more self-confidence in and out of class. As the parent said:

*My child has become very active to express himself since he attended classes here. He has changed a lot...one day, I took him to McDonald and came across a foreigner, to my surprise, and he went up to talk with him that had never happened before.*

The student also felt happy with this method of teaching in the English class:

*I like English classes, because I can have a chance to speak English and argue with other students.*

In fact, the practices used in the centre accords with the argument of Torrance and Rockenstein (1988) that the learning process involves creation by inventing and creation by improving. According to their theory, the learning process should consist of two continuous parts, the first step is to create by inventing and providing students with a safe, non-critical environment for self-expression; the second step is to create by improving, i.e. requiring a critical environment where errors are noted and corrected. Schmeck (1988a) also agreed that 'school systems and teachers need to permit and re-

ward some of the self-expression that is implicit in creating by inventing, the kind of self-expression that leads, to self-discovery, self-awareness, and ultimately to integration and adult cognitive functioning.'

However, this practice took a good part of class and in turn reduced the time for offering knowledge. As a consequence, the learning performance of students in the centre was not reflected in the improvement of scores in their traditional government schools which have only employed knowledge-based teaching and testing systems. This outcome gradually became discouraging for both parents and students.

*Eventually, children still need compliments from teacher in their own government school for the progress that they made in the centre. And more importantly, we need high scores for entry to a better high school and university (Parent).*

*I am active in English class in my school (government school) and have fun in displaying my good oral English, but I just can't get good marks in English tests in school (Student).*

The principal also expressed the same concern:

*Now I am thinking giving more knowledge than oral practice in class to prevent some dropouts.*

## Discussion and conclusion

The centre performance turned out to be negative. One year after the introduction of Communicative English by the principal, student numbers had dropped from a maximum of five hundred to around four hundred. Median-achieving and underachieving students were especially affected because they had a stronger desire to have fast positive feedback from their government schools. The principal added that the numbers would continue to decline if he did not take some actions to stop it.

Having investigated this English centre by using the two research methods: classroom observation and interview, it has been identified through classroom observation that Communicative English training was conducted at the centre; meanwhile by interviewing its principal, a teacher, a parent and a student it was identified that Communicative English training did encounter some issues beyond the capacity of the centre, i.e. dubious teaching quality, conflicting motivation and slow-moving teaching schedule. To find out why Communicative English training could not be thoroughly carried out in non-government English training entities in China; two crucial factors are identified and examined behind the three above issues in this case study: teacher qualifications and knowledge-based English evaluation system.

It is hard for the teachers in non-government English training centers to produce a good teaching performance because of their inadequate educational background. As we know the teacher plays a key and irreplaceable role in the field of education and the quality of teachers determines the quality of education. It would not be expected that an excellent student can be trained or developed well by a mediocre teacher. In fact, the same problem happened in Hong Kong, but Hong Kong has successfully overcome this issue. In recent years, some local non-native English teachers in Hong Kong were criticised about their English proficiency and thus local school English teachers without English language undergraduate degrees were required by the government to pass an assessment called the "LPAT" to ensure that their English was of a sufficiently high standard. Those who did not pass the assessment were not permitted to teach English any more (Wikipedia, 2006). With reference to the Hong Kong experience, top priority should be given to the provision of further education for English teachers in non-government English training by the Chinese government.

The Knowledge-based English evaluation system in China is the second crucial factor in the inability to facilitate Communicative English in the non-government English training centre. The signification of evaluation systems in the education field has long been emphasised by a good number of researchers. Ramsden (1988) states 'several investigations have identified methods of student assessment as the most critical situational influence on learning strategies'. He continues 'the evaluation process provides a signal to students about the kind of learning they are expected to carry out; they adapt, by choosing strategies that will apparently maximize success.' Moreover, Schmeck (1988b) added that 'If students see teachers rewarding the parroting of words from textbooks and lectures, they will memorize those words literally through repetition and recitation, and they will acquire not only facts but also shallow, quantitative conceptions of the learning process.' The evaluation system used in China's

English education is recognised and also widely acknowledged as much in favour of the memorisation of English words, phrases and grammar, rather than nurturing self-expression and critical thinking. Although the government intended to promote communicative ability-oriented English training, and designed textbooks for that purpose, the evaluation system of English has remained based on English knowledge, which undoubtedly determines the ways that students learn English. As a result, there was a big mismatch between teaching practice at the centre and officially-recognised English evaluation systems with the latter eventually determining the methods of learning English. In principle, the Communicative English practice of the centre did not correspond with the knowledge-based evaluation system in the English learning and training field in China, so it was understandable that the attrition rate of students increased later on.

To sum up, it is concluded that under the current English evaluation system with a focus on knowledge training, the English communicative ability-oriented education in China is not effective. The case of this foreign language training centre was chosen to study as representative of China's English training markets in terms of English levels of teaching staff and teaching approaches. However, 'there is no way of knowing how typical the selected case really is and it is therefore rather hazardous to draw any general conclusions (Burns, 1994 p 314)'. Thus the conclusion reached is more instrumental than terminal.

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