

# CHINA EFL: A NEW PARADIGM\*

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## **Abstract**

Chinese university graduates have studied English for 16 years, but graduate functionally illiterate, unable to produce comprehensible oral or written English. Chinese universities are under severe financial pressure to enroll more students, increase class size, increase teaching loads and improve the financial bottom line to service expansion debt. Through the new paradigm discussed herein, the university is able to deliver a higher quality educational product to its students/consumers at a greatly reduced cost and provide graduates who produce comprehensible oral and written English.

## **Problem Identification**

Graduates of the Xinyang Agriculture College English Department suffer from the same pedagogy and methodology that has generally failed China for the past 25 years. The graduates are functionally illiterate in that they have studied English for 12 years, but are unable to speak or write coherently, at even a basic level. They are required to learn English through four independent and disconnected courses, i.e., intensive reading, comprehensive listening, extensive writing and oral English. The teaching methodology is rote memorization of “set phrases” through “talk and chalk.” There is no English-speaking environment, no target language immersion or acquisition.

Xinyang Agricultural College also suffers from the same heavy bank debt service obligations, as articulated in the 3/13/07 *China Daily* article, “Debt Warning for Universities.”<sup>1</sup> This has resulted in a far-too-high student/teacher ratio of 150:1. An English class of 40 students in 2002 has ballooned to a class of 160 students in 2006. There is simply not enough money to hire a sufficient number of teachers, and even if the funds were available, there is a distinct shortage of qualified and experienced teachers.

Colleges and universities throughout mainland China must develop a new management strategy that increases economic efficiency while simultaneously improving the quality of the educational product being delivered to the student/consumer.

To maintain the status quo not only cheats the students/consumers by providing them with less than what they are entitled to for their tuition fees, it also cheats Chinese society as a whole because these college graduates will not be properly prepared to make their maximum contribution to a better-off Chinese society.

## **The New Paradigm**

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\* (2008, 4th Quarter) *Education in China: 21st Century Issues and Challenges*, Nova Science Publishers, New York

<sup>1</sup> Mainland Chinese universities have borrowed heavily to finance construction of new building and campuses to house the ballooning student enrollment. The debt service is bankrupting the universities.

Commencing with the spring semester, March 2007, the Xinyang Agricultural College curriculum committee approved two experimental EFL courses; Holistic English I for a class of 360 freshmen and Holistic Business English I for a class of 348 sophomores.

There were many conceptual problems to obtaining approval of the new paradigm.

First, the workbooks are not yet published because they are still in the formative stages. Usually a university will only authorize the use of published texts.

Second, there was concern that the movies may contain vulgar language, sex or violence and that they had not appeared on the list of approved movies published by Beijing. (Each movie was pre-screened and did contain vulgar language, sex and violence, in amounts less than those found in normal daily life, but realistic in nature.)

Third, there was reluctance to substitute movies for a live foreign expert. (Does learning occur only through direct teacher/student contact?)

Fourth, there was reluctance to substitute one evening class for nine daytime classes. (Empty classrooms during regular class times seemed inappropriate.)

Fifth, there was fear that students would not “catch the meaning” of the movies (as if they catch the meaning of all textbooks or lectures).

Sixth, encouraging students to have fun watching movies just did not seem to be a very educational endeavor. (Must studying be a painful and time-consuming endurance event?)

## ***Course Description, Holistic Business English I***

This one semester course is designed by Niu Qiang, PhD, Martin Wolff, J.D. and Teng Hai, MBA utilizing a holistic approach to language acquisition through comprehensible input in a friendly environment (Stephen Krashen’s second language acquisition model). The course is designed for sophomore English majors, non-English majors and business majors.

The course is a comprehensive, but remedial, “holistic” approach to English acquisition including observation, listening, reading, writing, debate, conversation and Internet research. This course revolves around nine commercial Hollywood entertainment movies with business content, theme or moral.

The underlying educational philosophy is that the best way to truly improve a student’s second language acquisition is through the student’s reading, listening, writing and speaking more English, in a holistic manner. There is no shortcut. This course is intended to provide timeless business conversation issues with current application in China.

There are reading and vocabulary activities for the students to complete before watching the movie. The primary purpose of the exercises before watching the movie is to increase the student’s comprehension of the movie, i.e., Krashen’s “comprehensible input” theory.

There are no academic exercises while watching the movie, thus creating Krashen’s “friendly environment” through the absence of academic rigors. Students are encouraged to bring drinks and snacks, relax, and enjoy the movie. The movies are interesting, entertaining, and most importantly, educational. They may be played in any order as one does not build upon another. To enhance the educational value of the movies and hence improve English acquisition and business knowledge, the movies must be presented within a friendly entertainment atmosphere instead of within the institutional strictures of a rigorous academic assignment.

After watching the movie there are writing assignments; Internet research assignments that will draw the student’s attention to current issues in China related to the moral of the movie; and suggested topics for conversation or debate. The exercises after watching the movie are intended to involve the student in an in-depth analysis of the moral of the movie and its current relevance in China, and thus

prepare the student for the subsequent conversation or debate regarding the movie. This will facilitate language acquisition and output.

The main objective of this course is to take the students out of the language-learning realm and place them into a language acquisition mode and increase language output. The course builds self-confidence, intrinsic motivation and develops autonomous learning strategies.

This course is a departure from the “talk and chalk” teaching methodology where the students are required to “memorize and regurgitate” for a test oriented course. There is simply nothing to memorize. At the same time, the course will expand the students’ worldview and business knowledge.

The idea of “Holistic Approach” is borrowed from psychology and has been applied to many fields other than linguistics. Holistic approach in language teaching means to treat what is to be learned as a whole. This course is holistic on three levels: First, along with the movies, the five skills of language are not presented in isolation, but are integrated in one course; Second, due to the nature of movies, English is not broken down into small units, rather the input is presented in all its complexity, which enables the learner to acquire the real meaning and use of the words learned in isolation Third, the most important innovation of this course is the idea of introducing international business culture by way of movies. The content of the movies provides both a global view of the business world and the underlying culture differences between the east and the west. In addition, moral and personality essentials towards success and failures, gains and loss are an indispensable part of each movie, which will help to build up the university students’ character and prepare them for possible challenges in their future life. It achieves what we call “Quality Education” in the real sense. Last but not least, this course is a very example of the famous Chinese saying “combine education with recreation”.

The movies will not only strongly motivate the students so as to develop a positive attitude towards classroom learning, but also effectively teach them how to learn on their own outside the classroom, which we believe is the solution of English learning in the end.

The movies replace traditional textbooks that contain old, boring and irrelevant stories or “set phrases” to be memorized through role playing and game playing; resources that evoke constant criticism from students and foreign teachers alike.

This course should not be confused with a “film appreciation” class that studies the film for creation, composition and value. This new paradigm is completely different from the academic pursuit of studying films. Nor is this a CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) course. The computer is only one tool in the integrated use of modern technology. This is truly a holistic English course.

## ***Course Description, Holistic Freshmen English I***

This course differs from the sophomore’s Holistic Business English I in that the freshmen movies are a little easier to comprehend and the subject matter is more cross-cultural and does not concentrate on business issues.

## ***Course Workbooks: Holistic Freshmen English Workbook I and Holistic English Workbook, Business I***

The workbooks are not written in textbook format intending to impart the authors’ substantive knowledge to the students. Rather, it is designed as a workbook for implementation of the “Seven Factors of Optimal Input” put forth by Dr. Niu Qiang (9/2001) in *Re-examine the Role of Input and the Features of Optimal Input, Part I* (12/2001) and *Part II*, in *Teaching English in China* Vol. 24, Issue #3 and Vol. 24, Issue #4.

The workbooks<sup>2</sup> are the product of five years research, investigation and testing<sup>3</sup> at 6 Mainland Chinese universities.<sup>4</sup>

They are workbooks designed to 1) facilitate the students' self-study, 2) increase the students' business vocabulary and knowledge, 3) assist the students in developing creative thinking, 3) to encourage the students to engage in critical analysis and problem solving, 4) to embolden the students in developing an ethical standard with which they will guide their personal and professional lives, and 5) increase confidence in oral communication.

The workbooks allow each student to comprehend, produce and progress according to their own particular pace. Students of various skill levels and knowledge levels will be able to interact with each other since there are no right or wrong answers; just creative answers based upon the individuals' level of comprehension, level of English acquisition, their state of academic accomplishment, and the extent of their classroom participation in conversations and debates.

The depth of discussion and debate will depend upon the nature and mix of the student group, their grade level, the quality of the educational institution, and the ability of the teacher. The movies may be selected in any order and according to the students' interests.

At RMB 30.00 each, the workbooks are also affordable by even the poorest students and they eliminate the need for students to purchase additional notebooks.

## ***Course Scheduling***

Movies should be shown on Monday and Tuesday evenings. Students should have one week prior to watching the movie to do the required homework. After watching the movie, students should have one week to complete the required homework to prepare for the subsequent conversation class.

During the first week of the semester, all 357 freshmen met on one evening in a large multi-media classroom for a course introduction and all 352 sophomore students met on another evening. The introduction included an explanation of the new pedagogy and methodology; a walk-through of the Workbook for the first movie assignment and first homework; and the students were shown the first 20% of the movie "The Paper Chase." (The entire movie was available on the school Web site for those interested students who wanted to watch the entire movie.)

During the second week the freshman met in nine discussion groups, in their regular classrooms, during their regular daytime schedules. These classrooms have movable desks and chairs so the students can face each other, as opposed to theatre style seating where the students talk to the back of each other's heads.<sup>5</sup> During the second week all 348 sophomores met one evening in the multi-media room to watch their first movie. The regular daytime classes were transferred to the single evening class because the movies require two and one-half hours to view and will not fit into the 90-minute regular class schedule.

During the third week of the semester the sophomores met in nine discussion groups, in their regular classrooms, during their regular daytime schedules. The freshmen met one evening in the multi-media room to watch their first movie.

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<sup>2</sup> Holistic English Workbook I (Freshman) movies: *Iron and Silk, Gung Ho, Not without My Daughter, The War of the Roses, The Terminal, Tai Pan, The Joy Luck Club, Eat a Bowl of Tea*. Holistic English Workbook I (Business) movies: *Erin Brockovitch, Wall Street, Other People's Money, Disclosure, Working Girl, Life and Debt, Rainmaker, Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price, Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*.

<sup>3</sup> China EFL: use and abuse of teaching with movies (2006) Qiang, Teng, Wolff (in press).

<sup>4</sup> Changchun University, Jiangxi University of Finance and Economics, Shanghai Normal University, Shanghai University, Tong ji University and Xinyang Agricultural College.

<sup>5</sup> The college does not have any classroom set up specifically for conversation English and one is required.

In this way, the foreign expert conducted discussion classes every week, alternating every other week with freshman and sophomores. While the sophomores were assigned to watch an evening movie, the freshman had daily discussion classes and the sophomores had daily discussion classes during the week when the freshmen were assigned to watch a movie. This alternating schedule was maintained throughout the 18-week semester.

The foreign expert had a teaching load of nine classes every week. A Chinese co-teacher, using English subtitles when available, showed the evening movies. Chinese subtitles were never allowed, as they would be counterproductive to English acquisition.

All of the movies were also available on the Xinyang Agricultural College Web site, in the school sound lab and the College computer lab. This eliminated any excuse for a student missing a movie.

Two Chinese co-teachers were assigned to assist the foreign expert. One co-teacher showed the movies in the evening and both co-teachers, on occasion, would participate in the discussion classes for the purpose of learning how to conduct the course in the future, without a foreign expert.

Each class has a student monitor who was assigned to teach all classmates how to access the Web site movies, to assign classmates to be responsible for classroom cleanliness and govern movie admission in the multi-media classroom by checking workbooks at the door. (No class workbook, no entry.) This insured that the limited seating was available for the class students only and that those alien to the class, who had no motivation to follow the class decorum, were excluded.

## **Economic Efficiency**

The wage disparity between foreign experts and Chinese teachers is well documented elsewhere. Xinyang Agricultural College formerly required two foreign experts, one for the freshmen class and one for the sophomore class. Under the new paradigm only one foreign expert is required and the combined time commitment of the two Chinese co-teachers was 5 hours per week.

This immediately reduced the College's expenditure on foreign experts by 40%. When the Chinese co-teachers take full responsibility for the courses, in the near future, the College will realize a 90% budget reduction from the previous foreign expert budget.

There is also another budgetary benefit from the new paradigm. Under the old paradigm students were exposed to the foreign expert assigned to their class. Their experience was limited to the regional English spoken by that foreign expert.

While watching the English movies, the students were exposed to an average of 10 native English speakers (using many different regional Englishes) per hour and two L2 English speakers per hour. The students/consumers hear 360 native English speakers and 72 L2 English speakers during the 36-hour semester and hence receive much higher value for their tuition fees than exposure to one foreign expert for 36 hours.

## **Student Evaluation of the New Paradigm**

At the end of the semester, 87% of the 352 sophomore students and 93% of the 357 freshmen students, participating in the holistic English program, voluntarily provided answers to an anonymous questionnaire.

The students were asked to rank (from 1–10 with 10 being the greatest help) how much the course helped them to improve in ten areas. (vocabulary, reading skills, listening skills, writing skills, conversation skills, (Charts 1 and 2 ) confidence, motivation, discipline, (Charts 3 and 4) worldview and business knowledge (Charts 5 and 6). The students' responses are summarized in the attached charts.

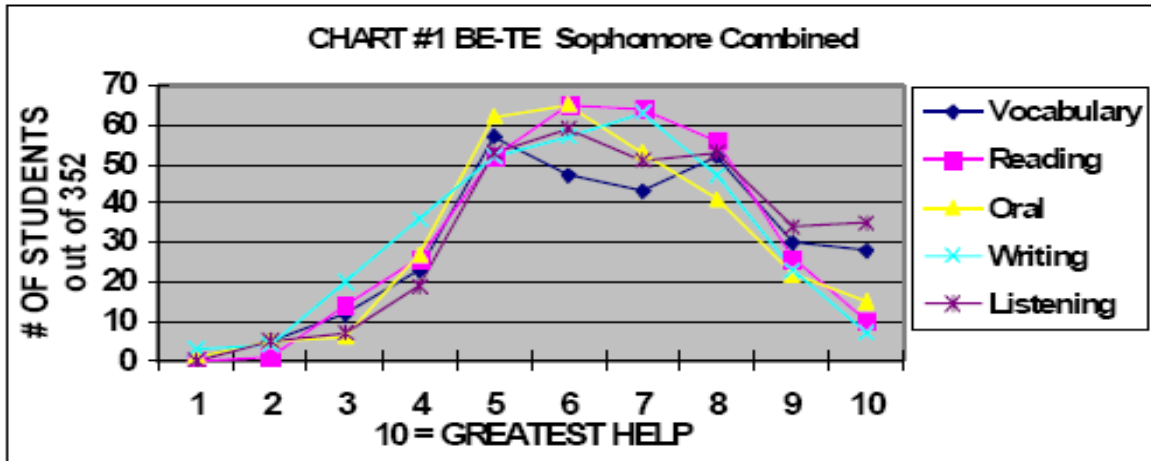


Chart 1. This chart reflects that the Sophomore Business English and Tourism English majors in the Holistic English Program experienced benefit in vocabulary, reading, conversation, writing and listening. Class-by-class analysis establishes that those students receiving the most benefit are in classes of 40 students or less.

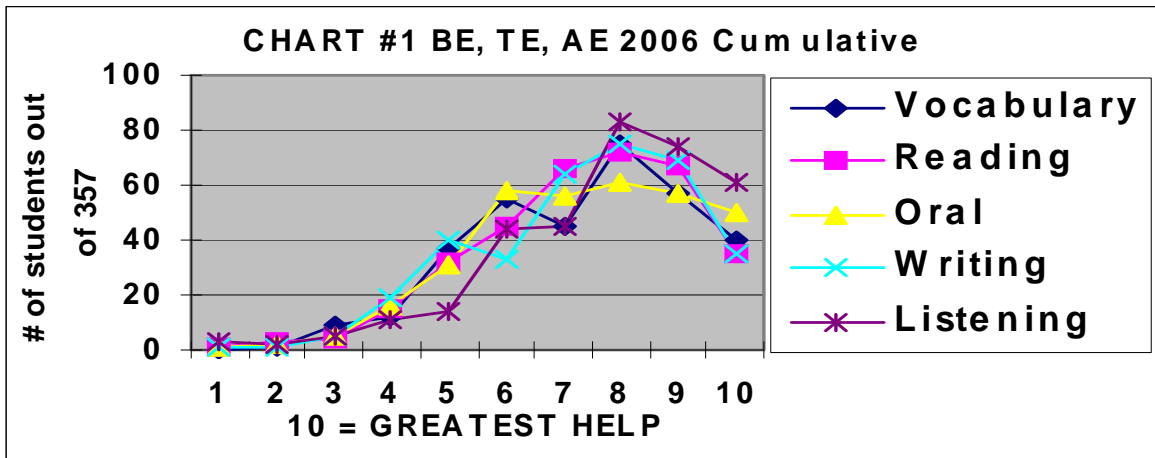


Chart 2. This chart reflects that the Freshmen Business English, Tourism English and Applied English majors in the Holistic English Program experienced benefit in vocabulary, reading, conversation, writing and listening. Class-by-class analysis establishes that those students receiving the most benefit are in classes of 40 students or less.

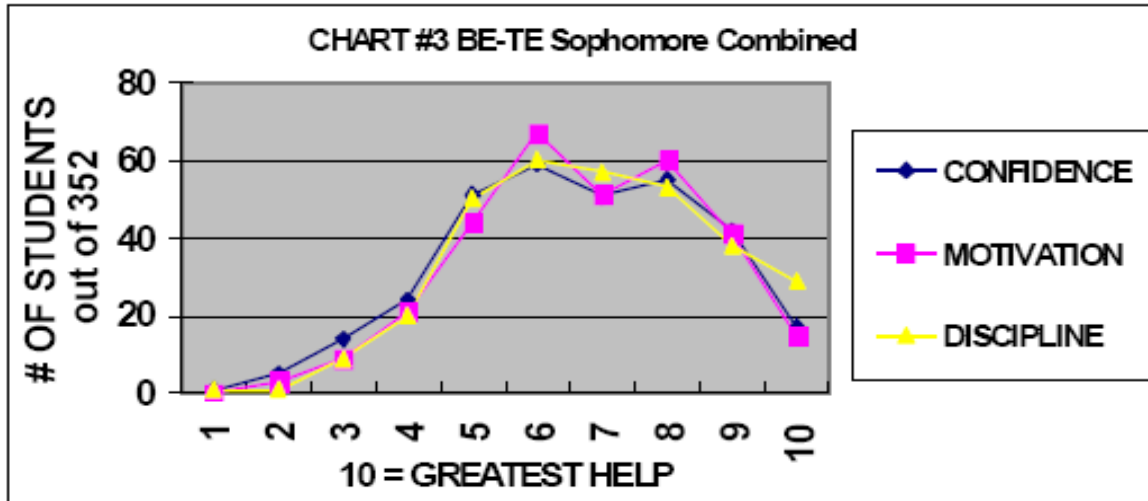


Chart 3. This chart reflects that the Sophomore Business English and Tourism English majors in the Holistic English Program experienced benefit in confidence, motivation and discipline. Class-by-class analysis establishes that those students receiving the most benefit are in classes of 40 students or less.

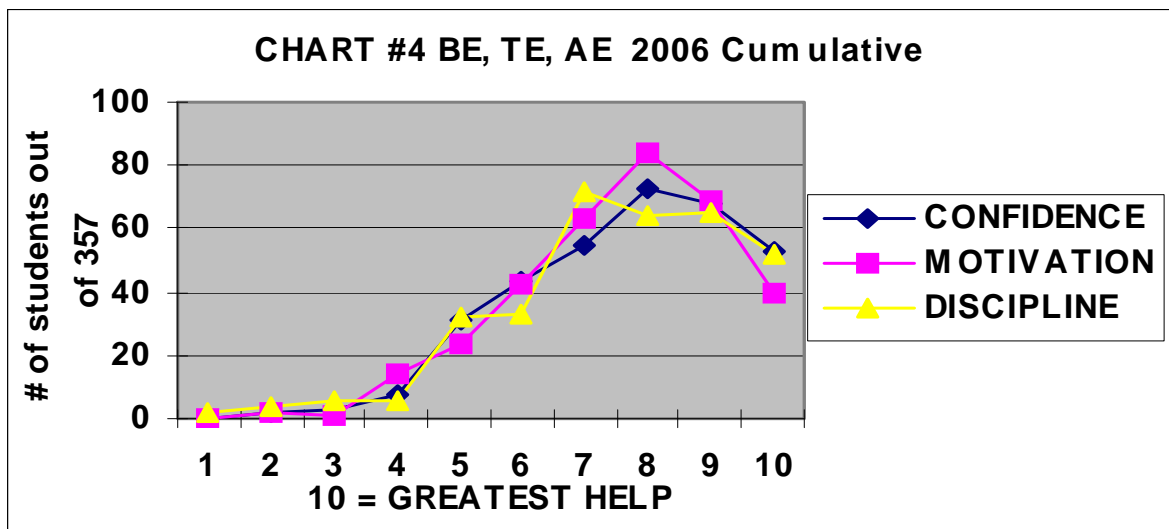


Chart 4. This chart reflects that the Freshmen Business English, Tourism English and Applied English majors in the Holistic English Program experienced benefit in confidence, motivation and discipline. Class-by-class analysis establishes that those students receiving the most benefit are in classes of 40 students or less.

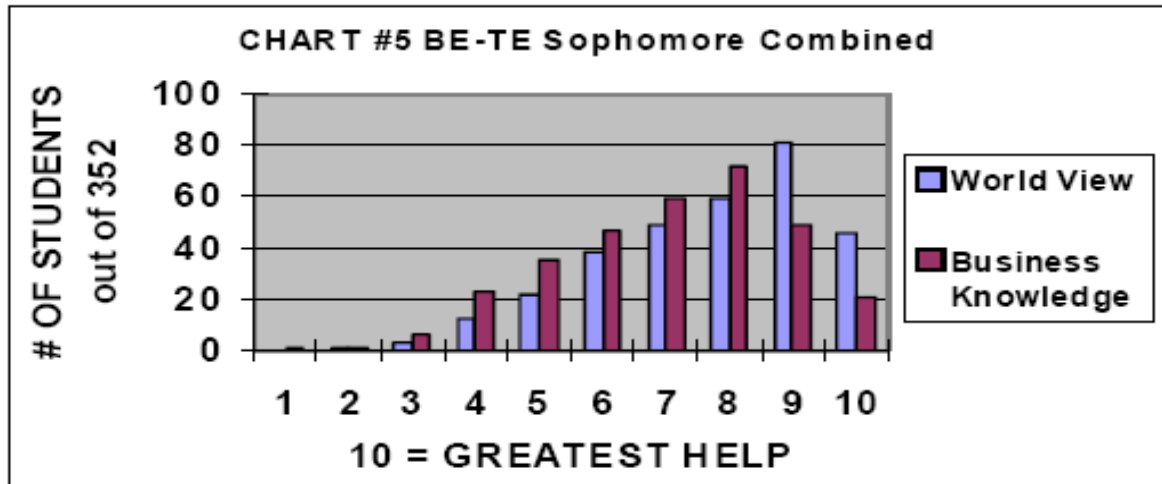


Chart 5. This chart reflects that the Sophomore Business English and Tourism English majors in the Holistic English Program experienced benefit in expanded world view and business knowledge. Class-by-class analysis establishes that those students receiving the most benefit are in classes of 40 students or less.

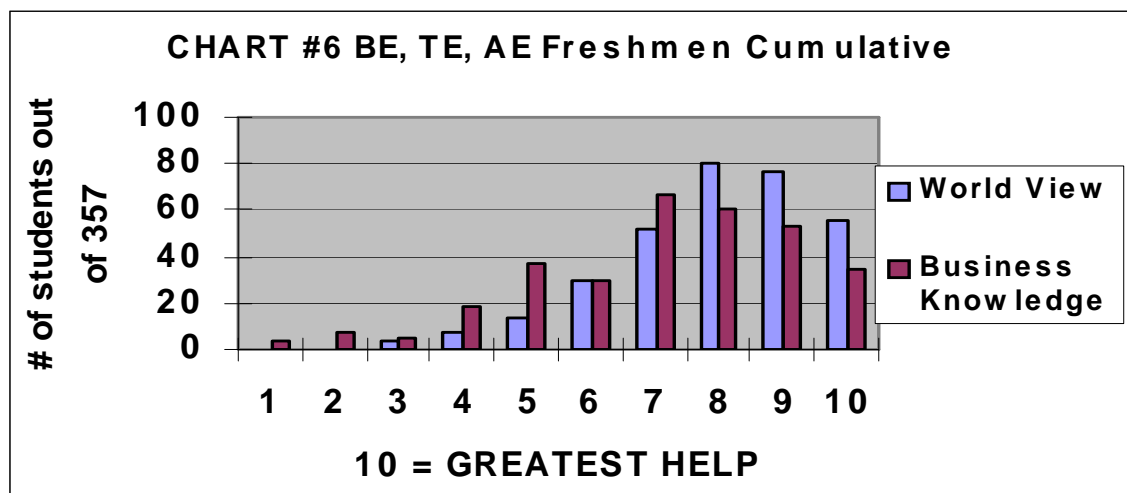


Chart 6. This chart reflects that the Freshmen Business English, Tourism English and Applied English majors in the Holistic English Program experienced benefit in expanded world view and business knowledge. Class-by-class analysis establishes that those students receiving the most benefit are in classes of 40 students or less.

The students claim to have comparatively benefited simultaneously in all ten categories, which confirms the value of the holistic approach using movies as the input base for oral English class. The holistic English course was conducted simultaneously with the traditional reading, listening and writing courses; yet, the students found significant benefit in reading, listening and writing within the holistic course. This suggests that the traditional courses are in need of review.

The primary complaint of the students was that with classes containing as many as 51 students, there was insufficient time for each student to converse with the teacher. This correlates directly with the students' evaluation that their conversation skills still lagged behind the development of their other skills, (See Charts 1 and 2) even utilizing the holistic paradigm. The students noted a particular benefit from the teacher assigning each student to conduct the discussion class for five minutes.

Enhanced confidence, motivation, discipline, (Charts 3 and 4) worldview and business knowledge (Charts 5 and 6) also suffered in classes with more than 40 students and as high as 51 students.

There is also a direct correlation between the degree of discipline, motivation and confidence, and the lack of enhancement of learning skills. Classes with 40 or more students experienced more disciplinary problems, less motivation, less confidence and fewer enhancements of skills. The anonymous questionnaire also asked each student to register the grade they believed they had earned in the course. When comparing the grades requested by the students with the actual grades given, there was a 2% discrepancy. The students had undervalued their accomplishments, which means there is also a probable 2% under evaluation in each of the Charts.

Both the freshmen and sophomore classes were apparently admitted to the college based upon the identical college entrance examination scores and criteria. (Immediately prior to publication of this article it was discovered that a higher percentage of the sophomore class matriculated to college from the Vocational Middle School, as opposed to the regular middle school, and hence the sophomore class was less capable.)

## **Conclusion**

1. Students benefited greatly from the new paradigm.
2. Classes with 40 or more students are anti-academic and a detriment to the students' acquisition of English.
3. Oral English classes should be conducted in classrooms specially designed to create a friendly conversation environment.
4. The new paradigm should be expanded into a two-semester program for further trial basis and evaluation.
5. The workbooks should be improved following the students' responses to the anonymous questionnaire.
6. For the 2007–08 school year commencing in September 2007, Xinyang Agriculture College should offer Holistic Freshman English I and II<sup>6</sup> and Holistic Business English I and II.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Holistic English Workbook II (Freshman) movies: *A Great Wall, Freedom Song, The Longest Yard, Supersize Me, Gandhi, Walk the Line, World Trade Center, Reversible Errors*.

<sup>7</sup> Holistic English Workbook II (Business) movies: *Barbarians at the Gate, North Country, Runaway Jury, Class Action, The Constant Gardner, McLibel, An Inconvenient Truth, Life and Debt*.