

Chinese ELT students in India: Some reflections on the use of instructionist and learner-centred activities

K. Meenakshi

Vellore Institute of Technology, Tamil Nadu, India

ABSTRACT

The big shifts in the global environment and the rapid developments in China's economy have multiplied the demand for qualified people with good knowledge of English. In spite of the special significance given to English in their country, the Chinese find it difficult to attain mastery over the language and hence many Chinese students opt to pursue their higher education in India or in any other Western country. Because they prefer a supportive learning atmosphere coupled with strongly planned learning courses, the Chinese students who come to India are provided a separate course in English to address their specific needs and concerns. This paper describes different learner-centred activities that help Chinese students in India learn English in more effective ways, especially through the use of technology. Instructionist practices and assumptions underlie some of these activities which are coupled with exercises to encourage group and collaborative work. This paper is not a definitive, empirical paper, but a reflective article on the still relatively unknown phenomenon of Chinese students studying English in India.

KEYWORDS: *English skills, instruction, constructivism, interaction, use of technology tools*

Introduction

With globalization and the ever-increasing demand for highly qualified people in the international market, the purpose of learning English has become manifold. More specifically, due to the rapid economic development of China and its unabated opening up to various national economies and cultures, the need for English language competence has gained more significance in the Chinese society. In the process, the teaching of English as a foreign language has become a difficult and challenging task for teachers, due to lack of resources and still relatively minimal contact with the target language despite major changes in the official educational curricula (Liu, 2007). Though Chinese students generally have a positive attitude and motivation to learn English, it is difficult for them to enhance their skills in China because of the very limited opportunities to use the target language. This dearth of opportunities makes the students less confident about using English outside the classroom, in spite of their being taught the language since the fifth grade. Thus, attention of some Chinese students has now

turned towards South Indian universities where they believe they can get quality technical education. The establishment of many units by the multinational companies in China has also added to this demand.

These students who come to India generally have completed the College English Test (CET-4) or National English Test (NET-4; NET-6), the qualifying examinations in China. However, many of them are still not comfortable with the use of English. In our experience, the two main reasons why Chinese students are unable to (or choose not to) speak in class are their limited vocabulary and their fear (related to cultural influences) about making mistakes in front of peers and the teacher.

Because of their unique characteristics as English language learners, an English Proficiency Test was conducted for a group of Chinese students immediately after they joined Vellore Institute of Technology in Tamil Nadu. Based on the results of the test, a course called *English for Chinese* was then developed. It was basically an effort to integrate traditional classroom lectures with learner-centred activities coupled with the use of technology.

This paper first discusses *instructionism* (to teach something in a formal, teacher-led way) which essentially embodies the culture of schooling in China. Second, it then describes various learner-centered activities used to help students learn English, some of which are informed by instructionist perspectives. This paper is essentially a *practical* paper which focuses on the author's reflections on these instructionist and learner-centred activities. The main point to be made is the need to address the specific needs of this group of students, by always making sure that instructionist practices are accommodated, especially in the initial stages of the course, while leading the students to more learner-centred activities. The activities to be described are *not* new or innovative—what I hope to do is to simply raise awareness of emerging practices in Chinese ELT classrooms which, of course, are increasingly becoming commonplace phenomena in ELT classrooms in China, but have yet to take root in the culture of learning among most Chinese learners of English (Ke, 2008).

Instructionism and culture in Chinese education

English has occupied a prestigious position in the world mainly because of its ubiquitous presence in many aspects of daily life. To widen the cultural and intellectual horizons of its citizens, the Chinese government prefers to send its students either to Western countries or to India for their higher education. Since 1978, especially after the introduction of the country's open-door policy, China's economy has developed rapidly, thus enhancing interaction between the Chinese and the outside world and encouraging Chinese students to go abroad to acquire new cultural knowledge (Chiu, 1995). In Chinese culture, teachers are regarded as persons possessing sacrosanct knowledge and hence interrupting them is considered an offence. Students have been trained to respect those who provide knowledge and avoid challenging those in authority (Chan, 1999). Even if the teachers invite students to ask questions, there is usually little response; thus English classes in China are still generally teacher-centred (Ke, 2008). Chinese

students prefer tightly structured learning paths through clear, logical and systematic presentations of lessons; they bring along with them the culture of the teacher as someone who must not be questioned (Qing, 2007). In essence, this approach to teaching and learning is referred to as instructionism. Thus, if there is a move to wean them away from this approach, it must be emphasized that the transition must be gradual and respectful of the learners' cultural preferences for particular kinds of learning.

Furthermore, Confucian beliefs about learning emphasize academic learning as well as human perfection. This influence has been persistent over many centuries, and the impact on contemporary Chinese education is still widely documented (Bush & Qiang, 2000; Wong 2001). Education is considered as an important criterion not only for personal enhancement but also for societal development. Learners who are competent can easily secure an official position in a government organization through satisfactory performance in an examination. In China, academic success gives a person better opportunities for career and social mobility, so student records in public examinations indeed play a pivotal role in deciding their future (Wang, 2006). Consequently, this creates an examination-oriented culture which promotes rote-learning as the best possible method of teaching and learning (Wang & Mao, 1996).

Another reason why Chinese students remain silent in class is that they are afraid of making mistakes. Many researchers have agreed to the fact that the Chinese give importance to maintaining dignity in class, and providing wrong answers is deemed one of those instances where one may "lose face" (Tsui, 1996). This attitude is still prevalent among the Chinese students which can be substantiated by the following Chinese proverbs: "*The bird that stands out will be shot first*" and "*the taller tree will catch the wind first*", thus warning people not to take risks.

Thus, it is necessary to create a different learning environment for Chinese students in order to make them comfortable about learning English in real communicative contexts. This means that students must learn in a non-threatening learning environment and that English language teachers must take on a holistic, affective and student-centred view of language learning (Finch, 2002).

The need for a learner-centred learning environment

As seen in the previous section, one dominant learning tradition in China is instructionism which emphasises the process of transmission of knowledge from teacher to learner, with the teacher as the sole authority. Related to this is the examination-oriented culture of teaching and learning which values memorization at the expense of critical and deep thinking (Guo, 1996; Gao & Watkins, 2002). This may partially explain why despite being considered very hardworking and diligent, many Chinese students do not willingly take any initiative or risk in the classroom. It is also believed that many students' creativity is curtailed from childhood, and even if they are academically brilliant, they are not deemed as competent in solving practical problems (Gu & Meng, 2001; Kennedy, 2002; Salili, 1996).

The above points stress the need for creating a supportive learning atmosphere characterized by the following:

- Active participation of learners
- Focus on student-centred activities
- The teacher as facilitator
- Enhanced class discussion and experimental work
- Orientation towards real-world contexts in English language learning.

Nevertheless, as earlier emphasized, learner-centred pedagogy must be understood and implemented with the target students in mind. It cannot be accepted uncritically. Indeed, because Chinese students generally expect classes to be very formal and teachers to have full control over the class (Zhu, 2002), it may not be wise to incorporate many learner-centred activities and exercises like group work or peer review into the early stages of the course. What may be appropriate with Chinese students is a kind of “guided” work which gradually introduces them to learner-centred views and practices as the course moves along. This strategy will not cause a big cultural shock to students because changes are done gradually so that they first start with something familiar and then move to some unfamiliar areas and practices.

To aid the move towards learner-centred pedagogy in the classroom, this paper also points to the use of technology, especially the use of certain English language learning softwares, to create a new learning environment. Many Chinese are good at using computers and since the duration of the course is very short, computers serve as tutors for drill exercises, especially in spelling, vocabulary and grammar. One-to-one interaction with the computer and the immediate feedback it provides act as motivating factors for the students to learn on their own, thus enhancing learner autonomy. Yang and Chen (2007) detail a case study on technology-enhanced language learning, Internet-based teaching and student attitudes, and provide pedagogical suggestions for effectively using computer networking in second and foreign language classrooms. Moreover, recent educational reforms in China place increasing emphasis on the integration of new technologies in the English classroom (Towndrow, 2004).

Based on the above issues and arguments concerning the Chinese students’ culture of learning and the desirability of an alternative approach to teaching this group of learners, an intensive course on *English for Chinese* was offered to Chinese students before they moved on to take the regular courses. The course was actually a blend of instructionism and learner-centredness, supplemented with the use of technology. As mentioned earlier, this kind of scaffolding of teaching and learning is necessary to reduce the sense of confusion or even shock at a sudden change in the learning environment.

The course

Specifically, the course *English for Chinese* was designed and developed with the following objectives:

- To enrich students’ vocabulary
- To enable students to develop familiarity with the Indian accent and gain confidence in spoken English

- To strengthen students' writing skills
- To develop learner autonomy and learner interaction.

The duration of the course was two months, consisting of 25 hours of classes per week; the classes were taught by a team of teachers and the course was coordinated by the author. This team was formed exclusively for the Chinese students so as to create strong rapport between the learners and the teachers. The weekly schedule comprised 15 hours of theory, 5 hours of lab/activity and 5 hours of activities using digital library resources. The expected outcome of the course was that the students would have developed some key skills in English, would be able to use them appropriately in different situations and would be able to cope with their academic studies, much of which required the use of English.

Some (simple but effective) learner-centred activities

The course comprised of six modules, namely, listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary. Each component was primarily dealt with in the class with a view of making students comfortable with different strategies in English language teaching and learning. Furthermore, the classroom sessions helped a lot in developing a mutual understanding of different cultures which is essential to Chinese students because they tended to be shy and/or passive. This was then followed by lab hours or activity sessions so that they could interact with their peers or with their teacher and have the opportunity to practise what they learnt from the book. There was a slight variation in the teaching of the six modules for two groups of students. The "weaker" group (of average language competence) was given extra attention through additional worksheets and activities.

Listening

We have two ears and only one tongue in order that we may hear more and speak less.

These words of Diogenes Laertius emphasize the primacy of listening among all the skills. As listening involves receiving, interpreting and responding to the message, it is considered as the lynchpin of communication. Hence, listening was given utmost importance in the Chinese classroom and various listening activities were formulated. A passage or a paragraph was read aloud in the class and the students were asked to listen to it and express in their own words the content or the gist of what they had heard. Simple questions were asked to check whether they understood the passage. This session was supplemented with listening exercises in the language lab.

The *Sky Pronunciation Suite*, a multimedia programme designed and created by Don Friend, was used to enhance the learners' pronunciation skills—from phonemic awareness which helped students "see" and "hear" the sounds of English, to skills in stress and rhythm which helped students appreciate and engage in real, connected speech in English. This interactive programme also provided a wide variety of realistic language tests in everyday situations with the

focus on listening for information, listening and responding, listening and note taking and general listening.

The students were also asked to listen to English songs and fill in certain blanks or complete sentences to improve their vocabulary. There is nothing extraordinary with this strategy; however, my experience with using this with the Chinese students has been very positive. It has not only helped the learners focus their attention on particular words/phrases, but has also created a relaxed climate that was much needed in a classroom where the learners were generally anxious about their own proficiency in English. One example of a simple song used in the course was the one by Hoobastank, an immensely popular song among the Chinese students, and likewise a favorite which I found they shared with many Indian students as well.

THE REASON (The Song)
(excerpt)

I'm not a perfect person. There are _____ things I wish I didn't do but I _____ learning. I never _____ to do those things to you, and so I have to say _____ I go, that I just want you to know I've found a reason for me, to change who I used to be a reason to _____ over new, and the reason is you

Speaking

One reason why students usually do not interact in the classroom initially is that topics for discussion may be culturally inappropriate: "International students experience difficulty including culture shock, language difficulties, adjustments to customs and values, differences in education systems, isolation and loneliness, homesickness and a loss of established social networks" (Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002, p. 2). Students also hesitate to talk at the start of a course for fear of being misunderstood by others (Ryan & Twibell, 2000). To reduce the level of stress that students face in using the target language, opportunities for speaking practice on topics related or *relevant to their culture* were provided through activities involving pair work, group work and role-play that were meant to stimulate their creative thinking abilities. The learners became more comfortable when they were given topics about themselves or topics that were of interest to them.

Role-play is a very flexible and effective learning tool for enhancing the spoken skills of the learners. The Confucian principle,

What I hear I forget
What I see I remember
What I do, I know

is applicable in Chinese classrooms. Role-play allows students to practice language in a "safe" situation. Thus, the students were asked to consider different situations and then to present the situations through role play in class, which helped a lot in improving their interactive skills.

Moreover, PowerPoint Presentation (PPT) served as the best tool to develop

their intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The students were divided into groups and each group was asked to do a PowerPoint presentation on a topic of their choice. They were briefed on the major features of PPT and explanation was given on how the slides should be prepared. The students, following a procedure with some elements of Project-Based Learning under "Teaching and Learning", collected materials, and edited and presented them on the slides (see *Taylor Made Professional Development Pilot Programme*, 2000). Each member of the team prepared his/her part and delivered it in the class, after which they answered the questions posed either by the teacher or their classmates. This developed the learners' speaking skills and encouraged critical thinking.

Reading and writing

Reading and writing play a significant role in shaping a person's career. Many Chinese students prefer to read books and improve their vocabulary, but when it comes to writing, they are a bit reluctant. As researchers have pointed out, most Chinese colleges and universities seldom give practice in writing skills for their students (Ji, 2001). Most English exercises and standardized examinations are multiple choice questions and hence the students do not have adequate understanding of the complexity of writing. As a consequence, they generally fear being asked to write stretches of discourse because this entails the need to showcase a wide range of skills for which limited exercises and examinations have failed to prepare them. To address this fear, they were initially given short passages to read, and then in the instruction session, they were asked to comment on them either orally or by writing. This was followed by activities in the language lab where they had software like *English Master* to help them improve their reading and writing skills.

The activities based on digital library resources that supplemented the instructionist classes on writing proved to be effective as well. The students were given some activities and asked to work in the library. They had to collect information either from the Internet or from reference books, understand and edit it, and then write up the facts themselves. For instance, a list of eminent personalities was given from which they had to choose one, read about him/her and write in their own words all the pertinent information. When they came to class, they were expected to speak about that person in a clear and organized manner. This not only helped them to hone their skills in information gathering but also helped them in editing and presenting the information. Note making and transcoding (bar chart, pie diagram, table, and flow chart) improved their comprehension skills as well because they helped the students discriminate between critical and less important information and use the relevant ones in their presentation. These activities were holistic activities that did not separate the teaching of one skill from other skills, thus providing the students with a comprehensive experience in the learning of English which, in reality, is the way languages are learned in the first place.

Grammar and vocabulary

The instructionist approach was highly beneficial for teaching grammar and vocabulary because Chinese students preferred to use textbooks or printed worksheets for this module. These lessons/classes focused on explaining to the students the meaning of words, their pronunciation and their usage. The learners were allowed to view the Chinese equivalent in their electronic dictionary so that they could confidently use the word when the situation demanded. These sessions were followed by the lab sessions where the students had further practice in vocabulary and grammar through games, quizzes, and many other interactive exercises. The *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary Software* provided students with numerous grammar and vocabulary exercises.

Conclusion: General reflections

The two-month course provided the students with a variety of possibilities in terms of learning activities to enhance their communication skills. I observed that the students became more active participants in class and enjoyed the interactive sessions. Their development in the spoken skills could be seen through activities like "Shipwreck", where each student would take a role and plead for his/her life in a situation, where only one could be saved. They were able to justify their stand and further compared it with others to reiterate the point that their life is more important than others.

PowerPoint presentations also served as a comfortable platform for exhibiting their talents, as many Chinese are very good with computers. These presentations served as a multipurpose criterion, where they could use technology, exhibit their presentation skills, and develop awareness of their body language.

One of the biggest challenges is the writing dimension of their English language learning experience. There are pedagogical as well as cultural factors that constrain development in this area. As earlier mentioned, moving towards producing longer stretches of discourse is very difficult because of the grammar-focused, discrete-item approach to teaching writing that the students are familiar with. Moreover, the more and the longer they write, the greater possibilities of making errors, thus resulting in some kind of face-saving dilemma for both students and teacher.

Nevertheless, as a whole the teaching experience was a fulfilling one. My team members and I created a separate English course for Chinese students because of their unique English language learning background. We observed that the students became more comfortable with the teachers in the class and insisted on having more face to face interaction with the teachers. We have found that there was a place for Confucian values and lecture-type pedagogical practices in class, especially at the initial stage of the course, and learning was enhanced when these were soon followed by activities in the lab where some technological tools were available and later by interactive sessions, still with the help of technology in some cases. This methodological transition proved to be acceptable to the students because it respected the culture they had been accustomed to. They gradually accepted the wisdom of learner-centred activities and became more dynamic and confident English language learners.

THE AUTHOR

K. Meenakshi is an assistant professor in the School of Social Sciences and Languages of Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore, India.

Correspondence concerning this article should be directed to K. Meenakshi at k.meenakshi@vit.ac.in.

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