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An Ongoing Teaching Experimental Project of EFL in a Chinese Tertiary Education Context

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Abstract

There is no doubt that Chinese tertiary students' English language proficiency has improved considerably since China opened its doors to the outside world when substantial economic reforms began in the 1980s. However, an analysis of recent data indicates that far too many Chinese tertiary students complete their studies with inadequate speaking and listening skills. Indeed, their general English proficiency falls far short of the demand for competent English speakers resulting from the unprecedented economic and technological developments that have occurred in China. These developments have resulted in substantially more contact with other countries than had ever occurred before.

This paper presents a critical review of a recent initiative that has been taken with the intention of achieving improvements in the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Chinese tertiary education. The Chinese Ministry of Education has recognised that the challenge of increased engagement with English speaking countries demands a searching reappraisal of current educational practice. Consequently there has been encouragement for change to occur in EFL teaching in Chinese tertiary education. In this paper an examination is made of the social and cultural factors which are thought to interfere with the implementation of new ideas in the current Chinese tertiary educational discourse. The paper then gives an insight into an on-going teaching experiment conducted at Shanxi University of Finance and Economics (SUFU) which has recently attempted to bring about change to teaching practice.

Introduction

Despite the fact that China has made many advances in its approach to tertiary education in the past twenty years, some aspects of education seem more resistant to change than others. For example, an investigation by Shao Yunzheng (1998:12) has shown that many graduates do not have sufficient proficiency to meet the ever increasing demands of international commerce:

The employers are commonly not satisfied with the English comprehension competence of tertiary students who have graduated in recent years, particularly students' oral and written English ability. Tertiary students are eager to further improve their oral English and writing ability, so it appears more and more important to raise tertiary students' comprehension competence skills in listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating. (Chinese Ministry of Education, 1999 :17)

In recognition of this deficit the Chinese Ministry of Education launched a program of teaching reform in 180 colleges and universities across the country. These educational institutions have been charged with the task of producing sufficient numbers of highly competent English speakers to allow the continued growth of China's competitive power in

the world (Zhang Raoxue, 2003:5). Thus, the Chinese Ministry of Education launched its new program of teaching reform of College English in February, 2004.

The objective of this paper, then, is to provide an examination of the literature into EFL teaching generally in China, and a descriptive explanation of the experimental situation at Shanxi University of Finance and Economics (SUFE). The reflective process of analysis involved in the development of this paper will be beneficial for the decision-making that will be an outcome of the teaching reforms to College English teaching at SUFE in particular, and in China more generally.

At the beginning of 2004 the Chinese Ministry of Education issued its reform document, *College English Curriculum Requirement* (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2004) and it selected the colleges and universities where the new teaching experiments would be conducted. The main objective of the experiments is to find new directions for EFL teaching in Chinese tertiary education. In turn these analyses are intended to indicate the direction for changes and modifications to practise resulting from the experimental outcomes. It is also intended that the personnel involved in these experimental programs will be charged with the supervision of a broader program of national change to EFL teaching in Chinese tertiary education that will occur at the conclusion of the experiments.

One of the tertiary institutions chosen by the Ministry of Education to take part in the experimental program is the SUFE, the employer of the author of this paper. Therefore, the paper also provides a partial insight into the progress of the one-year experimental project funded by the Chinese Ministry of Education which began in September 2004 at SUFE.

Background

The College English course is a compulsory component of the curriculum for tertiary students in China and is considered a particularly valuable aspect of the students' education by the national education authority:

The College English teaching system is established on the basis of understanding that it will develop students' capacities from their foundational English language knowledge and it will give them opportunities for the application of their language techniques. The course uses foreign language teaching theory, combining many kinds of teaching models and teaching approaches into a model that intends to build on their learning strategies and increase their capacity for multicultural communication (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2004:1).

Clearly the primary concern of the Ministry of Education is that tertiary education students will receive a substantial and well rounded capacity to use the English language.

In recent years the development of College English teaching has made considerable progress, in truth, the English proficiency level of present day tertiary students is well in advance of those students who graduated only ten years ago. And this progress has largely been due to the strenuous efforts of the foreign language teachers and the education departments responsible for that work. However, it has been a matter of some concern that the demand for highly competent English speakers has increased exponentially in the last

ten years, thus outstripping production of such graduates. While the older methods were successful with smaller numbers of students who worked within a more generous time-frame, contemporary demands have resulted in a very different situation as described by Han Baocheng

Furthermore, there is now much less tolerance of the wastage that occurs when students drop out, and, with the imperative of an ever growing economy, there is simply no time to waste. Therefore, it became necessary for a complete reassessment of the situation of foreign language teaching with the goal of finding a radically different approach, one that would address the challenge of educating sufficient numbers of excellent English language speakers (2002:34).

In the search for new directions it has been necessary to focus attention on the original syllabus and the environment in which it was enacted. The syllabus, and the staff who delivered it, regarded reading, writing and translating as the basis of scholarly endeavour. That approach, well intentioned though it may have been, tended to ignore the cultivation of students' listening and speaking ability which are now both recognised as essential to the requirements of the international business community. Another, and different, aspect of the considerable expansion of enrolments in tertiary education is that as student numbers have increased dramatically, the number of university teachers of English has not. Currently the ratio of teachers of English and students is 1:100 (ZhouYu,2003:10) Thus it will be recognised that EFL teaching in Chinese tertiary education presents administrators and teaching staff with a considerable challenge, not at some time in a distant future, but right now.

The Chinese Ministry of Education has quickly responded to the challenge in the tertiary education sector by implementing a program of teaching reform. The Ministry published its new '*College English Curriculum Requirement (trial)*' at the beginning of 2004. This document particularly emphasizes the need for the development of students' communicative competence, especially the ability to listen and speak (Wang Dong, 2004:24). From the time of the release of the new requirements document the Ministry has encouraged a nation-wide program of teaching reform that has already brought about substantial reappraisal of teaching practice in the delivery of College English at university and college level.

The teaching reforms of College English are planned to address these three aspects of pedagogical practice:

- ❖ to revise the English teaching syllabus, away from a focus of instruction on text based comprehension, to one of listening and speaking-focussed learning. This new focus is governed by the goal of improving the students' language comprehension and abilities to apply language learning in various contexts.
- ❖ to reform the current teaching model from a reliance on textbook, chalk and teacher talk, to one of mutual communication, individualized endeavour, and a more interactive learning model which combines computer (network) teaching software with a language lively classroom.

- ❖ to reform the assessment system which has relied on the National College English Test of grammar and written tests of reading comprehension, and move to an evaluative regime focused on listening for comprehension and speaking with purposeful outcomes.

It is intended that the teaching reform of these three aspects of the curriculum will result in an improvement to the students' English overall linguistic capability, particularly in raising their capacity to listen and speak. Thus, by first giving them the ability to comprehend the spoken English of their teachers and radio or television broadcasts, they will gain substantially increased exposure to the language of native speakers – providing a spoken language basis on which to establish their capacity as creators of written text. The fundamental importance of spoken language as the basis for engagement with textual communication is now fully acknowledged:

It is believed that the emphasis on the primary establishment of spoken language, coupled with their ongoing instruction in written English, will raise the level of their communicative capacity and lead them toward a greater facility in writing and translating competence (Zhang Raoxue, 2004:4).

This changed attitude to language teaching has resulted in a dramatic alteration to the way that university faculties need to think about the development of curriculum. Indeed, these changes are deeply rooted in the culture and are based on long held assumptions about the very nature of university teaching and learning.

An important aspect of the EFL restructuring program has been the necessity to make adjustments to the way that students are assessed in English competence. It has been a general practice in Chinese universities that EFL has been taught at progressively more difficult levels, beginning with the Band 1 and progressing to Band 4. Most students have completed their studies in EFL when they have completed Band 4 which is assessed with the College English Test Band 4 (CET-4). However, there is opportunity for those students with very high levels of aptitude to progress to Band 6. The only Bands that are formally assessed by standardized test are Bands 4 and 6. There are currently 2,400,000 students taking either CET, 4 or 6 each year.

However, as a result of the New Requirements documents, the CET-4/6 are being restructured and adapted to reflect the changing nature and demands of the EFL course. The cohort of non-English major students at SUFE were to be the participants in the experiment on which this study reports. These are students who have been required to study College English for two academic years. At the completion of this period of study, they take the CET-4.

Analysis of Current English Teaching in Chinese Tertiary Education

A dramatic change has been the result of the recognition that College English teaching could not meet the demand for large numbers of qualified English speaking personnel in China (Shi Baohui, 2003). Thus, faced with the critical need for change it became necessary for tertiary education providers such as those at SUFE to take a critical review

and analysis of current teaching goals, teaching models and teaching methods in order to find a new direction.

The goal of English teaching

The pathways of the College English Syllabus in China have experienced three levels of upgrading in the past thirty years, ranging from a reliance on a grammar-based pedagogy to reading for comprehension-based approaches, to the emerging approach which emphasises listening and speaking as the foundation for development in multitextual engagement (Li Baokong, 2004).

The teaching goals of the 1999 syllabus demonstrate an emphasis on a reading for comprehension-based pedagogy, and the document nominates a basic 4,200 words that students are required to master. Consequently there is a need to examine the students' command of these words but there is little or no emphasis on understanding the grammar which might allow students to take a functional role in acts of communication. The National Examination Committee of College English designs and holds CET-4 and CET-6 examinations twice every year, and these contribute to the development of students' English proficiency and competence. Because the CET-4 and CET-6 examinations pay less attention to examining student's practical competence, to some extent, it put a premium on students' examination education tendencies. As a result, it is understandable that some teachers place considerable emphasis on their students' passing the examinations and spend much time in dealing with students' examination competence in the recognition and repetition of the list of words.

Consequently this focus on examinations has a tendency to suppress the amount of time in which students are engaged in activities that might increase their practical English competence. Therefore, students may demonstrate a capability to remember many words by sight but are, all too frequently, neither able to understand or say them. Such students may well have acquired a basic vocabulary but have not mastered the techniques of applying it in acts of communication.

The most recent model of English teaching

The teaching model as it has been recently practiced in Chinese tertiary institutions, generally comprised a teacher, text books, blackboard and chalk. This equipment has been used in a classroom with students sitting in rows listening to a teacher who stood in front of them. Some classes occasionally used computers but that use has generally been very limited. Normally there are 50 to 60 students in each class, and it is clearly impossible in such a situation for the teacher to instruct students individually in the practice of oral English. The teacher will talk about grammar, do some translation, explain the text and ask students to do some written exercises. This situation, in which considerable numbers of students, with varying levels of competence in English language learning, are brought together to treat the language as a theoretical concept with discrete components that must be learned individually by rote, has a number of serious consequences for students.

The first, and perhaps most important consequence, is that having divorced the language from its function as an essentially social activity, a means of communication between participants in cultural exchange, the level of teaching effectiveness is considerably reduced. Furthermore, the teacher must deal with a wide range of student competencies. Many

students come from the countryside where exposure to the sight and sound of English is an alien experience, while others are from large cities where the English language may be an everyday phenomenon. The very large gap between the levels of students' English proficiency does pose a real challenge to teachers. If the teacher pays most attention to those students with lesser capability, he/she will certainly not be able to satisfy the learning requirements of high achieving students; a situation that leads to general unrest and a lack of educational productivity.

When students become disengaged from the subject, when they lose motivation, they become increasingly more difficult to teach and the whole English teaching enterprise becomes more and more futile, from the perspective of the teacher and the students.

The methodology of English teaching

Ever since the beginning of EFL teaching in China, the grammar-translation has taken a dominant place in tertiary level English teaching. There are still many teachers of English who consider it practical and effective. Thus this traditional method has had been particularly resilient, even after the influence of the communicative approach and cognitive approach have won recognition in the rest of the world.

All too frequently the teaching of English in Chinese universities remains didactic, product-oriented and teacher-centred. Consequently, students frequently appear passive, teacher dependent and lacking in initiative, and reluctant to speak in class unless they are sure of their linguistic accuracy. Because nearly all the students have been educated in their pre-tertiary experience by the traditional methods, they tend to be quite passive learners. In class they expect to listen to the teachers and take notes. There is no exchange of information. The only response students give is answering questions or reading the text. While teachers may pay attention to the linguistic points of English they tend not to address such issues the development of learning strategies. As a result, the nation is faced with the serious situation of having far too many students being confronted with a time-consuming pedagogy that is much less than effective in English teaching (Li Lanqing, 1996).

The impact of Chinese culture

Compared to similar cohorts in Western countries most students in China are introverted, and this is due to the impact of Chinese culture. China is bound by a very strong adherence to Confucian values with a strong emphasis placed on the concepts of co-operation, 'face' (dignity and honour) and self-effacement. Each of these concepts has had enduring implications for the language teaching classroom. Co-operation and the maintenance of 'face' account for the reason why students prefer not to speak in response to questions from the teacher; the students desire for self-effacement reflects their society's need for modesty and balance but it appears to be very counter-productive to the need for encouraging the capacity for critical self-awareness so necessary for a meta cognitive approach to learning.

Although Chinese students are active in their minds in class, they tend not to demonstrate similar vigour in their social behaviour. This means that even if an answer to a teacher's question is known, generally only a small percentage of students will become involved in answering the question. Prior to the trialling of autonomous learning, the students involved in this project did not ask the teacher questions. Those who were asked to respond generally tried to speak or read with fluency, clarity and confidence. However, this was something that students did only when they were instructed to do so. Chinese educational authorities

have tended to structure classes in such a way that students regard the teacher as the provider of knowledge and the student as the receiver.

The traditional voice of Chinese educational culture has been one of obedience to authority, that is, students were expected to conform to social norms. They were not expected to challenge, rather they were to listen, absorb and then repeat the content when asked to do so (Littlewood, 1996:37). The ancestry of this educational style derives from Confucius, Manlius and Shun Tzu, all educators from two thousand years ago.

Students' English proficiency is at quite different levels

Due to the very considerable expansion of enrolment in Chinese tertiary education, the current teaching ratio of teachers and students is 1:100. Furthermore, the tertiary students' English proficiency levels are considerably disparate and all too frequently at a much lower level than those of the students enrolled before 1999. The reason for this lack of homogeneity in achievement is that students come to the university from many different parts of the country, and they reflect the considerable differences in the economy across the nation, as well as the markedly different levels of educational achievement between rural and urban environments. Teachers at SUFE often have more than fifty students in their classes. Therefore, it is almost impossible for an English teacher to pay adequate attention to each student in the classroom.

Taking a new teaching approach at Shanxi University of Finance and Economics (SUFE)

The launch of the Ministry of Education reforms was made in *New Requirements* (Ministry of Education, 2004). The requirements of this new approach were outlined in Document No.21, "The experimental implementation of teaching reform of College English" (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2004). Thus, Shanxi University of Finance and Economics (SUFE) was appointed as one of 180 universities in which the teaching reform experiments of College English were to be conducted, commencing February 2004. The faculty at SUFE responded to the need for change by designing a classroom based English multimedia teaching model, supported by information communications technology (ICT), to be used in the experimental classes. This pedagogical model is designed to place emphasis on autonomous learning, collaborative group learning, and the application and increased use of ICT. An explanation of the development of this theoretical framework of the teaching model follows.

It was the understanding of the Foreign Language Faculty at SUFE that no matter how good a teacher may be, students will not learn a language until they accept the necessity to practise their skills, both inside and outside class time. The faculty recognised that learning a language is too complex an intellectual challenge for adults to manage if they restrict their learning to classroom activities. As Nunan argues, not everything can be taught in class (Nunan 1998a: 3). Even if a student could learn all that was needed in a classroom, a teacher will not always be around if and when students wish to use the language in real life (Cotterall 1995: 220).

At SUFE, it became obvious that with a limited number of linguistically competent teachers of English, coupled with an ever burgeoning body of students, there was an urgent need to

develop an approach that addressed the disproportionate ratio of teachers to students. There was also a need for measures to counteract the passivity of students. Indeed, the cultural influence in China that requires such polite deference to superiors, and a reluctance to stand out from the crowd, is a particularly difficult impediment to language learning. Faculty acknowledged that student passivity was the real enemy of true learning; staff recognised that students needed to develop their own learning strategies, so that as far as possible they become autonomous learners.

The revelation that the key to the success of the new approach was one that might appear to be culturally alien came as something of a shock to SUFE staff. However, they acknowledged that the encouragement of autonomy was not simply a useful attribute that needed to be developed at university. As Li Ming (1999:7) argues: 'cultivating a learner's independence or autonomy should be regarded as the end goal that teachers or educators try to pursue'. Or, as Mcdevitt (1997:34) points out: "The end product of education is an independent learner"--a personal characteristic that has not been culturally encouraged in China.

These understandings required a rethink of current practices at SUFE. Thus a thorough accounting of existing teaching models needed to take place, and such a reassessment needed to be particularly concerned with the scale and complexity of language teaching to such a considerable body of students. Staff came to realise that the new approach must be one that was 'both flexible and responsive to the diversity of student needs and circumstance' (Benson & Voller, 1997: 34).

However, a primary requirement in the creation of an entirely new pedagogical approach was the need for the teaching staff to fully understand the implications of exactly what it was that they meant when they talked about autonomy. The work of Holec provided an answer that was to serve as the working brief for staff involved in the development of the new university language curriculum:

Learner autonomy refers to autonomous self-regulation in which the learner takes charge of his own learning, determining the objectives, defining the contents and progressions, selecting methods and technique to be used, monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly and evaluating what has been acquired (Holec, 1981: 74).

As the program began to take shape there was an awakening of understanding amongst the planners that this new approach was certainly not a process of 'teacher-less learning' (Sheerin, in Benson & Voller, 1997: 63). In truth, the teachers began to realise that they did have a most important role to play in casting these student adventurers off on their own journey of discovery, since it was they, the teachers, who needed to provide the charts and navigational aids that would help the students find their way in the uncharted waters of their own learning.

The staff at SUFE accepted that if students were to become autonomous learners, that is, if they were to adapt to a very new and frightening burst of independence, there was a need for a series of clear goals toward which students could strive. If the students were to be encouraged to take the path to autonomy, they needed clear directions for how to get there:

- 1) Autonomy is the act of learning on one's own and gaining the technical ability to do so;
- 2) Autonomy is the development of the internal psychological capacity to self-direct one's own learning;
- 3) Autonomy is taking control over the content, pace and process of one's own learning.

(Adapted from Benson, 1997: 29)

The planning committee at SUFE found that changing the curriculum demanded considerable changes in attitude from both teachers and learners. Teachers were no longer able to take their previously dominant position as the privileged speakers at the front of the class; neither could they continue to consider themselves as the holders of all wisdom. And of course students, too, could not shelter behind the quiet façade of their previous role as the passive receivers of information.

However, the evolution of learner autonomy in the classroom, while it may not have always been smooth sailing, has proved more valuable than could have been predicted at the start of the year. Staff has encouraged the formation of functional groups of students that have been supportive of the individuals that contribute to them. The students have adapted well to this quite remarkable cultural transition from an individualistic, competitive environment, into one that is group orientated and supportive of the individuals within this kind of social organization described as group work.

Group work is “a generic term covering a multiplicity of techniques in which two or more students is assigned a task involving collaboration and self-initiated language” (Brown, 1994:173). There are many implications for foreign language education that flow from the concept of learner autonomy. For example, the use of small groups, including pairs, represents one means of enhancing learner autonomy (Harris & Noyau, 1990; Macaro, 1997). By collaborating with their peers, learners move away from dependence on the teacher. Group activities can frequently help students to harness the power of the collective intellect within the group when individuals build on the foundation of their own learning resources with the assistance of peers, and they are not then relying on the teacher.

The main purpose of the group is to provide a small community of support for students as they learn. Such a community gives them an emotionally secure environment in which they can develop the confidence to make mistakes, and one that offers them plenty of opportunities to make the halting attempts and approximations that are so necessary for language learning. As Brumfit (1984: 97) explains: ‘giving students greater opportunities to speak is often considered an essential feature of communicative language teaching’. Thus, students in small groups do frequently produce a significantly greater *quantity* of language, some of which may be quite inaccurate (Liang, Mohan, & Early, 1998). And this process of experimentation is most likely to happen when students are prepared to take risks on the basis of their increased level of confidence (Long, in Long & Porter, 1985). However, the lapses in accuracy pale into insignificance beside the potential to experiment in a language lively, speaking centred classroom, which provides the potential for the production of far more and much better quality language than have students in a teacher-centred, lockstep classroom setting.

It has been found by Race and Brown (1998) that once the students have established a firm basis of spoken language they are positioned more advantageously to engage with the task of encoding and decoding written texts. Furthermore, once students are established in the security of small groups, they are then better able to develop a range of interactive and collaborative skills which are often underused, or not developed at all, in individual study situations (Race & Brown 1998:79; Oxford, 1997). Nevertheless, the faculty at SUFE were aware that, ultimately, the acquisition of a new language is an individual achievement. Finally, the work of learning must rest on the shoulders of each student.

It was at this point of refining the pedagogical model that the staff at SUFE recognised that it was at the conjunction of group work and independent individual learning, where the ICT component might take up the role of fostering autonomy. A number of well established claims have been made in favour of the efficacy of technology-enhanced language learning (Sinclair, 1999). Indeed, there has been a universal recognition of the capacity of ICT to increase involvement in language learning, and this, coupled with recent developments in technology, has strongly supported the growth of self-access and independent learning (Sinclair, 1999).

The claims made for ICT include the suggestion that the technology, especially multimedia functions, can help to support a wide range of different learning styles. The combined use of computers and the Internet has the potential to provide a wealth of resources to independent learners, and many software packages do offer a complete curriculum for language learning. The faculty at SUFE felt that these claims needed to be put to work in the context of the newly created language learning environment.

The SUFE language teachers recognized that ICT does have a great deal to offer the language learner: huge amounts of spoken data; authentic written text; graphics with audio accompaniment, and video online. Software and online exercises can provide rules to begin with, or as glosses for data. When there is felt to be a need to focus on grammar there are complete programs that have activities for both deductive and inductive learners. Some major software packages, such as DynEd and ELLIS series, do offer a structured path through their material, as well as record-keeping functions.

Experimental Design

The following will detail various aspects of the methodology that was designed by the Shanxi University of Finance and Economics as a response to the Chinese Ministry of Education's teaching reforms.

Aims and objectives of the experiment

The primary objective of the nationally recommended College English teaching reforms at SUFE has been to improve students' English comprehension and application competence. This reform agenda has resulted in the development of an entirely new teaching model that has been tried in an experimental program that begins in September 2004. Students in the experimental group have been moved away from teacher dependency to a situation in which they have been made aware of the desirability of becoming autonomous learners, and they have come to learn that they can develop a high level of competence in listening and speaking as a result of their efforts.

Research approach to the experiment

The research program at SUFE is the responsibility of the College English reform group who designed a contrastive teaching experiment which sets out to achieve the goals of the College English syllabus and the teaching objectives of the university. They did this by arranging the rate of teaching progress; confirming the methods of assessment and examination; establishing the teacher management system; training teachers in web-teaching and hyper textual overheads making; offering guidance in small group management and supervision of class-delivery of content by teachers.

Experimental samples

After the students of Grade 2004 entered the university, they attended the first graded test. Based on the results of the overall grades (60% for the test results and 40% for the results of College Entrance Examination), students were divided into two-level classes (Classes A and B). Three classes A and six classes B were selected to do the experiment in order to put the experiences of the new teaching model into practice.

Reliability and validity

The teaching styles of the experimental classes were conducted in the form of combining the teacher's teaching face to face classes and students' autonomous learning with ICT network, to listening and speaking training in small groups. The teaching ratio of teaching face-to-face, autonomous learning, and listening and speaking training is 2:1:1. Experimental classes have four class hours each week. The teacher's teaching face-to-face is at ICT-assisted learning classroom, three natural classes put together to have large-size class for two class hours once a week; web-based autonomous learning is arranged at the computer centre with the teacher's guidance, each time for two class hours once every two weeks; listening and speaking training in small groups is conducted as face to face teaching, once every two weeks, for two class hours each session.

Experimental Class A were required to study the text book College English (Volumes 2-4) commencing in first term and continuing through to the third term, when Volume 1 is delivered to students to learn by themselves. At the end of the third term the students were organised to attend CET-4. During the fourth term the experimental classes were studying advanced English (Volume 5). There were four class hours every week for College English Band 2 to Band 5. Those students who passed CET-4 were able to attend CET-6 at the end of the fourth term. Non-experimental Classes B were required to study College English (Volumes 1-4) from the first term to the fourth term, and at the end of the fourth term students were organised to attend CET-4.

Experimental classes and non-experimental classes of Grade 2004 both adopted the use of *New Horizon College English (Reading and Writing course)*. This is a textbook with web-based teaching software produced by the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press and sponsored by Chinese Ministry of Education.

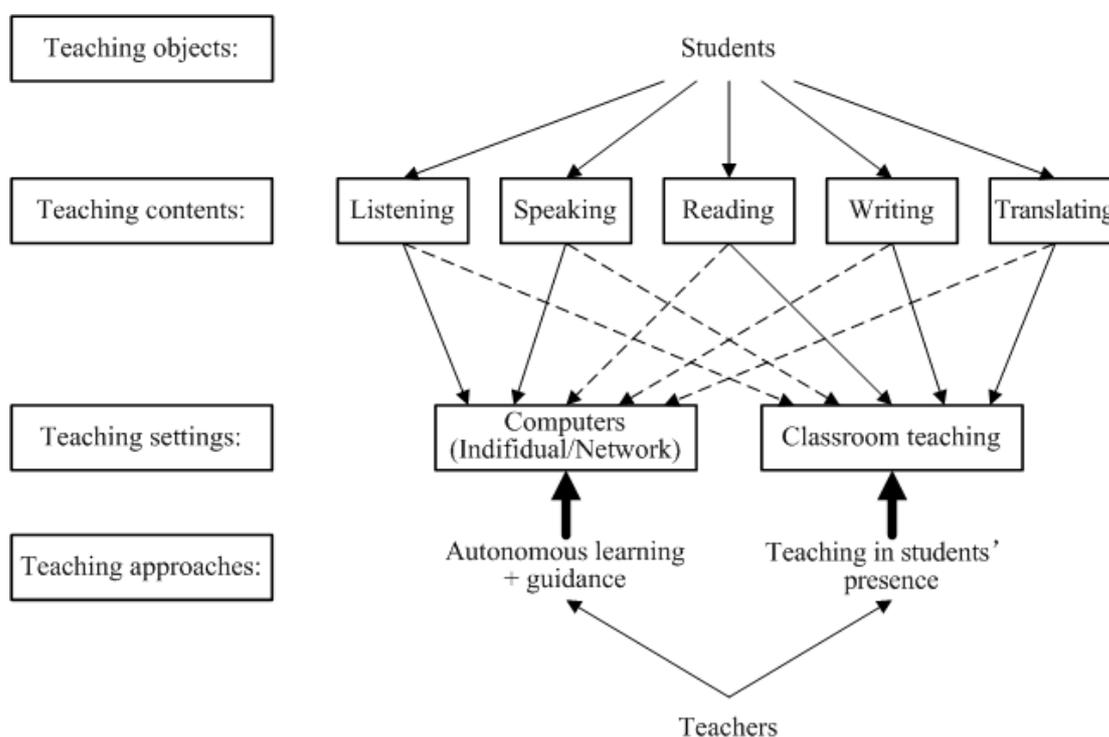
The experimental classes were given an additional seventy-six hours of study time when they were able to have free access to the computers. This access was allocated to each student's computer-card at the beginning of the term. Sixteen of seventy-six class hours were organised for the use of autonomous learning which was, initially, supervised by the teacher. Once the teacher felt that the students were sufficiently well prepared to work

autonomously the students organised their own study times in such activities as selecting time to study on computer, doing assignments on campus-web or checking teacher's explanation to questions on the website and in self practice (Reform Planning Committee, SUFE, 2004).

ICT and classroom-assisted English teaching model

The ICT and classroom-assisted English teaching model is a new kind of teaching model that has been designed to help students achieve the requirement of College English teaching. The model was also designed for the research purpose of taking part in the Chinese Ministry of Education's large-scale teaching experiments. In this model there is a focus on collective engagement in small groups, individualized ICT teaching and autonomous learning. The model has been designed to maximise students' capacity to use computers because with this technology individuals can repeatedly listen and speak according to their needs. Teachers are able to give guidance during contact time when students are engaged in small group or, during whole class activities teachers can pass on knowledge and techniques for reading, writing, and translating. Thus the approach generally allows students to engage with learning according to their own learning preferences and characteristics, level of learning and timing, with the teacher's guidance but with the help of the computer. These ideas are demonstrated graphically here, in Figure 1.0

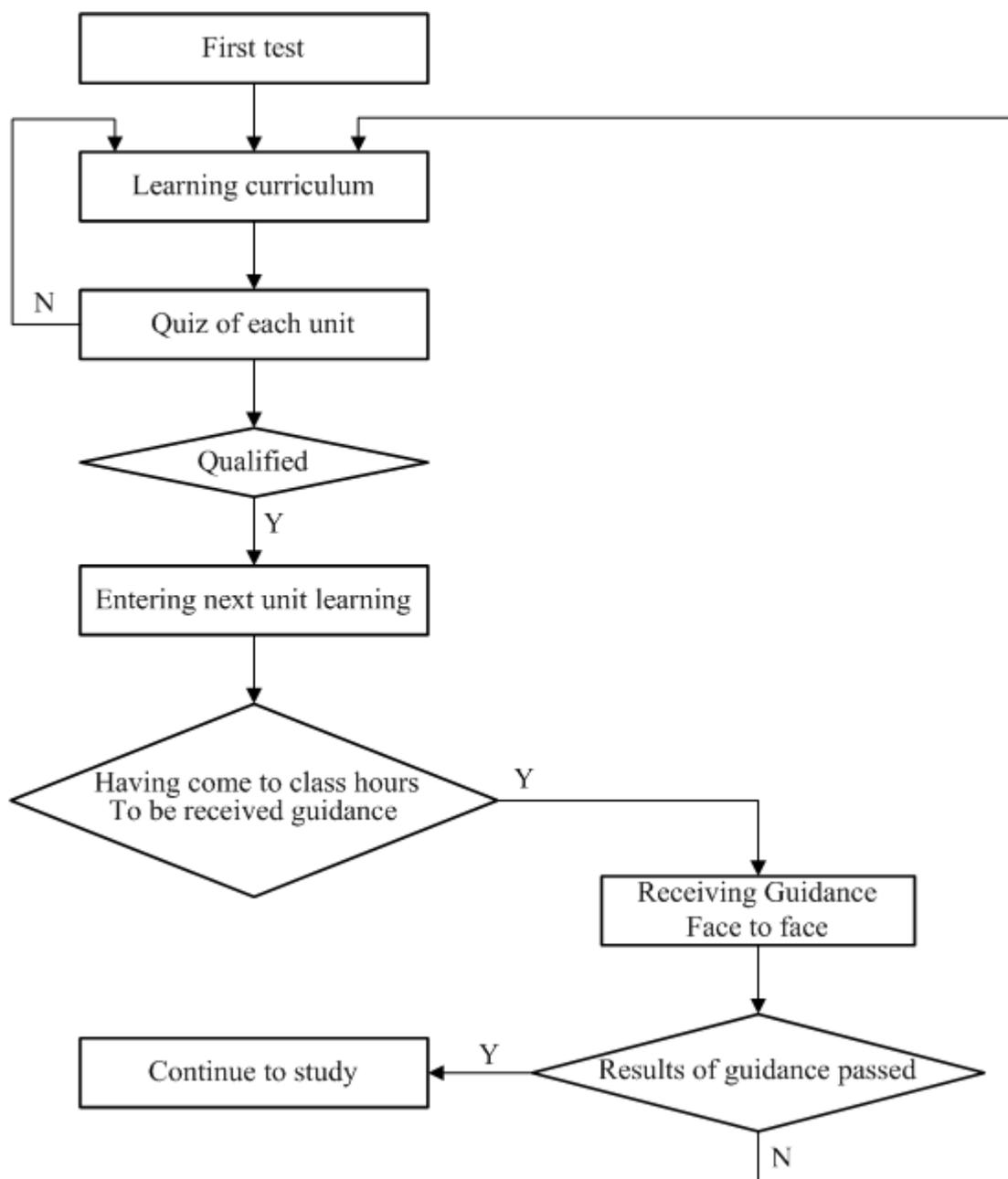
Figure 1.0 Components of the teaching model



From College English Curriculum Requirement (p.6) by Chinese Ministry of Education, 2004

In the process of engaging with computer-based English learning, the teacher's role changes from face to face instructor to facilitator who offers guidance in small group-focused tasks and individual computer tasks. Given the number of students in each year

cohort there will be a total of 23 groups with no more than eight students in each group. The guidance in the use of computers that is offered by teachers is intended to maximize the effectiveness of students' autonomous learning and to decide whether the student can go on to learn according to his/her learning outcomes. When the students have studied for sixteen to twenty class hours they are given one-hour individualized guidance as participants in a small group using a computer, a process explained by this flow chart: Figure 2.0 Computer-based English learning process



From *College English Curriculum Requirement* (p.7), by Chinese Ministry of Education, 2004

Language learners have certain cultural expectations about teacher and student roles and, in the process of adopting the New Model, many of these cultural expectations will be challenged. In the traditional model of tertiary education the teacher's role has been that of

imparting knowledge to students whose duty as learners is to memorize it. This approach is clearly not conducive to self-direction. As Oxford notes, "Just teaching new strategies to students will accomplish very little unless students begin to *want* greater responsibility for their own learning" (1990 p.10; italics in original). Therefore, in the New Model the teachers are still responsible for setting the topics for students, and they need to provide a well structured, well-informed set of materials, but they must now also create a set of circumstances in which the students become actively involved. In this New Model the teacher is responsible for stimulating the flow of class interaction and communication between students in a way that allows the students to use language in a natural way. Thus the teachers become facilitators, organizers, guides, consultants and the assessors of the course.

Students need to understand that language learning is a conscious process and most of the knowledge they learn about a language is procedural knowledge. Therefore, students' autonomy in language learning needs to be enhanced and this is more likely to occur when the students have targets and schedules of their own. They should decide, under the teacher's guidance, what to learn and find out about the most suitable and effective ways of learning. They should also learn to self-evaluate in order to check their own process and find out which aspects of the process they should give most attention. Students are reminded that they must always keep in mind that they are the overall conductors and active participants in their own language learning.

The use of multimedia technology does offer the teacher some additional aid by providing the opportunity to use its content while the teacher is still engaged in a guiding role. In this case the teacher's function is to communicate with students and maintain the instructional role. The potential for actively teaching, in this instance, remains in the area of communication between the teacher and the students. If the teachers' communicative function disappears, the students' learning motivation will almost certainly be reduced.

Teaching Assessment

As the New Model progressed it became clear that the processes of teaching assessment needed to change. It was also recognised that the previous assessment approach, in which students' grades, determined by end-term course examination, combined with casual observations of students' in class learning processes, was a less than adequate form of understanding the teaching process and teaching management. From this realisation it became obvious that if the curriculum objectives at SUFE were to be met, it was important to establish a rigorous, objective, and accurate assessment system. Staff felt that it was important for teachers to gain feedback from students if they were to improve their teaching management and guarantee the teaching quality. There was also an understanding that the thought processes necessary for written feedback from students might prove to be the most effective means for students to adjust their learning strategies, improve their learning methods, and raise learning effectiveness.

Inclusive assessment of the teaching/learning process takes into consideration three aspects of student activity. There are students' self-assessment, students' assessment of each other and the teacher's assessment of students. The teacher of each class has the responsibility of coordinating the process of students' self-assessment and students' assessment of each other. The results from these assessments serve as 5% of the overall term grades. The

teacher of each class also assesses the students' performance in listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating in class and outside class. The results of this anecdotal record form another 10% of the overall term grades. The hours of students' study on computers are automatically recorded by the computer. At the end of term students' computer interactions form 20% of overall term grades.

Final assessment refers to the end of course examination and the level examination. The final course examination consists of a written test and an oral test. The examination content of the experimental classes has the same content as those of the non-experimental classes. However, the results of the final course examination and the results of the level examination are respectively 50% and 10% of the overall term grades

At the end of the term the language teaching faculty of SUFE compares the teaching results of the experimental classes and those of the non-experimental classes. A detailed analytic report concerning the two teaching models is then completed.

Sources of data

There are currently 550 undergraduate students taking a major in English, with three teachers involved in their instruction during the experimental period at SUFE. At the beginning of the first term, in September 2004, the experimental classes and non-experimental classes were organised to complete a survey which sought information about students needs: "An Investigation of English learning needs and requirements and Curriculum establishment for tertiary students of Grade 04". From this survey instrument data were derived concerning the students' capacities as English learners, such as their personal interests, requirements, desires and perceived strengths and weaknesses as learners.

During the course of the academic year samples of classroom observation, assessment and anecdotal records of the supervision of students' learning process will be presented at informal monthly discussions by the English Experimental faculty. The minutes of these meetings, together with the results of the analysis of the data from the student survey instruments, are intended to form the basis of reports from the Contacting group of College English teaching reform to the Chinese Ministry of Education.

Implementing the experimental model

The following section lists the key aspects taken into consideration when implementing the experimental Classroom-based ICT-Assisted English Teaching Model that Shanxi University of Finance and Economics designed and adopted as part of the Chinese Ministry of Education's wide-scaled experiment

Focusing of listening

As mentioned previously, Chinese tertiary students' competence in listening and speaking is relatively weaker by comparison with their reading and writing competence. According to *The College English Curriculum Requirement* (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2004), the act of developing students' listening and speaking competence is the main objective of classroom teaching. The curriculum document defines listening as the ability to identify and understand what others are saying. This involves understanding a speaker's accent or pronunciation, the grammar and vocabulary, and fully comprehending meaning. An able

listener is one judged capable of doing these four things simultaneously.

In the search for a teaching methodology that might result in a more engaging and fruitful outcome, the attention of the faculty at SUFE was drawn to the fact that students who were taught Russian by methods emphasising listening because more effective as language users than students taught in a conventional way (Postovsky, 1974). The student of a foreign language needs to be accurate and thus intelligent listening becomes a necessity. The teacher is responsible for helping students to acquire this skill which provides the very foundation for learning and functioning in a language. However, the teaching of listening, and or speaking, is not without its problems. While the teacher can observe, isolate and offer suggestions to remedy errors in speaking, the same is not the case for listening. Nevertheless, the teacher can facilitate the development of listening ability by creating listening lessons that guide the student through these three stages of teaching:

- Pre-listening (purpose must be given at this stage): This activity should establish the purpose of the listening activity and activate the schemata by encouraging the students to think about and discuss what they already know about the content of the listening text. This activity can also provide the background needed for them to understand the text, and it can focus attention on what to listen for.
- During listening (the listening task): The task should involve the listener in getting information and while students are listening to the tape the teacher asks them to take some notes.
- Post-listening (speaking): The teacher writes some questions on the board and asks them to answer the questions. They are also stimulated to talk and participate in the activity. This activity should help the listener to evaluate success in carrying out the task and to integrate listening with the other language skills. The teacher should encourage practice outside of the classroom whenever possible.

(Underwood, 1989:11).

When listening to English as a foreign language, the most important features can be defined as:

- 1) Coping with the sounds,
- 2) Understanding intonation and stress,
- 3) Coping with redundancy and noise,
- 4) Predicting,
- 5) Understanding colloquial vocabulary,
- 6) Understanding different accents,
- 7) Using visual and environmental clues.

(Underwood, 1989:12)

These points help to identify that while planning language exercises the listening materials, the task and visual materials do need to be taken into consideration. The teacher should produce a suitable discourse while using recordings. A preset purpose, ongoing learner response, motivation, success, simplicity, and feedback are all matters that need to be considered while preparing the learning situation.

Most scholars agree that, at the lowest proficiency levels, listening materials that present very familiar and predictable content and that are relevant to students' interests will serve the purposes of learners most efficiently, given that students will use their knowledge of the world to aid them in comprehension when their linguistic skills are deficient. For example, videotaped materials can be especially useful at the lower ranges of proficiency because of the visual contextual support they provide, as long as students know that they are not expected to understand every word.

Assisting learners in the development of listening comprehension is a challenge. It is a challenge that demands both the teacher's and the learners' attention because of the critical role that listening plays, not only in communication, but also in the acquisition of language. Teachers must weave these listening activities into the curriculum to create a balance that mirrors the real-world integration of listening with speaking, reading, and writing.

Constructing multi-dimensional English environment

The greatest disadvantage for learners of English in the Chinese context is the shortage of a natural communicative environment, and it is generally considered impossible for students to learn English without such exposure. In the traditional classroom teachers have been the purveyors of knowledge and wielders of power, and the learners are seen as 'containers' to be filled with knowledge held by teachers. For most students, the textbook is almost the only source from which to construct their English environment. Therefore, the construction of a many-dimensional English environment, such one that might be provided by sound and video facilities, the purposeful use of the internet, textbooks, popular reading materials, the development of an English corner, the use of the campus radio station, and the encouragement of interactive activities that involve speech contests, may all contribute to an active social setting where English can become the currency of cultural exchange. When a university faculty is able to develop such an environment the teacher takes charge of classes in English in which interaction between the teacher and the students are encouraged. In such a situation the teachers will become active participants in a dialogue with students who are eager to speak English both in the classroom and in their dormitories.

Teaching the students how to learn

There is an old Chinese saying that eloquently expresses the new philosophy of English teaching at SUFE: "The master shows you the way to the door, what you learn after going through it depends on yourself." Thus the faculty has recognised, and is helping students to understand, that learning how to learn is more important than how much is learned. When students are able to master the way they learn, they can enlarge their vocabulary in the areas that they recognise themselves as being in most need, and they do this when they become autonomous learners. Now the teacher demonstrates to the students a variety of strategies from which they may select those that best suit their needs in speaking, listening,

and understanding. Having been instructed in strategies designed to support these skills, students have the chance to practice them in a variety of language tasks.

Focusing on individual development

The matter of the students' considerable learning differences is one that may be resolved when the teaching staff has created a teaching regime in which students' competence is developed according to individual student interests, characteristics and preferences. Faculty have recognised that while some students may be good at listening and speaking, others may be more interested in reading and writing. In class the teacher will allow students to read privately and then answer questions individually; the teacher will provide students with a range of different worksheets and allows individuals to make their own decisions about which tasks to do. In this new climate of autonomy the teacher hands out different worksheets to different individuals depending upon their tastes and abilities. The teacher encourages students to choose what they want to read or listen to, especially when there are concerns about the student's extensive reading capabilities. Thus the students who operate at different levels of English proficiency are given different learning requirements. In this way the teacher encourages individualised learning and individualised development so that students, in turn, will be better able to meet the varying needs and requirement of the work place.

Language teaching rests upon a foundation of four skills and knowledge of culture

For the students, a recognition of culture is an important aspect of being able to communicate successfully and appropriately in another language. Kramsch (1993) has pointed out that every time we speak we perform a cultural act. This means understanding that everything that we say has the potential to be misunderstood or misinterpreted in the peculiarities of an intercultural situation. Furthermore, language users need to recognise that everything that is said has social consequences. What we say may be interpreted by the people we speak to as being friendly, polite, interested and concerned, each according to a particular set of cultural ways of behaving.

In the most advanced language learning environments culture is considered to be a fifth micro skill, one that must be introduced simultaneously with the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing if they are to be properly applied. This view of language learning recognises that culture is something that learners need to acquire as an integral part of the second language learning situation. The effective teacher can do a great deal in the classroom to help students develop ways of finding out more about the culture they are learning by analysing their experiences and developing their awareness of the social environments in which the language is to be used.

Preliminary findings and conclusion of the 2004 experiment at SUFE

From the classroom observations and the interviews with the students, it was found that:

- Students were able to select and implement appropriate learning strategies, and they were able to adapt them to their own purposes if necessary. They were paying more attention to their learning process rather than outcomes of study due to the process assessments that were stressed at the university.

- Each student developed an individual work plan, term goals, and daily timetable of study and play. It has been shown that current students' rates of attendance reached 96%, which is much higher than the attendance rate of the 85% recorded previously.
- Students have been much more actively engaged in class, genuinely committed to study, and increased levels of motivation. Even the most reserved students are more likely to volunteer to speak out when their point of view is listened to sympathetically in class. Almost all of the students have maintained a consistent schedule of listening to radio daily and have volunteered to find materials to read as part of their study, and the majority of students were successful in finishing their assignment on time.
- Because the university has placed a much greater emphasis on learning English, students are feeling that it is very important to engage with the study. Yet, despite this pressure to study English, students feel that they are being properly equipped by the faculty to become active learners who are given the autonomy to take charge of their own learning.

However, the encouragement of linguistic interaction in English between students remains problematic for teachers in the Chinese context, and that aspect of the challenge is one that teachers are yet to overcome.

To this point the teaching experiment at SUFE has been active for only three months, thus providing only a limited body of data, but, limited though it might be, there have been, nonetheless, exciting outcomes to share. As the experiment continues there will be a need for reporting on the research in more detail. Doubtless, there will be problems and resolutions aplenty, but we might be forgiven for thinking optimistically that there will be many valuable outcomes to share when the experiment has been completed.

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