

MUTE ENGLISH –The Latin of China

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ABSTRACT

“Mute English” (ME) is a unique Chinese phenomenon ignored by linguistic scholars but derided by Chinese students. It is a communicative language taught as if it were a dead language, like Latin. We explore the origins, as well as the cause and effect of this phenomenon.

INTRODUCTION

Mute English is a term brought to the authors’ attention by a post-graduate, non-English major, at Sun Yat-sen University (Zhongshan) when describing culture shock after attending the first day of classes in Holistic English. (<http://chinaholisticenglish.org> “First Day Student Culture Shock.” September 2009)

Carter Class 1

September 20th, 2009 at 9:26 am

I entered a strange classroom for oral English and had a special experience there last Monday afternoon. All the seats were surrounded in circles next to desks and many colorized banners were pasted on walls in the classroom. A dumpy oldster with white hair and a red hat who was pretty much the same as the KFC but looked so strict was walking up and down. It was my first time to be near a foreigner for such a long time. I was a little nervous and perplexed but sometimes the oldster was humorous and the classroom was filled with laughter. *Maybe my mute English will be improved here, I look forward to it.*

Maxwell.Class 5

September 23rd, 2009 at 11:36 pm · Edit

Thank you for your encouragement to me for learning English, and your stories that increased my experience and awareness of social life. This class touched a string and you gave me interest and motivation to learn English anew. I have learned English for seven years, but not ever found satisfaction in my English. *After this class, I realized that why I didn’t study English well. The answer is that I had learned “mute English”.* From now on, I will start

my English learning life by a new way. With the strict upbringing and rules from this class, and the Professor Wolff's humorous expression, I believe I can move a step on the road of learning, and good habits from this class which will be beneficial in my future when employed.

Carter and Maxwell are just two of 670 post-graduate students attending one of China's top ten universities and representing 195 undergraduate colleges and universitiesⁱ from every Provinceⁱⁱ of China.

Once apprised of this term, the authors provided the students an opportunity to express their opinions as to the cause and effect of ME. (<http://chinaholisticenglish.org> "MUTE ENGLISH" October 2009) Each discussion point is preceded by at least one student comment, prompting the analysis.

DEFINITION

Mute English

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Mute English is a phenomenon, especially common in the People's Republic of China, where people can read and understand English as a second language but cannot speak it well. The phrase is a translation of the Chinese phrase, "哑巴英语" ("ya ba ying yu" in pinyin). The phenomenon is sometimes referred to as Dumb English.

Mute English occurs primarily due to the lack of native English speakers to emulate or practice with, particularly in a country as large as China. Efforts to mitigate Mute English in China have resulted in numerous commercial products including TEFL schools and teach-yourself courses, international exchanges, and the eagerness with which Chinese students strive to practice their English with foreign visitors.

We take serious exception to the Wikipedia rationalization for ME and suggest that it is simply a well crafted excuse and a convenient scape-goat to avoid dealing with the real causes of ME and implementing appropriate and required reforms.

In fact, the Wikipedia excuse for ME perpetuates one of the 4 Great Lies of teaching English as a foreign language in China and is pedagogically just plain incorrect.

"You can only make your English better by speaking with a native L1 English speaker."
(Wolff 09, 4 Great Lies)

Just as steel sharpens steel, L2 speakers can sharpen L2 speakers. The problem lies in the pedagogy and methodology that treats English just like any other academic subject matter that must be studied and learned through rote memorization. (Qiang/Wolff 2009 China EFL: Programming Human Robots)

REAL CAUSES OF MUTE ENGLISH

CET and College Entrance Examinations

The bane of English teaching in China

Chelsea Class 16

October 28th, 2009 at 9:04 am

Learning a language consists of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Unfortunately, students in China studying English do not pay attention to speaking. It is just “mute English”, the reasons for this below. Firstly, ***we study English in the way of reading English textbooks, listening to dialogues, and writing composition. The only purpose of our study is just to passing exams, like CET***, which does not contain speaking test. So we students rarely do speaking practice. Secondly, many people are afraid of making mistakes when speaking English. They think that will make them lose faces. And the last but not least, we do not have the environment for speaking English, because a lot of people cannot understand English and our English teachers make courses also in Chinese! To change “mute English”, I think we should speak English as often and loudly as we can, just like Li Yang, not to care faces. Maybe only this way can we improve our speaking English.

Smith Class 2

October 28th, 2009 at 1:31 am

English as a foreign language has received worldwide attention all over the world also, including Chin. ***In China, there are many English tests, for example, cet 4, cet 6.*** Admittedly, it improves student's English level to a certain extent. But it also brings some problems, mute English is the most serious phenomenon. ***Under the education system of China, students blindly pursue the examination results and a large number of students ignore the importance of oral English.*** Therefore, some students even English very well, but difficult to express themselves in English very well. This is the disadvantages of China's education system. Now, we should start to study English hard, improve our English level, especially oral English.

Jane Class 16

October 29th, 2009 at 10:04 pm

Maybe we are not unfamiliar to hear “Mute English”. “Mute English” is a common phenomenon in our China. We have learnt English for many years since junior high school, but most of us do not communicate with others in English well. Now, I am in the same trouble.

On one hand, in my opinion, there is no environment for us speaking English. ***In my memory, we study English with reciting; we only seek***

to know the meanings and grammar of words and recite them in order to pass the exam such as CET-4 and CET-6 but ignore its real use of learning English. Maybe we are able to get good marks in the examination, but we can't speak it fluently. Now, I am in the same trouble. *In all, it is the problem of Chinese education system; we study English only in order to pass the "Mute English" exams.* We have reading and listening exam but no oral English exam, as a result, they do not emphasize oral English no matter teachers or students. On the other hand, It is a reality, there are lots of students and need thousands of teachers so it is impossible for every class have a foreigner teacher to improve oral English. However, the point is that many Chinese English teachers' oral English are not very good who only focus on test not oral practice. In the future, we should take English as a real language! We should not only study words but also learn to communicate with others in English. In this way, learning English will be real valuable.

Ricky Class 9

October 29th, 2009 at 9:32 am

The Mute English phenomenon is common in China. Some students included me just can read and write well but lack the ability to listen and speak. *We were taught English just for English examination and unfortunately, oral English is not required in English exams, so we ignored it.* Another reason is that we would not have the environment where we can speak English if we don't create it on our own initiative. So, we should try our best to build up the environment to learn English and make Mute English gone. And I think with the Professor Martin's help, our oral English will become better and better.

Jose Class 5

October 28th, 2009 at 8:32 pm

After reading the paper "Mute English", I learned that many solutions were suggested to solve this phenomenon. For example, some of the students advised that CET should be reformed and special attention should be paid to the oral English exam. But I want to figure out that actually, *we already have an extra oral English test of CET, which can only be taken by those students who got a high score in the CET reading, listening, and writing parts. Unfortunately, nobody is taking serious of the extra test. For the students, this test score has nothing to do with the final score of CET, they just get a tiny certificate that little employers will pay attention to. Therefore, what I suggest is not only add an oral English test in CET but also weigh it a lot for the students' true English skill and pay serious attention to this test, so that students may try hard to pass this test and get their oral English improved.*

The CET examinations, much like their Imperial Examination predecessor, are more of an endurance contest than an evaluation of well rounded academic achievement. The CET national examinations have fostered their own pedagogy, methodology and teaching materials and these have filtered down to the kindergarten level. The examinations purportedly measure a university student's cumulative memorized knowledge **about** the English language. (Wolff 2009, China EFL: What Does Reform Mean?; Wolff 2009, A New Chinese Puzzle)

The importance of the CET examinations cannot be overstated because they have become the gatekeeper to higher education and even employment. (Wolff 2009, CHINA EFL: A Market Driven Model PetroChina Embraces Holistic English Program) Millions of students pass the requisite CET examinations every year but remain functionally illiterate, unable to produce comprehensible English.

Most English education in China is designed to prepare students to pass the CET examinations while ignoring the practical ability to use that which has been studied for 16 years.

Anderson Class 8

October 24th, 2009 at 11:25 am

Actually, the Mute English is a common phenomenon in china, and I am a victim of the Mute English. What causes the Mute English, in my opinion, there are several reasons, with the English teacher and the examine system the most important two reasons. ***In my middle school and high school, my English teachers only teach me the words and the grammar, and they teach these in Chinese. And we never speak English in the class. The teach method partly causes us the mute English. On the other hand, our examine system also contribute a lot to our mute English, the university entrance examination only exam our English the reading and writing level, not include oral English. So the middle school and high school teachers just teach us to pass the university entrance exam. And when we enter the university, we have to take the CET exam, which also emphasis our reading and writing level, also neglect the oral English. The whole exam system contributes a lot to our mute English.*** To improve the phenomenon, great changes should be taken, not only our teacher methods and also our exam system. And also we should try our best to improve our English for our better future.

The CET examinations are the root cause of ME. Since Chinese teachers of English are themselves victims of this test driven educational system, they teach English at the primary and secondary school levels with an eye on the eventual college entrance examination and CET, neither of which emphasize oral English. Thus, CET influences everything down to kindergarten education. CET is perceived as the top rung on the ladder of English success. Reaching for that

CET top rung begins in kindergarten. Oral English is not considered important at any level of China's educational system, not even the college entrance examination.

Malte Class 7

October 30th, 2009 at 2:18 am · Edit

In my opinion, there are several reasons for Mute English in China. In article, Professor Martin also finds some reasons, for example some senior high school teachers have no ability to teach English well. To be honest, it is indeed a very important reason. However, ***I think Chinese education system is the root cause of "Mute English". For College entrance examination, vocabulary, sentence and grammars have a very great proportion, while listening has a little proportion and oral English never appear. In order to get high score and enter a good university, the senior high school students must pay more attention to grammars, words and so on. Unfortunately oral English and listening are neglected.*** As a result, a mute English speaker appears.

Nancy 2 Class 7

October 28th, 2009 at 5:44 pm · Edit

When we talk about the mute English, I always feel a litter pity. I have learned English for 11 years, but I can not speak it as fluent as a foreign kids aged 11. ***The focus of learning English is put on preparing for examinations during my English learning career. And those examinations do not put any emphasis on the oral English.*** Consequently, teachers and I do not take it serious. When I realize that the real purpose of learning English is communication, I think I must improve my oral English .But I find my pronunciation is so poor. I am afraid of speaking English. It is a vicious circle. In order to avoid the tragedy as me, it is necessary to snip the circle from the beginning .let the teachers and students know the importance of oral English. Maybe when the importance presents itself in examinations, the high efficiency of reform will appear.

TEACHERS

Stella Class 18

October 29th, 2009 at 12:36 pm

'Mute English' is a common phenomenon for our Chinese students who often do well in writing, reading and listening. In my opinion, there are two main reasons why the Chinese students can't speak English fluently and freely. At first, although we already have study English for ten years, ***English teachers in China always put emphasis on grammar and language rules rather than practicability. We don't have much opportunity to practice our oral English.*** Secondly, we always complain the lack of English environment. However, all of us

ignore one thing that the environment should build by ourselves. Most of us are shamed to open our mouth to speak English. So it is only way that we don't keep mute any more to improve our really practical English.

Jane Class 4

October 27th, 2009 at 9:52 pm

In my eyes, this is a very meaningful topic to be talked about. Having studied English for so many years, what makes me so sad is not being able to express myself clearly and fluently in it. At the beginning of our studying English, we were taught how to spell a word and what its meaning is, then how to analyze a sentence grammatically. ***Most of the time, the teacher was speaking Chinese and never gave us a chance to practice our oral English.*** Tests also laid emphasis on what the teacher taught. Gradually we realized that oral English is not needed. The following period during which we studied English, situation remained the same, so oral English was ignored by us. As a language, English is a communication tool. Having studied English for so many years, for us, it is a failure that we still cannot communicate with others in English, which makes us lose interest and confidence in it. The phenomena of "mute English" calls for a reform in the education system of China. The aim of studying a foreign language should be making it our communication tools.

Armstrong Class 17

October 27th, 2009 at 10:03 pm

So far, I have learned English for more than ten years. I can read, listen, write English, and have went through the CET 4 and 6. However, I cannot speak English fluently, why? Language is a tool to communicate with each other, so is English. I don't know if the "MUTE ENGLISH" exists in other non English-speaking countries, but it does exist in China. From the perspective of mine, ***English is treated as a course not a language, our English teachers' missions are teaching us how to go through all kinds of examinations and get a high score in the course; the students, we, spend a lot of time on reading, listening and writing except speaking, because oral English is not required in the tests.*** At last, how to do to change the phenomena? I think let's start from "hello". Open your mouth and shout English loudly. Don't be shy, just try.

Elise Class 16

October 27th, 2009 at 11:20 pm · Edit

Mute English is common in China. We can read and understand English well as a second language. However, we cannot speak it fluently, and there are some difficulties to communicate with others. I think, there are two main reasons. One is the impersonal cause, the

other is subjective. Because of the English exams, students often pay more attention to the language grammars, articles' reading and words' spelling, but ignore the oral exercise. **Teachers also emphasize on using right words and grammars. In the class, teachers talk a lot and students only listen without saying a word.** Many of us are afraid of speaking errors, so they don't want to talk in English. This phenomenon makes me know there is no speaking environment and chance in our daily life. Though English corner is held every week, only a few people attend it. I think, if we could say it loud and often, we can overcome the Mute English.

Liana-class 7

October 27th, 2009 at 11:31 pm

The reasons for "MUTE English" which are shown in the article are true. The first time I started English class is at junior school. **From junior school to University, teachers in the class only pay attention to the grammar and the use of words. What is more, teachers say Chinese in the class.** This may be the students and the teachers are Chinese people. We can read and understand the article, but we have difficulty to speak it out. The people around us are Chinese, they all speak Chinese. Lack of the environment, in my opinion, is most important reason for "MUTE English". But "MUTE English" is a great barrier to learn English, so if we want to learn English well, we should try our best to overcome it.

Iris Class 14

October 29th, 2009 at 5:47 pm · Edit

I know the phenomenon about "Mute English" in China, but I don't know how to describe it in English until I read the paper and learn this word. The phenomenon is quite common in China. Although I have learned English nearly 10 years, I couldn't catch the English movie without subtitle and speak English fluently. The reasons for this phenomenon are well-known. **When we came school, what the teachers emphasized are grammar, reading not the listen and speaking. If you wanted to get a high score in English class, do the exercises about grammar and reading as more as you can.** Besides, the second reason is the environment around us. We are shamed. We are afraid to speak English and no one could communicate with you. If you speak English in common life, it is quite odd and the people would consider you as unbelievable and curious. Last but not least, in my opinion, the most important reason is that the purpose in China of teaching English is not for communication and using. What we learned from the school is English is a class that you should get a higher score not a language that you should use it to communicate.

Carling Class 6

October 29th, 2009 at 5:09 pm

I thought I was a mute in English. I were afraid of opening my mouth. I usually could not express what I wanted to tell others exactly. But now, after my ABC DAY, I have been going to change condition. I will speak English with room though I will make mistakes. I think there are many reasons for the Mute English phenomenon in China. First, there lacks material in China. ***There are so few good teachers who will teach the students speaking English, not only writing, reading and listening. Most teachers just teach the students words and grammar.*** Second, most of the English exams in our country do not contain oral English. We spent more on reading, listening and writing to get high scores. Last, because of the two reasons above, have been taught getting high scores for so many years, we have gradually lost the initiative of speaking. There lacks the English-speaking environment.

Jessica class 17

October 29th, 2009 at 3:54 pm

When we have first been taught English in grade one in middle school, we were told we must study English well to get excellent marks, and go to a key middle school and university. ***It is targeted for examinations and we are victims of examination-oriented education system. Most teachers taught grammars, sentence structures, and how to remember every single word correctly. Because of the extremely pressure of promoting, what the students can only do is do huge amount of English exercises, such as reading, listening, and writing, to learn the examination skills. Speaking, which students pay much less attention to, is not included in the examination.*** It is not the free soil to study what you like or what you really need, while English I think, is much more than good marks but a new way to communicate and get information directly.

Of the one million plus (1,000,000,000 +) Chinese teachers of English less than 10% actually teach English in the target language, ENGLISH. They stand in front of their students and utter one of the 4 Great Lies, “You must master English.” This is said in mandarin, not in English. (Qiang, Wolff, Teng 2009, China EFL: Holistic English: The Revolution Has Begun, but the Long March Lies Ahead)

There are two reasons for this: First, classroom instruction to pass CET does not require instruction in English. Second, the Chinese teachers’ English is so poor it is impossible for them to teach in the target language, ENGLISH. They have not come close to acquiring a functional English let alone “master English.” While few, if any linguistic scholars, disagree with Stephen Krashen’s theory that 2nd language must be taught in the target language, throughout China’s primary and secondary schools English is taught in Chinese. (Krashen 1981)

Foreign teachers recruited to teach oral English are not required to have any degree in English, linguistics, 2nd language acquisition or even education. They are not even required to have any teaching experience. The foreign teacher is viewed as more of an entertainer, (a white monkey), than a real teacher. Properly educated and experienced foreign teachers are not required because their oral English course does not contribute to the students' ability to pass the CET examinations. (Qiang/Wolff 2009, China EFL: Foreign Teacher Needed; Qiang/Wolff 2003 China ESL: An Industry Run A Muck? Qiang/Wolff 2006, China EFL: The Unqualified, Teaching (sic) the Unmotivated, in a Hostile Environment)

TEACHING MATERIALS

Lebron 15

October 28th, 2009 at 1:00 pm

This article reminds me that we have been learning English as a subject not as a language. ***From CET, Chinese English teachers and English textbooks we can see that for nearly 16 years, the aim of learning English is to pass exams.*** But in fact, English is and should be a tool for us not a subject. However, the article ignores students themselves. In the same mute English environment, there are still many students who can speak out. Are they smarter? Absolutely not. So the willing is another important aspect. Mute English teaching mode emphasizes memorizing, which is not a good way to learn English, but it is still a way to do so. The students who are willing to practice what they memorized before can make progress in learning English. So it is true that we should reform the English teaching mode, providing English acquisition conditions. The education for stimulate students' interests is also important.

Jane Class 6

October 14th, 2009 at 9:37 am

English is an important tool to communicate with foreigners and the whole world. There are three abilities in learning English: listening, speaking and reading. However, ***English teachers in China always put emphasis on listening and reading while ignoring speaking because they think it's not related with the CET examinations.***

Teaching materials for Chinese teachers of English are primarily limited to grammar and language rules. Oral English teaching materials contain little more than set phrase memorization exercises. (Qiang, Teng, Gregory, Wolff 2004, Can You Get a First Class Education At a Third Tier College In China?; Wolff 2009 A New Chinese Puzzle)

Teaching materials for the "foreign experts" are either the set phrase books utilized by the Chinese teachers, whatever materials are brought from the home country including guitar, or the "foreign expert" is instructed to just chat with the students.

China's government owned publishing houses publish no 2nd language acquisition teaching materials. CET does not even pretend to measure actual 2nd language acquisition.

NO ENGLISH SPEAKING ENVIRONMENT

Amy Class 17

October 29th, 2009 at 2:15 pm

The article "Mute English" moves me to express my feeling because I fully have the same feeling after reading it. In fact, I have been learning English for decade, but I still can't speak English freely, to say nothing of expressing myself in English when converse with others. I often feel vocabulary limited when I want to speak English. What's more, I'm short of courage, what makes me nervous and embarrassed. When I chat with foreigners, I also cannot understand them very well. Why?! I think that's "Mute English". ***Leaning English in China without an English Speaking Environment, it's hard to speak out consciously. I find that I usually think in English, but never speak out, that's not good for our spoken English at all!*** To avoid "Mute English", we have nothing to do but just open your mouth and speak out!

Jack class 17

October 28th, 2009 at 10:41 pm

It is common that many of people around us who have learned English for more than ten years can not speak it. We call it "mute English". Unfortunately, I am the one. I think there may be two reasons for this phenomenon. ***Firstly, there is no English speaking environment. I think the best way to learn a language is to use it in our daily life.*** But in a large country such as China, you will find it is difficult to use English to communicate with others. If you do that in normal time, I'm sure you will be thought as heterogeneity. Secondly, the problem of education system is also distinct. Every student has no chance but to learn English, many of them would never use it after leaving school. Only a few students maybe go overseas, but every one of us have use too much time to learn it. Many of students are compelled to learn English, leading to we can get high scores in CET-4 or CET-6 but can't speak it. I hope this phenomenon would improve in the near future.

Peter Class 01

October 27th, 2009 at 10:22 pm

Mute English is a common phenomenon to Chinese English learner. What the emphasis we put on is vocabulary, grammar, reading. Listening and speaking, which I think more important, are ignored by the learner. Of course a lot of things contribute to this phenomenon. ***Firstly, we have no speaking English environment in China, even in schools. What we have is only English Corner. However, almost no person joins in it.*** What's worse, in China, numerous examinations compel students learn English only for passing the test, and then they only can choose A, B, C, D for a question rather than communicating with other in English.

Chinese colleges and universities provide some extra-curricular English speaking activities but they do not provide the slightest semblance of an English speaking environment. English Corner has been around for 25 years but it has not contributed much, if anything. (Qiang/Wolff 2009, CHINA EFL: English Corner; (Qiang/Wolff 2008, China EFL: Why Chinese Universities do not Provide an English Speaking Environment,; Wolff 2009, CHINA EFL: A Market Driven Model PetroChina Embraces Holistic English Program)

There are two required elements to a proper English Speaking Environment. 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

Chinese teachers of English actually discourage the use of oral English in class because it does not help the student with the CET examinations and it constitutes a challenge to the teacher's poor English, which could cause the teacher loss of face (wounded ego or pride).

EFFECTS OF MUTE ENGLISH

Jane Class 4

October 27th, 2009 at 9:52 pm

In my eyes, this is a very meaningful topic to be talked about. Having studied English for so many years, what makes me so sad is not being able to express myself clearly and fluently in it. At the beginning of our studying English, we were taught how to spell a word and what its meaning is, then how to analyze a sentence grammatically. Most of the time, the teacher was speaking Chinese and never gave us a chance to practice our oral English. Tests also laid emphasis on what the teacher taught. Gradually we realized that oral English is not needed. The following period during which we studied English, situation remained the same, so oral English was ignored by us. As a language, English is

a communication tool. ***Having studied English for so many years, for us, it is a failure that we still cannot communicate with others in English, which makes us lose interest and confidence in it.*** The phenomena of “mute English” calls for a reform in the education system of China. The aim of studying a foreign language should be making it our communication tools.

Robin Class 18

October 28th, 2009 at 10:32 pm

The Mute English phenomenon is common in China, I was the typical example. I have learned English 10 years, and do my best to learn well, but I still can't express myself well How funny and how sad. ***I am afraid to speak English. I often attend the business English salon, but I neither play game with them nor talk to them, I have litter confident in oral English.*** My previous English teachers pay so much attention on grammar, we have no chance to speak it, how to make it authentic, how to communicate foreigners. we also accept that, so today's Martin brings me so much surprise. May be I should speak English as more often as I can.

Emma Class 5

October 28th, 2009 at 12:52 am

I passed a lot of English examinations, but both my oral and writing English are so poor. It's a prime example of mute English. At the beginning, I study English in order to pass the examinations. Therefore, memorizing new words is my aim. After 6 years, as an undergraduate, I was aware of the important of oral English. But, I must pass the CET. Just as Martin say, ***I had “no intrinsic motivation, no self-confidence, no self-discipline, no autonomous learning skills and lack creative thinking ability”,*** when I learned or practiced oral and writing English. However, how to improve the situation? I don't know. Maybe practice more and more practice.

Ben Class 4

October 30th, 2009 at 11:08 am

Such students, who can read English newspaper and write English composition without difficulty, are not willing to speak in English. Such phenomenon is defined as mute English. Mute English roots in our classes. Chinese are cultivated to be obedient subjects by national educational system. ***We used to keep silent in our class and listen to our teachers. If we speak out what we are thinking about, which may be in contradiction with orthodox idea, we will be regarded as rebels and abandoned by others. So most of us lost individual conscience and confidence.*** We would rather be mute than a different one. So in the Chinese class, we keep silent. And in the English class, we keep

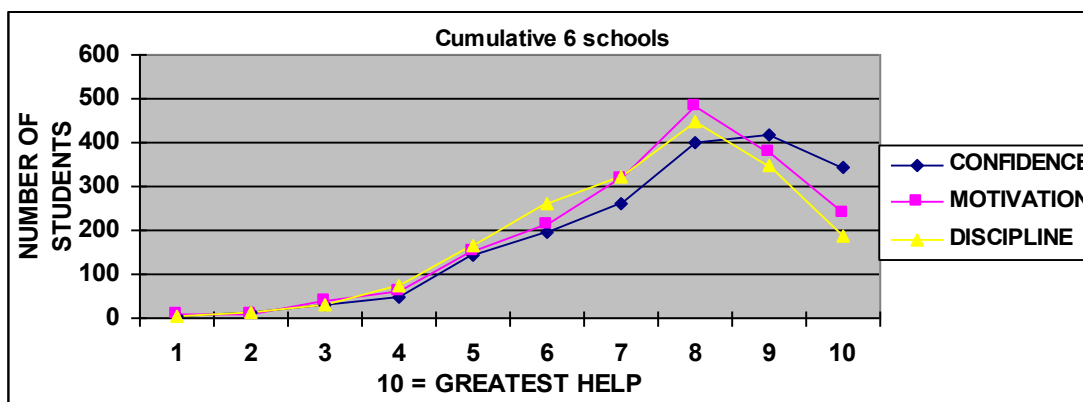
silent too. What I said above may be a part of the reasons gives rise to the mute English.

Edison Class 18

October 26th, 2009 at 10:14 pm

Mute English is a common phenomenon in China. Actually, I think what I have learned for many years is exactly mute English. I do well in most of my English tests, including university entrance examination, CET 4 and CET 6. But I rarely speak English with other people. ***So when I have to say something in English, I feel nervous and find no appropriate words to express my idea.*** What produce mute English? Our education system. Since we are pupils, we are taught to recite the content of our text books. Teachers teach us grammar and tell us to remember many words and phrases which may appear on the exam paper. Every problem on the exam has a model answer. The more you remember the better grades you get. I get good marks but my oral English never improves. We must create an English-speaking environment for ourselves. We must be not afraid of losing face. We must follow the saying “Steel sharpened steel”. Thus we are able to improve our oral English sooner or later.

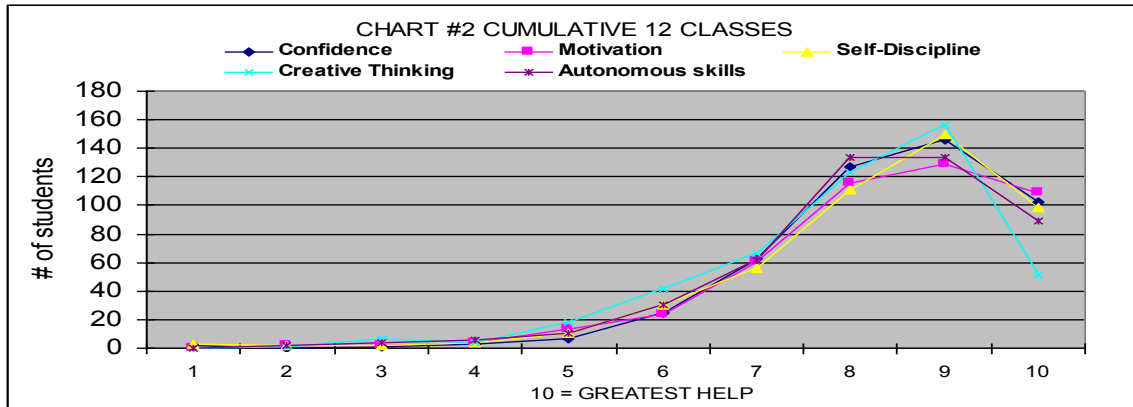
The most immediate and serious effect of ME is that university freshmen have no intrinsic motivation, no self-confidence, no self-discipline, no autonomous learning skills and lack creative thinking ability. The following graph demonstrates how freshmen from 6 universities (Guangxi University, Shenyang Normal University, Yang En University, Xinyang Agricultural College, Xinyang Normal University, Xinyang Vocational College) in 4 provinces (Fujian, Henan, Guangxi, Liaoning) made improvement and progress in 3 of these areas through a new paradigm for oral English. (Qiang, Wolff, Teng 2009, China EFL: Holistic English: The Revolution Has Begun, but the Long March Lies Ahead)



Graph 1

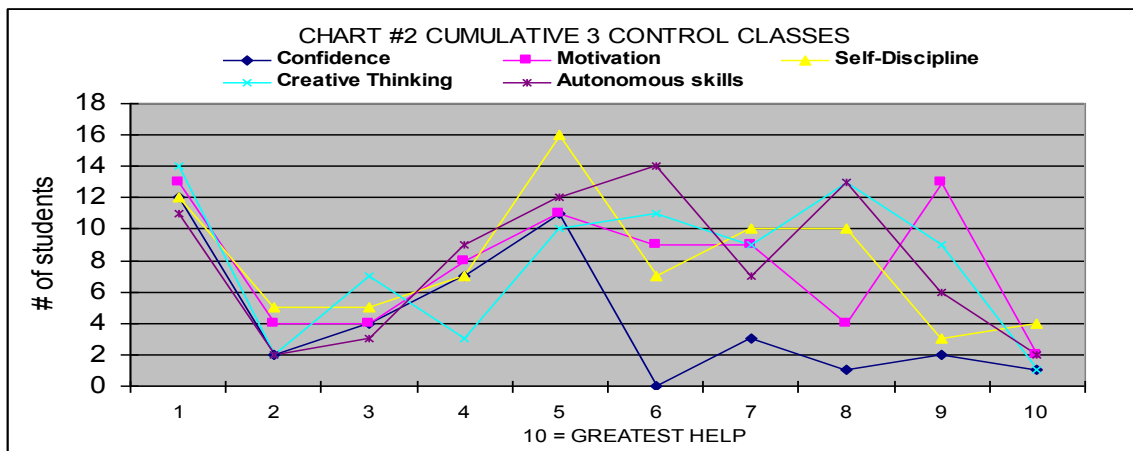
After four years of undergraduate university, post-graduate students at one of China’s top ten universities are required to endure another year of English learning. However, in the Spring term 2009, 485 post-graduate non-English majors were placed in 12 Holistic

English classes. Even as post-graduate students, they were lacking in intrinsic motivation, self-confidence, self-discipline, autonomous learning skills and lacked creative thinking ability. The following graph indicates their growth and development in these areas under the new paradigm.



Graph 2

The following graph demonstrates how post-graduate student,, at the same top ten university, in the traditional oral English classes fared poorly in these same areas.



Graph 3

Graph 2 and 3 are taken from HOLISTIC ENGLISH, A Revolution – Not an Evolution, Wong Zhe and Martin Wolff, Sun Yat-sen University, Niu Qiang, Changchun University (2009) (In Peer Review, TEIC Journal)

SOLUTION

Larissa Class 18

October 28th, 2009 at 11:27 am

It is known that mute English is a common phenomenon in the contemporary society in China. Some people argue that this phenomenon results from CET examinations, but I think it may be attributable to the exams early in primary school. When we were in primary school, we were taught to get high scores in all exams which includes English exam in order to enroll in an ideal junior school. As a result, the conception that to learn English is one of the keys to get in a better school is widely accepted since students are in primary schools. Therefore, both teachers and students are unaware of speaking during the English studying process. ***To solve this problem, I think we should place much emphasis on the way of exams of English.***

July class 16

October 28th, 2009 at 12:55 pm

In my opinion, the phenomenon "Mute English" is a very serious problem in China. From the days we began to learn English, our teachers taught us to read phonetic symbol and let us to read words, dialogues, passages and even recited them. But they seldom let us to speak or communicate with others in English. In the final analysis, there exists examination-oriented education system in China. The final score is judged by the ability of reading and writing not the speaking. ***If the style of English examination is changed, I believe everyone will speak English more actively. At the same time, changing the style is a tough task.***

The simple answer is TRUE REFORM instead of the current trend to tweak that which currently exists, including adding something referred to as an oral component to the college entrance examination and CET. A test should confirm and validate curriculum, curriculum should not confirm and validate a test. CET is predicated upon an inadequate and inappropriate foundation, i.e. English is just another subject matter and to be taught as such.

True reform requires a new sustainable foundation based upon practical English language needs in the employment marketplace instead of meaningless philosophical educational accomplishments. 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 speaker^{iv}. 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,"^v

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.*”^{vi} 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.^{vii} “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.^{viii} (Wolff 2009, CHINA EFL: : Incompatibility of Corporate Training and HOLISTIC ENGLISH) Language learning needs to be converted and transformed into language acquisition.

. “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) 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.” (Erling and Walton 2007)

CONCLUSION

So long as CET is the gatekeeper for university graduation or advanced studies and post-graduation employment, China will continue to teach MUTE ENGLISH and produce functional illiterates.

Chinese scholars of English Linguistics have remained largely silent and abdicated their responsibility to fashion language policy while allowing those preparing and profiting from the CET tests to have a free rein. (Qiang/Wolff 2005, Linguistic Failures, English Today)

Let us revisit the Wikipedia excuse for Mute English again and note that not one single post-graduate student, out of the 700 queried, blamed ME on the lack of L1 English speakers available for the practice of oral English in China. Yet, almost every student alluded to the test driven curriculum or even CET directly.

In fact we have been speaking out and writing against ME since 2002 but were unaware of the common terminology coined and applied by Chinese students to this failed EFL curriculum.

However, since this treatise is student generated, student driven and student centered, it is only fitting that students have the last word.

Michael Class 6

October 28th, 2009 at 10:37 pm

As a post-graduate student of Sun Yat-sen University, I think I am a symbol of ME-a student who has learned English for ten years but even can not speak English well. Professor Martin Wolff has made a search about this phenomenon and has written something about his observation. Mute English, is a common phenomenon that has existed for a long time in China’s education system. This is not a new question about China’s English education. In Martin’s paper, many students showed their opinions about this old topic. Many people have mentioned CET or China’s English examination system. I think this maybe the most important reason. Just look at the students’ comments, you will find almost everyone have mentioned CET in their texts. I think this is an interesting phenomenon, since everyone knows what is the root cause of ME, why there is no change? Another interesting

phenomenon is that, when we look at the suggestions those students have posted, many of them suggested what we should do is adding oral test to our English examination system. Still a test! Oral test becomes the scapegoat of ME! What many people have ignored is that CET originates in TOEFL. Not the test itself, but our attitude and aim of learning English is the most important reason. CET indeed has oral test! So do not say adding oral test into English test. Every test is not perfect; we can not place our hopes in this! Our Chinese people value pragmatism. You may find an interesting phenomenon in some landscape and famous scenery that some sellers can communicate with foreigners fluently even their education background is very bad. The day when one person realizes that he/she should learn English for his/her everyday life, then he/she may say bye-bye to mute English. I'm sure even there is a compulsory oral test in CET, a long time after one person passes the test, he/she may become ME again! What we should do is to ask ourselves why we should learn English and do I really need learn English? We shouldn't see English just as a subject. If you really realize that English is so important for your future life, then you will learn it well naturally, also speak well! No matter whether you like English or not, no matter whether there is an English culture environment or not, no matter whether there is a test or not!

Young Class 5

October 26th, 2009 at 9:54 pm

English, the most widely used language in the world, is becoming mute in Chinese education. Thinking about the way Chinese education evaluates our students, we can easily find why. For most people, the main goal of studying English is to get high grades in the examinations (College Entrance Examination, CET-4, GRE, etc.), which regard listening, reading and writing abilities as the criteria rather than speaking. For grad students, they may make great effort to improve their writing skills to publish English paper, but also — no speaking. In my opinion, to change this status we should change our concepts of English education. To consider English as a communication tool rather than a test tool, to put oral English as the main way in communication rather than reading and writing, that is the beginning of "Vocal English".

Carl Class 15

October 29th, 2009 at 9:01 pm

It is common and natural for the Chinese students becoming a ME learner. Many students, even the teachers, whose aim is just to get high score or pass the test not to communicate with others in English. Maybe some student want to improve their oral English, they can not find a place or somebody to chat with. They complain there is not an environment for him. When I begin to study English, the purpose is just to pass examination, and then I can go further study in university.

But when I have passed some exam, I found I could not communicate with others especially meeting some foreign guests. At last, I realize that the most important of studying English is oral English. I think if the purpose being changed one day, the ME would not exist. For this, students should change his aim. The teachers should change their teaching method. The exam should be reformed.

Dennis Class 5

October 28th, 2009 at 11:42 pm

In my opinion, the phenomenon of “ME” is produced mainly by the national educational system. We began to accept the examination-oriented education from being only a child. In these days, the parents the teachers and other people around us always told us “you should study well ,especially perform excellently in your exam”. Every vacation, every people you encountered would ask you “what about your examination? In our country, the students must face all kinds of examination, weekly examinations, monthly examinations, mid-term examinations, final examinations and so on. The unique standard to evaluate the student’s is examination. So we shouldn’t be so surprised at the production of mute English. Because of the circumstance around us, we must wok hard to get a high marks in the examination. Oral English is not important to us, no people cares for it. That’s why we are hard to put our English into the practice and can’t communicate with others in English. I think the revolution of the national educational system is the ultimate way to eliminate the phenomenon of “ME”. However, nowadays, we can’t count on the government to take active measures. We should create any advantageous factors for ourselves to practice our English. We also should believe we definitely can study English well and speak English fluently.

ⁱ **The students represent the following 195 undergraduate institutions of higher learning:**
Agricultural University of Hebei, Anhui Normal University, Anhui University, Anyang Normal University, Anyang Normal Teachers University, Beijing Normal University, Beijing Normal University Zuhai Campus, Binzhou University, Central China Agriculture University, Central China Normal University, Central South University of Forestry and Technology, Central South University, Changchun Normal University, Changsha University, Changsha University of Science and Technology, Chengdu University of Technology, China Agriculture University, China Pharmaceutical University, China University of Geosciences, China West Normal University, Chongqing Normal University, Chongqing Technology and Business University, Chongqing University of Post and Telecommunications, Dalian University of Technology Dalian Jiaotong University, Daqing Petroleum Institute, Dezhou University, East China Institute of Technology, East China Normal University, East China Institute of Technology, Foshan University, Fujian Normal University, Gannan Normal University, Guangdong College of Pharmacy, Guangdong Ocean University, Guangzhou University, Guangdong University of Technology, Guangdong University of Business Study Guangdong University of Technology, Guangzhou University of Chinese Medicine, Guangdong University of Technology, Guangxi Normal University, Guilin University of Technology, Guiyang College of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Guizhou University, Guizhou College of Finance and Economics, Hainan Normal University, Hainan University, Harbin Engineering University,

Harbin Normal University, Hebei University of Science and Technology, Hebei Normal University, Hefei University, Hefei University of Technology, Heilongjiang University, Henan Institute of Science and Technology, Henan Normal University, Henan University, Henan College Of Science And Technology, Henan University of Technology, Hengyang Normal University, Hohai University, Huaibei Coal Industry Teachers College, Huanggang Normal University, Huangshan College, Huangshan University, Huazhong Agricultural University, Huazhong Normal University, Huangzhong Agricultural University, Hubei Normal University, Hubei University of Technology, Hunan Agriculture University, Hunan City University, Hunan Normal University, Hunan University of Arts and Science, Hunan University of Chinese Medicine, Hunan University, Hunan University of Science and Technology, Hunan University, Inner Mongolia University, Jiangxi Agricultural University, Jiangxi Normal University, Jiangxi Science & Technology Normal University, Jiangsu University, Jiaying University, Jiamusi University, Jiliang University, Jilin University, Jimei University, Jinan University, Jiujiang University, Jishou University, JYU University, Liaoning Normal University, Liaoning University, Lanzhou University, Leshan Normal University, Liaocheng University, Liaoningshijia University, Linyi Normal University, Linyi University, Luoyang Normal University, Nanchang University, Nanchang Hang Kong University, Nanjing Agricultural University, Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing University, Neijiang Teachers' College, Nankai University, Northeast Agriculture University, Northeast Forest University, Northeast Normal University, Northeastern University, North University of China, North West Normal University, Northwest University, Northwest University of Politics and Law, Northwest A & F University, Ocean University of China, Peking University, Pingdingshan University, Quanzhou Normal University, Qingdao Agricultural University, Qingdao University, Qingdao Technological University, Qufu Normal University, Qiannan Normal College for Nationalities, Shanxi Agriculture University, Shanxi Datong University, Shaanxi Normal University, Shandong Agricultural University, Shandong Normal University, Shandong University of Technology, Shandong University of Science and Technology, Shandong University, Shaoxing University, Shaoyang College, Shangqiu Normal University, Shanxi Datong University, Shanxi Normal University, Shanxi University, Shenyang Agricultural University, Shenyang Pharmaceutical University, Shenzhen University, Shijiazhuang University Of Economics, Sichuan Agricultural University, Sichuan Normal University, South Central University for Nationalities, South China Agriculture University, South China Normal University, South China University of Technology, Southeast University, Southwest Forestry College, Southwest Jiaotong University, Southwest Normal University, Southwest University for Nationalities, Southwest University of Science and Technology, Sun Yat-sen University, Taiyuan Normal University, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Three Gorges University, Tianjin University of Technology, Tianjin Normal University, University of Electronic Science and Technology of China, University of Jinan, University of South China, Weifang Medical College, Weinan Normal University, Wenzhou University, Wuhan University, Wuhan University of Technology, Xiangnan University, Xiangtan University, Xi'an Jiaotong University, Xidian University, Xinzhou Teachers University, Xinjiang University, Xinyang Normal University, Xuchang University, Yangcheng Normal University, Yanshan University, Yantai University, Yantai Normal University, Yangtze University, Yunnan University, Yuxi Normal University, Zhejiang University, Zhejiang Chinese Medical University, Zhejiang Forestry University, Zhengzhou Normal University, Zhengzhou University, Zunyi Medical College

ii **The students represent the following provinces:**

Anhui, Chongqing, Fujian, Guangdong, Gansu, Guangxi, Guizhou, Hebei, Heilongjiang, Henan Hong Kong, Hubei, Hunan, Inner Mongolia, Jiangsu, Jiangxi, Jilin, Liaoning, Ningxia, Shanghai, Shandong, Shanxi, Shaanxi, Sichuan, Tianjin, Xinjiang, Yunnan, Zhejiang

[ⁱⁱⁱ] 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 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)

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- v Beijing Review., Education Feared to Raise Robots http://www.bjreview.com.cn/special/txt/2007-08/31/content_74644.htm (accessed July 10, 2008)
- vi http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2008-06/27/content_6799171.htm
Beijing-based survey company Mycos HR
- vii 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)
- viii 20% university graduates fail to find jobs in 2007 (Xinhua News Agency January 14, 2008)
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