

An Analysis of College English Teaching and Classroom Interaction in China^{*}

LIN Ju-ye

Quzhou University, Quzhou, China

CET (College English Teaching) is a compulsory course for non-English majors in China. It has recently become a focus in higher education in China and abroad. Most research concentrates on ESL (English as Second Language) classroom interaction strategies, factors affecting classroom interaction and forms of classroom interaction. For decades, students who have been spending years studying English in China continue to have very limited communication ability due to antiquated teaching strategies of drills and memorization. Little research considers fundamental problems of CET and learning in China, let alone how to guide a Chinese college English teacher to consciously strengthen effective classroom interaction. Thus, this paper reviews China's current college English classroom teaching situation that has been influenced by the confluence of China's political history, past English education, and English teaching approaches in China. There are fundamental connections between CET approaches and Chinese college students' learning efficiency. This paper proposes a new CET teacher-training program that is designed to CHASE (cultivate, help, activate, supply, and establish) protocol for CET in China. This program attempts to change the drill and memorization teaching common in China today and encourage teachers to become more effective by creating a more accessible interactive classroom that results in more fluency for students learning English in China.

Keywords: CET (College English Teaching), college students' learning efficiency, classroom interaction, China

Introduction

China's English education is closely related to the political history of China and its influence. According to RUAN and Jacob (2009): "The first foreign language class was held at the Tong Wen Guan (the Imperial Tongwen College) in Beijing in 1862" (p. 467). At that time, English was the main foreign language and its teaching method was the Grammar-Translation method. English teaching was mostly to cultivate students to read and translate but not to speak and listen. Since 1862, China's English education has experienced four political periods in Chinese history with various teaching and learning approaches. Between 1958 and 1965, the Chinese government put forward the economic goal of "catching up with and suppressing Britain in 15 years". This encouraged Chinese to study English, but they learned English by consulting a dictionary and reciting words and texts (XIONG, 1982, p. 274). Between 1966 and 1976, all schools were closed because of Cultural Revolution,

^{*} The paper is supported by Zhejiang Association of Foreign Languages (No. ZWYB2013043). And many thanks to Wendy Weisenberg for her help in writing this paper.

LIN Ju-ye, lecturer, Foreign Language Department, Quzhou University.

so students had no opportunities and no time to study English, and they had to work on the farms or in factories. English education was almost on the edge of extinction in Chinese universities. Moreover, it was difficult for English teachers to choose English teaching material at that time, because the political period turned young people against authority, education, and tradition. English teachers had to be very careful about the teaching content, otherwise they would be suspected as a capitalist and they would be criticized and punished physically and spiritually in public. During this period, the teachers did not feel fulfilled while they were teaching English. Between 1978 and 1997, Chinese President DENG Xiao-ping set about to modernize China's economy. The emphasis on English education increased rapidly, because China wanted to open its door to the world, but one thing that changed little was the pedagogy. The most popular teaching approach, the Grammar-Translation method, along with influences from the Audio-Lingual method, continued to dominate instruction (Taylor, 2007, pp. 62-63). From 1998 until now, with China's entrance into WTO (World Trade Organization) and the successful hosting of Beijing Olympic Games in 2008, the international and national openness requires Chinese learners of English to develop their speaking and listening skills and requires further openness to foreign language learning (Lam, 2002, p. 247). Therefore, the development of English education in China was strongly influenced by different political periods.

Today, a lot of English teaching reforms have taken place in China but they mainly involved primary and secondary school. Although some new teaching modes and approaches have entered into the college classroom for English-majors, CET (College English Teaching) for non-English majors in China remained relatively unchanged. Almost all CET still applies the Grammar-Translation method, drills and memorization. In China, CET is a special compulsory course for non-English majors. Every college student in China must take at least one or two years College English. These classes are divided into two kinds that are "listening and intensive reading. The former is given in an audio lab and the latter is held in an ordinary classroom to include reading, speaking and writing" (RUAN & Jacob, 2009, p. 467). In fact, the former class is really mostly listening without speaking; the latter is really a drill and memorization teaching without much classroom interaction. In addition, it is known that most CET in China is the large-size-class teaching with 80-100 students. Although some universities have employed relative small-size-class teaching with 35-40 students in the past few years, others still teach College English in large classes, which also brings many limitations and problems to CET reform. This also retards CET classroom interaction. At the same time, CET teaching has a heavy burden of passing all kinds of exams like mid-term exam, final exam, CET4, CET6. In order to help college students to pass all kinds of English exams and get credit for the course, teachers often explain everything in detail and students spend lots of time making notes, memorizing and practicing all language points, which results in college students doing writing and reading much better than listening and speaking. The majority of Chinese college students are actually unable to understand and speak with Americans, let alone communicate with waiters in the restaurants or salesmen in the shops. Therefore, Chinese non-English major undergraduates are often assessed positively to "achieve high scores with low communicative competence" and CET is often described as "dumb English" and it is notorious for lack of classroom interaction and vitality. According to the article by Coppola and Kerr titled "Teaching in China: Two Views" (2013, p. 61), 60% of a class in the University of Michigan participates in formal peer-led study groups while there is little participation for formal

peer-led study groups in Peking University. On the basis of the analysis of CET and learning in China, the breakthrough of improving CET is likely to enhance and strengthen college students' capacity to listen and speak by various means of English classroom interaction.

Literature Review

Since the late 1940s, more and more researchers and scholars in China and abroad have been interested in the study of language classroom interaction. However, according to literature review, most relevant research concentrates on classroom interaction strategies (Bejarano, Levine, Olshtain, & Steiner, 1997), factors affecting classroom interaction (LIU, 2009), forms of classroom interaction (LU, 2011; Smith & Higgins, 2006) or teacher behaviors and feedback in facilitating a more interactive learning environment (Smith & Higgins, 2006). As a matter of fact, CET in China is greatly influenced by not only Chinese political educational policy but also traditional teaching situation. It is time to attach great importance on CET in China. However, little research considers fundamental problems of CET and learning in China, let alone how to guide a Chinese college English teacher to consciously strengthen effective classroom interaction. This paper proposes a new teacher-training program that is designed to CHASE (cultivate, help, activate, supply, and establish) protocol for teaching college English in China. This program attempts to change the drill and memorization teaching common in China today and encourages teachers to become more effective by creating a more accessible interactive classroom that results in more fluency for students learning English in China.

The Concept of Classroom Interaction

The concepts of interaction and classroom interaction vary from person to person. Tuan and Nhu (2010) argued that:

Interaction is meaning-focused and carried out to facilitate the exchange of information and prevent communication breakdowns. However, classroom interaction is of a particular nature and a range of functions including formal instruction, whole class and task management and development of group cohesion. (p. 30)

This paper claims that interaction may not only happen between two people but also between a human and objects such as books, televisions, computers, cell phones, etc.. Interaction is defined as a way of forming a special relationship by mutual responses verbally or behaviorally. Classroom interaction refers to a special and specific way of verbal or non-verbal communication between teacher and students or among students through all kinds of classroom activities that is closely related to everything occurring in class. The author also believes that an effective classroom interaction is one that almost all students participate and involve in class activities smoothly and spontaneously so as to learn knowledge and skills effectively and productively with the help of a teacher as a facilitator.

The Category and Function of Classroom Interaction

In terms of the form and function of classroom interaction, most scholars and teachers think that classroom interaction can be divided into two forms that are interaction between teacher and learners and interaction among learners. Classroom interaction can:

Create an active learning environment; focus attention; connect knowledge; help students organize their knowledge; provide timely feedback; demand quality; balance high expectations with student support; enhance motivation to learn;

encourage faculty-student and student-student interaction and communication; and help students to productively manage their time. Learners will get more knowledge from the lessons when they actively participate in their learning. (Tuan & Nhu, 2010, p. 30)

Classroom participation and interaction is very important for ESL (English as Second Language) learners. As Tuan and Nhu (2010) said:

Second language learners need comprehensible input, need to be in situations that provide maximum personal involvement in the communication and need opportunities to use the target language in social interactions. Learning a language is using the language for communicative purposes. (p. 43)

Hence, in any ESL classroom, there should be interaction activities with learners and/or between learners that offer learners opportunities to participate in their language learning, which is what should have happened in CET in China and is exactly the direction where CET in China should reform in.

The Factors of Effecting Classroom Interaction

CET and Learning in China lack active and effective classroom interaction related to the teacher and/or students. Factors related to the teacher are teaching rationality, teaching approach, teaching strategy, and even teachers' passion and personality. Factors related to students are motivation, English level, learning method, and personality, perseverance and persistence, and even family environment. According to LIU (2009), students' English proficiency, learning styles, and personality have a great effect on classroom interaction. Teacher is also a decisive role in classroom interaction such as professional competence, teaching method, and teacher's passion and attitude towards students and students' learning. She also stated that textbook and school culture influence classroom interaction (LIU, 2009, p. 94). Therefore, lots of factors should be taken into consideration in an interactive classroom.

The CET Classroom Interaction in China

Bejarano et al. (1997) presented that: "One way to improve the quality of communicative interaction in the classroom is to increase students' use of Modified-Interaction and Social-Interaction Strategies" (p. 203). According to LI and FAN (2011), the forms of classroom interaction between teacher and students in China are IRF (Initiation-Response-Feedback), IRFR (Initiation-Response-Feedback-Response), IR [II RI (I2 R2)] F structure, and IRIFI/R2F2 Structure (as cited in LU, 2011, pp. 85-87). The paper presents these forms of classroom interaction in order to point out that these classroom interaction forms are actually IRF between teacher and students in China. In other words, it is the most pervasive CET classroom interaction in China that teachers put forward questions to ask students, students respond, and then the teachers will give them some feedback. The only difference is that the middle-response process increases more responses from more students. The kind of typically traditional classroom interaction model with a strong Chinese teaching and learning idea is widely used in almost all CET classrooms.

The CHASE-Based Teacher Training Program

On the basis of China's history of English education and English teaching approaches in China, this paper proposes a new teacher-training program that is designed to CHASE protocol for teaching college English in China. The CHASE-based teacher-training program is the abbreviation of the initials of the five words that are Cultivate-Help-Activate-Support-Establish.

Cultivate Learners' Awareness of Classroom Interaction

Teachers are the essential source for cultivating learners' awareness of classroom interaction. LIU (2009, p. 94) stated that 65.87% students never take an active part in College English classroom interaction and 30.22% students are willing to join the interactive activities if it is interesting. According to what LIU stated, it can be seen that learners have the motivation to participate in classroom interaction activities, but they seldom have the participation chance. It is firmly believed that all teachers expect their students to actively involve in class. Why does CET in China lack classroom interaction? Either teachers do not have adequate awareness to cultivate students' participation in classroom interaction, or they do not provide enough opportunities for students to take part in classroom activities. As a result, teachers should offer more opportunities for learners to learn by input and output as well. For example, sometimes, teachers explain all meanings and grammar to save time and finish teaching tasks without interaction with students, which makes students feel learning boring and tedious. If teachers employ pictures to ask students to guess the meaning or try making sentences with the aid of peers, it will be more effective and interactive. Teacher can also explain meanings first and let students practice their usages by the means of passing a ball with playing music. In this way, every student in class will be active to participate in learning activities. It can not only arouse learners' interest and desire, but also stimulate them to challenge themselves in classroom interaction. Meanwhile, learners ought to realize that ESL learning can be acquired better through classroom interaction in comparison with only listening to teachers mechanically. We are most likely to have an interactive CET classroom on the condition that both teachers and students have the strong awareness and motivation to participate in classroom activities.

Help Learners Master Learning Strategies

It is insufficient to have a consciousness of classroom interaction participation for learners. Learners also ought to know some learning strategies even some life skills as a member of the world. According to Bejarano et al. (1997): "SL (Second Language) and FL (Foreign Language) learners need to be able to use various interaction strategies skillfully in order to interact effectively in communicative group activities" (p. 206). According to Coppola and Kerr (2013):

There is no time for the Chinese students at Peking University to reflect on, think about, and practice the breadth of skills we seek to develop in liberal arts programs, particularly these skills that develop from social interaction and self-management. (pp. 61-62)

Learning strategies can be mastered through repetitious practice in class. For example, Chinese students often learn words by rote or by teachers' explanation of usages in class. However, learning vocabulary from the context is more effective in pairs or group work. The language teacher can ask students to guess the part of speech and meaning from the context together in pairs. Then lead them discuss the usages and make a sentence in pairs or group work. In this way, the language class should be more interactive and productive. Concerning life skills, they can be learned not only through second-hand experience from textbooks, teachers, peers, and parents, but also through first-hand social experience by students themselves. For example, when students conduct pair work, group work even presentation, they are expected to listen quietly and carefully when other students are speaking and talking. The strategy is viewed as both a polite life skill and an effective learning method. In brief, in order to help students master learning strategies, on the one hand, teachers must get ready to teach students learning

strategies so that these learning strategies can help learners create a positive learning atmosphere and facilitate learners to study cooperatively and effectively; on the other hand, teachers should provide various communicative opportunities for learners to master some individual learning strategies as well as social skills.

Activate Multiple Roles in Classroom Interaction

Teachers play different roles in different learning periods to facilitate teaching and learning. Webb (2009, p. 1) examined four dimensions of the teacher's role: preparing students to collaborate, forming groups, structuring group work to guide or require students to engage in certain processes, and engaging in certain types of discourse with groups and the class. It is confirmed that the role of the teacher is not as the ruler and controller of a classroom but a designer, organizer, facilitator, stimulator, conductor, assistant, monitor, and even assessor in an interactive classroom. Teachers should play multiple roles in ESL classroom.

Generally speaking, when it comes to the role of teacher, classroom management is inevitable. Classroom management is a complex art that involves teachers' multiple roles at any time in any activity in the classroom to create an interactive classroom atmosphere. For example, when students are doing group work, the teacher is expected to walk around and offer timely help and guidance whenever they need as the role of an organizer, stimulator, monitor as well as an assistant. If some students are confused as well as diffident, they need professional help at that time and then the teacher should be like a friend as well as an assistant to help them get out of trouble. In this case, students will be more confident in their lessons. With teachers' timely help and encouragement, learners will participate in class with confidence and passion and they can also experience positive learning atmosphere and environment. By the transformation of multiple roles of the teacher in class, learning environment might be more harmonious and friendly. The interactive learning environment will promote learners to participate in classroom activities spontaneously and enhance their learning efficiency.

Supply Timely Teacher and Peer-Peer Feedback

Some teachers think that only children need praise and recognition. In fact, anyone has a strong need and desire to be accepted and approved. College students, without exception, also need praise and recognition. College English teachers can promote that sense of self-worth and acceptance in the way of providing consistently positive feedback on students' behaviors to reinforce learners' appropriate behaviors and active performance. For example, the learners who perform well in group work or presentations should be encouraged and praised in front of the whole class. The positive feedback can reinforce learners' internal learning motivation. The positive feedback from a teacher can also cause more helpful behaviors and even will infect everyone in the whole class. As Stephen (2011) claimed: "Higher education would be the place where teaching was highly valued and practiced as an art, with practitioners at that level routinely using positive reinforcement as a motivational tool, a powerful incentive to stimulate further academic achievement" (p. 52).

Smith and Higgins (2006) found in their study that: "Teachers created such an environment [a more conversational and symmetric interaction wherein, 'questions, answers and feedback progressively build into coherent and expanding chains of enquiry and understanding' (Alexander, 2004, p. 20)] through feedback moves which encouraged peer-peer feedback" (p. 495). Students benefit not only from teacher feedback but from peer feedback as well. A teacher should also let students know that a friendly and specific feedback is required. If the benefit of peer feedback is recognized, learners are likely to make more progress through peer feedback. For

example, in writing class, if a teacher would like students to reedit their research paper, the teacher can ask students to establish a group to correct their paper for peers in the form of spoken and written feedback. Also, let students discuss, evaluate and develop the peer feedback together. At the same time, the teacher should try to listen, respond, comment on what learners say and add his own objective feedback to students' feedback. In this way, learners can both enhance communicative skills and learning efficiency.

Establish a Teaching and Learning Partnership With Learners

Everyone is both a teacher and a student to some extent. As a teacher, it does not mean that he/she knows everything. Therefore, teachers should learn to learn from people around themselves even students in the classroom. As Baxter Magolda (2012, p. 34) argued, a teacher should change traditional learning thoughts and the role of authority in class in order to genuinely share authority with learners. He also thought that it is important to respect learners' thoughts and feelings and affirm the value of students' voices. Teachers also ought to trust learners' capabilities and interdependence between a teacher and students (Baxter Magolda, 2012, p. 35). Thus, ESL teachers are supposed to have confidence with learners' learning competence and knowledge. If it is possible, try to share knowledge with each other in order to establish a harmonious teaching and learning partnership.

To establish a teaching and learning partnership between a teacher and students, teachers can ask for some suggestions from students about how to improve teaching and learning more effectively. Meanwhile, learners can also take the initiative to ask teachers questions or ask teachers for help. For example, a suggestion and help box can be installed outside of the classroom to seek suggestions from students if it is not convenient in class. The box of suggestion and help has a double function for teacher and students. The teacher can collect lots of ideas to improve teaching and learning; students can seek help if they have some trouble with their lessons. This practice not only arouses learners' enthusiasm and passion for learning but also creates a positive teaching and learning partnership with students. Only if there is a good and positive learning climate in the classroom, teaching and learning will be easier and more effective and learners are inclined to take part in classroom activities spontaneously.

In summary, this CHASE-based teacher-training program attempts to change the drill and memorization teaching common in China today and encourage teachers to become more effective by creating a more accessible interactive classroom that results in more fluency for students learning English in China. It is aimed at raising students' listening and speaking ability and improving CET and learning efficiency in China. It is certain that each teaching procedure requires CET teachers to carry them out effectively, along with learners' active participation.

Conclusions and Implications

Since the late 1940s, more and more researchers and scholars in China and abroad have been interested in the study of language classroom interaction. Any successful classroom interaction needs the joint participation of a teacher as well as learners. With mutual efforts and participation from both teacher and learners, high-efficiency and ideal-language classroom interaction will be achieved. On the basis of analysis on the current CET situation, we believe that the breakthrough is to enhance and strengthen Chinese college students' capacity to listen and speak by various means of College English classroom interaction. This paper is intended to put forward an effective teacher training program for CET classroom interaction in order to enhance Chinese college English students' communicative competence and improve CET learning efficiency. The program hopefully helps to reform and change the low-efficiency of college English teaching and learning in China. What is more, some

ideas and teaching activities mentioned in the study will be helpful to ESL learners and teachers. The study on the idea of CET classroom interaction in China is conducive to the exploration of more effective CET approaches and will cause College English teachers to renew teaching notion. Because of the limitations to time and ability, the paper is short of observation and data analysis and its conclusion is, to some extent, superficial and subjective. Further quantitative and qualitative analysis is needed.

References

- Alexander, R. (2000). *Culture and pedagogy: International comparisons in primary education*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Alexander, R. (2004). *Towards dialogic teaching rethinking classroom talk*. Cambridge: Dialogos UK.
- Baxter Magolda, M. B. (2009). *Authoring your life: Developing and internal voice to navigate life's challenges*. Sterling, V.A.: Stylus.
- Baxter Magolda, M. B. (2012, January/February). Building learning partnerships. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 44(1), 32-38.
- Bejarano, Y., Levine, T., Olshtain, E., & Steiner, J. (1997). The skilled use of interaction strategies: Creating a framework for improved small-group communicative interaction in the language classroom. *Elsevier Science*, 25(2), 203-214.
- Cook, V. (Ed.). (2000). *Linguistics and second language acquisition*. London: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press & Macmillan Publishers Ltd..
- Coppola, B. P., & Kerr, K. (2013). Teaching in China: Two views. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 45(1), 58-63.
- Corden, R. (1992). The role of the teacher. In K. Norman (Ed.), *Thinking voices the work of the National Oracy Project*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- DfES (Department for Education and Skills). (2004). *Primary national strategy excellence and enjoyment: Learning and teaching in the primary years*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Doughty, C. J., & Long, M. H. (Eds.). (2003). *The handbook of second language acquisition* (pp. 224-255). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Ellis, R. (1990). *Instructed second language acquisition: Learning in the classroom*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd..
- Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, F. P. (1987). *Joining together group theory and group skills*. Prentice-Hall International, Inc..
- Lam, A. (2002). *English in education in China: Policy changes and learners' experiences*. Blackwell Publishers Ltd..
- Leung, M.-Y., LU, X. H., CHEN, D. Y., & LU, M. (2008). Impacts of teaching approaches on learning approaches of construction engineering students: A comparative study between Hong Kong and Mainland China. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 97(2), 135-145.
- LIU, Z. (2009). Exploring factors of affecting college English classroom interaction. *Journal of Lincang Teachers' College*, 18(3), 91-95.
- LU, Y. F. (2011). A tentative study of how to improve the effectiveness of classroom interaction. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 2(3), 84-91.
- RUAN, Y. H., & Jacob, W. J. (2009). The transformation of college English in China. *Frontiers of Education in China*, 4(3), 466-487.
- Smith, H., & Higgins, S. (2006). Opening classroom interaction: The importance of feedback. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 36(4), 485-502.
- Stephen, S. (2011). *A new look at the interactive writing classroom: Methods, strategies, and activities to engage students*. Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Education.
- Taylor, T. W. (2007). *Modernizing English teacher education in China: Faculty perspectives*. Michigan: ProQuest, UMI Dissertations Publishing.
- Tuan, L. T., & Nhu, N. T. K. (2010). Theoretical review on oral interaction in EFL Classrooms. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 1(4), 29-48.
- Webb, N. M. (2009). The teacher's role in promoting collaborative dialogue in the classroom. *The British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 79(1), 1.
- Wells, G. (1999). *Dialogic inquiry towards a sociocultural practice and theory of education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wilson, J., & Haugh, B. (1995). Collaborative modeling and talk in the classroom. *Language and Education*, 9(4), 265-281.
- XIONG, Z. B. (1982, June). Further comments on English education in China. *TESOL Quarterly*, 16(2), 273-277.