
CHINA EFL: Corporate Training and Holistic English are not Compatible

Martin Wolff, China

I. INTRODUCTION

Although “English Fever” is running rampant throughout China and is claimed to be “market driven”; the rush to institute English learning nationwide, with more than 1,000,000 Chinese teachers of English who are themselves, for the most part, unable to produce comprehensible oral or written English or teach in the target language, has miserably failed to meet market needs. The goal of universities and colleges throughout China is to have students pass national English competency examinations such as TEM 4, CET 4 and CET 6. Setting aside, for the moment, the fact that these national English competency examinations bear little or no relationship to comprehensible output, the pass rates have become the exclusive focus of administrative attention and false pride. This is in part due to demands of Chinese employers who are misinformed that passing CET 6 is the evidence of an accomplished English speakerⁱ. Wang Shugua, President of Harbin Institute of Technology is quoted as saying “I recognize CET as a good tool to promote English studies but I am against the practice of regarding a CET certificate as the prerequisite for graduation, which is totally misleading.” He tried to eliminate the requirement for a CET certificate in order to graduate from HIT, but gave up without success. “I had to reconsider the usefulness of CET certificates in job hunting for our graduates. Almost all employers want their recruits to have a CET certificate, so I had to push my students to pass the CET for their good, although it is against my will,”ⁱⁱⁱ

The market need to have graduates who can produce comprehensible English output has been completely ignored. Consequently, foreign employers, Joint Venture employers and Chinese companies doing business abroad are hiring university graduates from India because they are better able to produce comprehensible oral and written English, than their Chinese counterparts. Imagine more than 5 million Chinese university graduates, who have learned English for 16 years, many of whom are being passed over for Chinese jobs in China. This is simply unacceptable! English is one of “*the 10 most popular disciplines that saw low rates of employment last year.*”ⁱⁱⁱ Chinese universities are under tremendous pressure to change curriculums to meet the needs of the job market. But instead, they are simply reducing enrollments in certain majors.^{iv} “One of the reasons for the difficulty in university graduates finding employment is that they are unable to satisfy the needs of employers,” he said. (Yang Weiguo, associate professor of Beijing-based Renmin University) He said the universities needed to adjust their teaching methods and content quickly to conform to social development and demand.^v

Both “in house” and private corporate English training centers are proliferating throughout the business hubs of China. The curriculum is usually industry specific and

amounts to ESP (English for a specific purpose), i.e. the teaching of technical language and phrases to meet the perceived need to limit English communication to a standard or formal form of English related to a specific discipline such as medical English, legal English, architecture English, IT English, etc..

Holistic English is to English language learning what Chinese traditional medicine is to health care, a holistic approach. Holistic English moves away from the traditional focus on grammar and lexis. “While there is a need for specialist terminology, the greatest need of international employers is to have employees who can communicate successfully in English. Thus, communication and accommodation should be emphasized in language instruction; the mastering of perfect grammatical forms is an added bonus that can be reserved for later refinement. Flexibility is just as important as the mastering of prescribed forms, if not more so. In order to communicate across international boundaries, students must learn to adjust to their interlocutor in order to facilitate understanding. Moreover, because of the growing use of English as a global lingua franca, students of the language need to be exposed to a wide range of English accents in order to increase their abilities to understand the people they are likely to encounter in an international career. Furthermore, it is not only formal but informal language skills that should be practiced at university; students should be made aware of the different genres and registers in English, so that they can determine the appropriate use of the language in the various situations in which they are likely to find themselves. Finally, students should be taught skills that allow them to mediate between languages and cultures. Thus an intercultural approach is needed in language teaching, so that future employees are ‘able to view different cultures from a perspective of informed understanding’ (Corbett 2003:2)^{vi} An approach that has the goal of successful intercultural communication at its core will prepare students for the relatively unpredictable needs of language use in corporate Europe.”^{vii}

II. EXPERIMENTS

We have now experimented with Holistic English at three of China’s largest IT companies in Dalian, Liaoning Province and at China’s largest state owned Oil Company in Guangdong Province. All four experiments were terminated prior to the previously established completion date.

The premature termination was not due to any lack of enthusiasm or motivation of the trainees. Nor was it due to any lack of progress by the trainees. The trainees were enthusiastic, motivated and disappointed by their respective administration’s failings to fully support the Holistic English Program or to assist in the creation of an English Speaking Environment.

Unfortunately, the administrators and program directors are so steeped in language learning methodology that they are simply unable or unwilling to grasp the concept of language acquisition, notwithstanding their proclamations of support.

The administrators and program directors initially expressed their full support for the Holistic English Program but that support eroded very quickly and evaporated within the first four weeks of the program.

There was a predilection to teach set phrases specific to their particular industry, (ESP). Although the trainees lacked a sufficient English background to speak English, let alone use it creatively, they were expected to memorize set phrases that would be “useful” in their specific job. General English knowledge and ability to creatively use English were not seen as “useful.” This is similar to teaching a parrot to speak “Poly want a cracker.” The parrot does not know who Poly is, does not know what a cracker is and has no idea if Poly really wants a cracker, but the parrot can speak. Trainees speaking set phrases are parrots.

There was a refusal to provide even the minimal efforts of support for creating an English speaking environment, after initially promising such support. In one program the Chinese staff agreed to speak to the trainees in English outside the classroom but this never materialized. Instead, the excuses flowed like water. Exceptions to the “English only” approach became so numerous that there was no English spoken to the trainees outside the classroom.

The administrators and project managers pandered to trainee complaints. When trainees complained about having to do homework to prepare to watch a movie, the leaders sought ways to eliminate the homework while completely ignoring the need for the trainees to familiarize themselves with the new vocabulary of the movie to make it more comprehensible. Some administrators went so far as to suggest that the homework could be substituted with Chinese subtitles, completely ignorant of any modern language acquisition theory.

When the trainees complained about having to watch the movies in a group and instead favored watching the movies individually on their laptops, an edict was handed down, without any consultation, that group viewing would be terminated. This unilateral decision ignored the checks and balances built into the Holistic English Program that included checking homework before watching the movie, checking homework after watching the movie and grading the homework in a timely manner to provide valuable feedback to the trainees. It also ignored the value of group reaction that prompts a trainee to question why they failed to react, as the rest of the group reacted, to particular scenes. It allowed undisciplined trainees to make numerous excuses for not watching the movie at all, such as not enough time, too busy, movie too long etc. It also removed the language acquisition element of watching the movie for fun and replaced it with an opportunity to stop, rewatch, and memorize language chunks, all elements of language learning, and thus transforming the Holistic English Program into just another language learning class. And last but not least, allowing the trainees to watch the movie on their personal computer, at their leisure, required illegal distribution of movies in violation of China’s copyright laws. This was somewhat ironic since the IT companies were vigorously attempting to protect their own work from piracy.

When administrators and project managers make partial class observations and do not hear recitation of English, they assume that there is no “useful” activity occurring and that the course must be changed.

Administrators and project managers could not see the value in a broad based English background, expanded world view or increased business knowledge. The IT companies objected to movies that would inform the trainees of copyright laws or sexual harassment laws. It was discovered that the IT trainees were treated as “property” without any personal intellectual property rights. The company owned them and everything they created. The administrators and project managers were all former university professors in a system that silently condoned sexual harassment of students by professors. There was an element of self-preservation in not wanting the trainees to learn about sexual harassment laws.

III. CONCLUSION

Comprehensible oral English production first requires comprehensible input. Actual speech in the L2 requires self-confidence, intrinsic motivation and autonomous learning strategies. Progress is not measurable by how many set phrases a person can remember, usually without any appreciation for appropriate use.

Language acquisition success is observable when a student who previously mumbled a few English words while staring at his shoes or while surveying the paint on the ceiling, looks you in the eye and produces a coherent and comprehensible English sentence. Success is when a student who never speaks in class becomes so talkative that they must be asked to give others a chance to practice their English. Success is when a student relates a news story they read but were not assigned to read. Success is when a student responds instantaneously, in correct English, to a completely unexpected situation. But these are not the measures the administrators and project managers are seeking.

The English learning methodology of the past 25 years that has failed to produce speakers of comprehensible English is favored under some misguided notion that just another 4 or six months and it will work.

They want to hear their parrots talk!

i Yuankai, Tang, 9/6/07 Beijing Review, Education Feared to Raise Robots http://www.bjreview.com.cn/special/txt/2007-08/31/content_74644.htm (accessed July 10, 2008)

ii Beijing Review., Education Feared to Raise Robots http://www.bjreview.com.cn/special/txt/2007-08/31/content_74644.htm (accessed July 10, 2008)

iii http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2008-06/27/content_6799171.htm

Beijing-based survey company Mycos HR

iv Hot courses' won't secure good jobs(Xinhua News Agency January 12, 2008) http://www.china.org.cn/china/national/2008-01/12/content_1239129.htm (accessed October 10, 2008)

v 20% university graduates fail to find jobs in 2007 (Xinhua News Agency January 14, 2008) <http://www.china.org.cn/english/China/239233.htm> (Accessed October 1, 2008)

vi Corbett, J. 2003, An intercultural Approach to English Language Teaching, Clevedon & Buffalo: Multilingual Matters

vii Erling and Walton 2007, English at work in Berlin, English Today Volume 23 Number 1