
CHINA EFL: English Corner

Martin Wolff, Guangzhou, China

About the Author

[Martin Wolff, J.D.](mailto:holisticenglish@yahoo.com) – holisticenglish@yahoo.com

Martin Wolff has taught Holistic English, international business law and marketing at top tier, 2nd tier, 3rd tier colleges and universities and corporate training centers for the past seven years in China. He has also been a teacher trainer. In the past seven years he has published 20 journal articles, 9 chapters and 5 textbooks.

If we are to believe the single definition of English Corner produced by Google and Google Scholar searches, English Corner is unique to China.

DEFINITION

English Corner

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

The phrase **English Corner** commonly applies to informal periods of instruction in English held at schools and colleges in China. These sessions are sometimes lead by native Chinese teachers or less often by teachers who are native speakers of English. The emphasis in these sessions is on improving the oral English skills of the participants. Often the activities in primary and secondary schools focus on cultural activities such as Halloween, Thanksgiving and Christmas among other festivals and holidays common in English speaking countries. As an informal session the topics can be far ranging. Usually **English Corner** activities are held on Friday afternoons after lunch in many schools.

HISTORY OF ENGLISH CORNER

We were unable to find any English written history of English Corner (EC). However, it is commonly believed that EC began in Shenyang City, Liaoning Province, some 25 years ago when one Chinese student observed another Chinese student reading an English book while waiting for a traffic light to change. It is said that they struck up a conversation and agreed to meet back at that corner, next week, same time, same corner.

The authenticity of this oral history must be questioned in light of known Chinese culture. First, Chinese are loathe to read English, even as a class assignment. It is suspect that a Chinese would be reading an English book on a public street. Second, the reported “corner” intersection is a circle surrounded by small public parks. There is no “corner.” Third, Chinese are not known for their compliance with traffic signals and it would be highly unusual to have someone actually waiting for a green light to cross. This historical account sounds more like a foreign interpretation of a Chinese oral historical account.¹

It is undeniable that EC is unique to China. What began as an alleged chance social meeting on a public street has morphed through the years into several different formats.

China now has the formal EC where a foreign teacher addresses an assembled group of Chinese students. In the west this is simply called a voluntary lecture. Then there is the informal EC where students are encouraged to ask questions after the lecture is completed. Then there is the EC assigned to a room where students can congregate and chat in English with a foreign teacher. There is the open air version held in the public square of the school. Sometimes the open air EC is advertised in the media or at other schools to encourage participation beyond the local academic community.

Then there are the variations including an “optional coffee hour.” Under this version, a class is herded into a small cramped room with no air conditioning when the outside temperature is 32C and told to sit on stools. They are offered coffee and Chinese snacks. Then they are instructed to chat with the foreign teacher. When the foreign teacher asks “What would you like to do?” The unanimous response is “LEAVE.” The foreign teacher is later criticized for dismissing a “class’ without permission.

The original social nature of a chance street corner meeting of two people with similar interests has been institutionalized and bastardized by an exuberant but misguided academic community. The institutionalization or organization of English Corner has converted an English acquisition experience into an English learning classroom extension.

EFFICACY OF ENGLISH CORNER

Searches of Google and Google Scholar provide not a single scientific study of the efficacy of EC.

There are stories about how successful a particular EC may be but this is predicated solely upon the number of participants.

EC has proliferated and spread to almost all of the 1,200 plus Chinese colleges and universities, all without any scientific basis.

LOVE IT OR LOATHE IT?

A net citizen asks: “Is the idea of an English Corner to get the students to speak English or the foreign teachers to answer questions about whether they like Chinese food? I'm thinking the former but what happens with ours is the latter.”

The EC issue has been thoroughly thrashed on many internet China teacher chat rooms and forums. From these postings we observe the following:

1. Very few foreign teachers like EC.
2. Very few foreign teachers find any value in EC.
3. Many foreign teachers are required to participate in EC because it is written into their employment contract.
4. Foreign teachers claim that the most successful EC is when it is organized by the students rather than the administration.
5. Chinese students usually ask a set group of questions at EC:

Do you like China?

Do you like Chinese people?

Do you like Chinese culture?

Do you like Chinese food?

Where do you live? (Where are you from?)

Do you play piano?

Do you play guitar?

What is your favorite color?

Who is your favorite sports star? (Yao Ming is usually the only acceptable answer.)

While most foreign teachers loathe EC, a super majority of Chinese administrators and teachers swear by the benefits of EC. They point to the foreign teacher conducted EC as proof that they have an English Speaking Environment on their campus. The foreign teacher conducted EC allows the Chinese administrators and teachers to completely abdicate any responsibility for creating or maintaining a true English Speaking Environment on their campus.ⁱⁱ

In reality, as soon as an EC is established, i.e. a specific time when a foreign teacher is available for students to communicate in English, there is a tacit admission that no English speaking Environment exists on that campus so there must be a designated time to speak English. EC is a significant factor in identifying whether or not a particular campus has an English Speaking Environment.

CREATE AN ENGLISH SPEAKING ENVIRONMENT

Creating an English Speaking Environment (ESE) is no simple task. Each campus is unique and must be assessed independently. The campus evaluation should include an evaluation of five factors: 1. Physical facilities; 2. Chinese staff; 3. Students; 4. Campus support staff such as bus drivers, cooks, librarians, etc.; and 5. On campus residents and their families.

Each factor is unique on each campus and defies any simple single formula for creating an ESE.

The following is an evaluation recently conducted of a campus in Southern China, Guangdong Province.

When contemplating the creation of an English speaking environment, the proper definition must be kept in mind:

There are two required elements to a proper ESE. A proper ESE is one where the students are inundated with comprehensible English input and where it is easier to communicate in English rather than in the native Putonghua. An English speaking environment is defined as: *"An environment where English is the dominant language."* Or, *"an environment where people are compelled to speak English".ⁱⁱⁱ*

The conversion of a Chinese speaking environment at a school located in China to an English speaking environment at a school, located in China, is a monumental task akin to eating an elephant.

The only way to eat an elephant is one bite at a time. The transformation of a Chinese speaking environment to an English speaking one must be accomplished one step at a time.

In designing an English speaking environment there are two major resources in play. There is the physical facility and the people. Both resources play an equally important role.

The facility must impress the casual visitor with the fact that it is an English speaking and training facility. Everywhere you go and everything you see on campus should remind you to speak English. This begins with a western style STOP sign on both sides of the entrance gate and bilingual signage everywhere on campus, buildings to street names. Even the sign on the mango tree warning against picking should be bilingual. Since the hotel is on campus, it must be included.

Every room of every building should encourage speaking English.

However, the signage would not be my first priority. My first priority would be something that is most impressionable, has the highest cost effectiveness, reaches the most people constantly and has an unforgettable and unavoidable impact. (At Xinyang Agricultural College the first priority was a video wall in the main square that would play English movies with English subtitles every night to the entire college community. During the day it would play English news. The square is crossed regularly by 90% of the college community, several times a day.)

If I had the authority, power and money, my first transformation project at the training center would be as follows;

Purchase 5 flat screen TVs and permanently tune each one to a different English news channel.

TV #1 and #2 - locate on the second floor of the campus cafeteria, one in each room.

TV #1 tuned to BBC news.

TV #2 tuned to CNN news

(These channels are available through local cable service)

TV #3 and #4 should be located on the first floor of the campus cafeteria.

TV #3 should be tuned to Al Jazeera English news

TV #4 should be tuned to Russian TV English news.

(These channels are available through a 1,000-rmb satellite dish.)

Al Jazeera extensively covers the Middle East and Africa , both destinations for our trainees. Russian TV covers the Russia , the former Soviet Union block and the "...stan" countries bordering China and to which our trainees are assigned.

TV #5 should be located in the 1st floor lobby of the teaching building and should be tuned to CCTV 9 International.

The sound on all sets should be set just above the din but not so loud as to be intrusive beyond the target audience.

The first thing people entering the teaching building would hear is English and the last thing they hear before leaving would be English. People waiting for the elevators would have the opportunity to watch and hear English, great preparation for their further activity on upper floors.

The 4 TVs in the cafeteria should be available throughout the work day and not just during the meals. People should be able to watch anytime they have spare time or leisure time.

Subsequently I would want to create an English reading room that contains free choice English reading materials exclusively. These should not be academic reading materials but general interest and at varying English levels. For instance, the newspapers should include China Daily, Shanghai Star, 21st Century, South China morning Post etc. Magazine should include Marvel Comics, 16, Ms. Cosmopolitan, Esquire, Modern Mechanics, P.C., Auto trends, Home and Garden, better house and Garden, Vogue etc. Books should include romance novels, mysteries, detective stories, BUT NOT THE CLASSICS.

A video library should be available with English movies and English subtitles or no subtitles, BUT NO CHINESE SUBTITLES.

An English karaoke room should be established where everyone can enjoy singing English songs BUT NO CHINESE SONGS.

All computers and sound labs must have English programming NOT CHINESE. The computers can add Chinese language capability to the English programming so that communications may be prepared in a bilingual format.

The above is my preliminary assessment of the facility needs of primary importance. It is not intended as an exhaustive list.

Then we must have a comprehensive plan to deal with the human resource on campus. These must be divided into faculty and staff, service workers and incidental people. Two separate plans will be required.

The faculty and staff will require mini-seminars on language learning versus language acquisition, immersion, how to create an English speaking environment. They will need to learn their importance in creating an English speaking environment.

The service staff (bus drivers, hotel clerks, to cafeteria waitresses) may need basic English courses.

Then there are the incidental people. One large segment of this group is the children who live on campus. I would suggest, at the very least, a Saturday morning English cartoon hour where the parents can take their babies and young children and older children can attend on their own.

Another large segment of incidental people are the spouses who live on campus. I would suggest

that every on campus home be provided with English TV channels.

The third and lowest of my priorities would be English activities such as speech contests, debates etc. Such activities are English speaking opportunities but do not create the English speaking environment and are least important.

An English corner is a tacit admission that there is no English speaking environment so a special time for speaking English is set aside. And then it is relegated to a "corner" not the center.

The above are my preliminary ideas after spending a few days on campus and speaking with numerous staff and students. The above is not intended to be exhaustive and the staff and faculty should be encouraged to give input. Make them partners in the transition work and they will be more willing participants.

Students added the following suggestions for creating an ESE:

English movies in dorm by closed circuit TV - no Chinese TV
Bi-lingual signage on campus
English electronic sign on Hotel
English music on Public Address system
Bi-lingual food signs in cafeteria
Cafeteria staff should speak basic English
Ability to check out English books from library
English magazines such as fashion, beauty care, home decoration, new autos, popular mechanics etc.
Speech contest
Campus radio station should be all English
Saturday or Sunday English Movie Theater
Every classroom should have English signage

FIRST BITE OF THE ELEPHANT

Assuming the threshold decision has been made to try creating an ESE, step, by step, what is the first step? Again, there is no single simple answer for every situation. The

following is a first step taken at a Guangzhou institution of higher learning very recently:

Yesterday the foreign teachers convened a special staff meeting with all of the Chinese staff in attendance. This was a first for me. I mean I have never heard of the foreign teachers successfully demanding a staff meeting nor have I ever heard of 100% attendance at any staff meeting. The Chinese Dean, being fully aware of the meeting agenda, approved of the meeting.

A foreign teacher presented a complaint received from several students. "The Chinese staff does not speak to us in English outside the classroom."

The foreign teacher pointed out that we are teaching English majors in an English program and are employed by an English department. She also pointed out that all of the staff has very good English skills and there is no apparent reason for the staff not communicating in English outside the classroom.

We then listened to an hour of excuses.

Another foreign teacher was called upon for comments. He walked to the front of the room wearing a red baseball cap with yellow letters that read "SPEAK ENGLISH." He just stood there for two minutes until the laughter died down. Then he turned his back, took off the red cap and replaced it with a black cap. He then removed his outer shirt to reveal a black undershirt that read "ENGLISH ONLY" on the back. More laughter.

Then he whirled around displaying the front of the shirt and the cap, both of which read "ENGLISH POLICE." Both hands were cocked like pistols and he yelled "WE ARE SERIOUS." Then all of the foreign teachers displayed their black shirts and caps.

After the laughter died down, it was explained that every week arrest warrants would be issued for teachers who spoke to students in Chinese outside the classroom. Then the room went very silent. It was

explained that every week a letter would be sent to the President identifying those teachers who were hindering student development by refusing to speak to students in English outside the classroom. Then every teacher was issued a red cap. Everyone put their cap on and agreed that they needed to speak to the students in English outside the classroom.

This morning, as the Chinese teachers went to their classrooms without their red caps, they were met by a room full of students wearing red caps reminding the teachers to "SPEAK ENGLISH." The teachers were very surprised and taken aback. The students explained that they refused to speak with any teacher who spoke to them in Chinese.

The next few weeks should prove very interesting.

The Dean is now suggesting that red caps should be issued to all freshmen at the orientation each September.



CONCLUSION

An ESE provides an essential element for English acquisition^{iv} while an English Corner is simply a tool for more English learning.^v Consider the definition of EC again, "...informal periods of instruction in English"

The existence of an English Corner is a present danger and imminent threat to the effective creation of an English Speaking Environment. It not only constitutes an impediment, it enables the excuse makers.

Kill the English Corner and create an English Speaking Environment.

The great unanswered question is; why does China continue to implement a process that is without scientific basis and shows no appreciable benefits? After 25 years of English Corners, Chinese college graduates are still unable to produce comprehensible output.

i According to Paul Theroux's book "Riding the Iron Rooster: by Train through China", English corner started in 1979 in People's Park in Shanghai by old men who wanted to keep up their pre-Revolutionary English that they learned in mission schools. In fact, I attended the EC there in 1989 and talked to some of the old timers, many of whose English was impeccable. As you know, during the Cultural Revolution, anyone heard speaking English could be sent to re-education camps or worse, so there was a lot of pent-up demand after that. David Dixon, Foreign Expert, Shanghai

ii Qiang/Wolff (2008) China EFL: Why Chinese Universities do not Provide an English Speaking Environment, Ch. 12, Education in China: 21st Century Issues and Challenges, Nova Science Publishers, New York

iii [\[1\]](http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Marlow-ServiceLearning.html) Creating Authentic Dialog: ESL Students as Recipients of Service Learning, Stephanie Marlow, Boise State University (Boise , Idaho , USA) "An environment where authentic dialog with native English speakers occurs on a regular basis presents ESL students with the possibility to grow both linguistically and socially" . <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Marlow-ServiceLearning.html>

iv Language acquisition refers to the process of natural assimilation, involving intuition and subconscious learning, which is the product of real interactions between people where the learner is an active participant. It is similar to the way children learn their native tongue, a process that produces functional skill in the spoken language without theoretical knowledge; develops familiarity with the phonetic characteristics of the language as well as its structure and vocabulary, is responsible for oral understanding, the capability for creative communication and for the identification of cultural values. Teaching and learning are viewed as activities that happen in a personal psychological plane. The acquisition approach praises the communicative act and develops self-confidence in the learner.

A classic example of language acquisition involves adolescents and young adults who live abroad for a year in an exchange program, attaining near native fluency, while knowing little about the language in the majority of cases. They have a good pronunciation without a notion of phonology, don't know what the perfect tense is, modal or phrasal verbs are, but they intuitively recognize and know how to use all the structures.

Second language acquisition occurs when comprehensible input is delivered in a low-anxiety situation, when real messages of real interest are transmitted and understood. ... we learn best only when the pressure is completely off, when anxiety is zero, when the acquirer's focus is entirely on communication; in short, when the interchange or input is so interesting that the acquirer 'forgets' that it is in a second language. Krashen, Stephen (1981) Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning, Pergamon Press Inc.

v The concept of language learning is linked to the traditional approach to the study of languages and today is still generally practiced in high schools worldwide. Attention is focused on the language in its written form and the objective is for the student to understand the structure and rules of the language through the application of intellect and logical deductive reasoning. The form is of greater importance than communication. Teaching and learning are technical and governed by a formal instructional plan with a predetermined syllabus. One studies the theory in the absence of the practical. One values the correct and represses the incorrect. There is little room for spontaneity. The teacher is an authority figure and the participation of the student is predominantly passive. In the teaching of English in Brazil, for example, the student will study the function of the interrogative and negative modes, irregular verbs, modals, etc. The student learns to construct sentences in the perfect tense, but only learns with difficulty when to use it. It's a progressive and cumulative process, normally tied to a preset syllabus that includes memorization of vocabulary. It seeks to transmit to the student knowledge about the language, its functioning and grammatical structure with its irregularities, its contrasts with the student's native language, knowledge that hopefully will produce the practical skills of understanding and speaking the language. This effort of accumulating knowledge becomes frustrating because of the lack of familiarity with the language.

Innumerable graduates with arts degrees in English are classic examples of language learning. They often are trained and theoretically able to teach a language that they can communicate in only with extreme difficulty. Krashen, Stephen (1981) Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning, Pergamon Press Inc.