

CHINA EFL: WHAT IS HOLISTIC ENGLISH?

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Throughout China, English is taught in 4 separate and disjointed classes, Reading, Listening, Writing and Speaking. There is no link or common subject matter between the classes. The foreign teacher is retained, primarily, to handle the oral class to **force**ⁱ speech production by chatting with the students. (Yes there are exceptions but we are speaking to the overall national situation at all levels of higher education throughout China. Yes, some foreigners do teach other than oral English. Yes, some foreigners are given teaching materials for oral English. But those are the exceptions and they are few.)

The Holistic English Program replaces oral English learning with conversation English experience; replaces teachers with facilitators; replaces set phrase or speech pattern memorization with language acquisition; develops self-confidence, intrinsic motivation and develops autonomous learners and creative thinkers; replaces graduates who are unable to produce comprehensible English with those who can.

There are Chinese beliefs that you **learn** English just like you learn any other subject; if you can speak English you can teach English; foreigners can just chat with Chinese students to improve the Chinese' spoken English; English can be taught by Chinese speaking Chinese; and Chinese students will improve their oral English if **forced** to speak with a foreigner.ⁱⁱ

Holistic English is simply taking one subject matter and using it for reading, listening, writing and **voluntary**ⁱⁱⁱ speaking in one single class. It emphasizes comprehensible input through very entertaining movies, in a friendly English speaking environment. It is all about language acquisition rather than language learning. It emphasizes input rather than output. Watching dictioned movies is different from the audio-lingual method because the subtitles enable the students to read and comprehend the movie and the story of the movie makes learning a pleasurable entertainment which makes implicit learning or incidental learning of the vocabulary possible. This is a combination of both explicit learning and implicit learning or intentional learning and incidental learning, or conscious learning and unconscious learning.

It also provides free choice reading material and English TV for leisure time activities in the evening. Every attempt is made to prompt the English mental lexicon within a dominant Chinese environment. Everything possible is done to create a non-academic, non-performance based, non-test oriented atmosphere within in the classroom setting. Students speak when they are ready, not on command. Forced output is actually very harmful.^{iv}

One way to relax the classroom atmosphere is to have plants; carpet, curtains, wall pictures, as opposed to Chinese proverbs in Chinese, which prompt the Chinese mental lexicon rather than the target English mental lexicon; water machine, anything that takes the edge off and makes the room feel more like home. There is no lectern as that is a major barrier to a friendly environment.^v

It has been scientifically proven that the above formula works and students do acquire English with output capabilities.^{vi} 25 years of recent Chinese educational history proves that language learning does not produce students with output capabilities. That is why so many Chinese try to go abroad to improve their English.

The Holistic English Program is a comprehensive, but remedial, "Holistic" approach to English acquisition^{vii} including observation, listening, reading, writing, debate, conversation and Internet research, all in one course. Each semester the course revolves around 8 full feature commercial Hollywood entertainment movies. The freshmen course movies are primarily cross-cultural in nature while the sophomore course is exclusively composed of movies with business content, theme or moral.^{viii}

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 also intended to provide timeless business conversation issues with current application in China.

There are computer assisted 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. The movies should be shown in a downtown movie theater atmosphere. Stopping the movie for discussion, analysis, or to memorize chunks of language, is totally inappropriate, as is showing the movie in segments. Such activities are techniques of English teaching, not English acquisition.

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.^{ix}

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 as well as help them develop a personal moral base. Again, it bears repeating, this is not a film appreciation class. The movies are not the subject of any study, they are simply comprehensible input.

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 "Oral" or "Conversation" 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. The movies constitute **comprehensible input** that is **delivered in a low-anxiety situation**. They are **real messages of real interest**.

Watching English movies helps the learner to convert their receptive knowledge into productive ability by drawing their attention to how words, expressions are actually used in real context of situation instead of context of text.

While watching, unconscious memory is also working, same as listening to the same melody repeatedly enables one to hum the tune without effort. The Chinese students are poor at acquiring the English pronunciation, especially the intonation. Owing to the fact

that Chinese belongs to a different language family, namely, the Sino-Tibetan language family. But by exposing to English in great quantity by various native speakers of English, the students imitated and acquired the English accent quite naturally and easily. Good pronunciation is conducive to both good comprehension and production in the English language for Chinese students.

Idiomatic conversational English, Academic English, Business English, Conference English, English for Special Purposes like Legal English, Zoological English, Astronautic English, etc, can all be learned through watching TV Series on various subjects, depending on the learner's own interest and choice of profession. Both visual and audio channels are brought into full play cognitively, motivation and interact are increased to the highest level psychologically; modules for both listening and reading are activated neurologically or biologically, and by dubbing, even the pathway of speaking is smoothed which helps greatly to prepare students for later or future free production.

Various ways to express the same meaning become possible, and the same word or phrase can be encountered in all its complexity in various situations. Therefore, if proper learning strategies on how to watch English movies are communicated to the student, for instance, by telling them to give intentional attention to the target term, then not only the different meanings of the same term can be picked up, but also, repeated encounters of the same term enhances the memory and shortens the incubation period from comprehension to production. In this way, the three factors influencing memory, (frequency effect, recency effect, saliency effect) will guarantee the student to learn English expressions so well that they can pass from controlled forced output to automatic natural production without too much effort.

It would be beneficial to provide the students with access to computer lab or sound lab facilities where the movies can be watched repeatedly. A theory that is widely accepted and is true in both L1 and L2 acquisition is that incidental vocabulary learning is a gradual process in which gains are made in small increments with repeated encounters needed to gain full knowledge of a word.

It was found that vocabulary gains increased as the number of times learners met words in context increased. Learners who met words 10 times produced superior scores to those who met words only twice. However, no significant results were found between two and six encounters and six and ten encounters. The correlation between the number of times each word occurred in the book and the relative learning gains was found to be 0.34, which confirms that repetition affected learning. (Stuart Webb, 2007)

It is safe to say that six to ten encounters are more likely to promote receptive knowledge of known words to productive knowledge of words than two or three encounters. While watching movies makes many encounters possible within a short time which enables the recency effect, frequency effect and saliency effect to take place in terms of the functions of memory. The effect of repeated watching with intervals is exponential.^x Availability of the movies on the university intranet is essential.

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. The workbooks cannot be adapted to a film appreciation class. 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. The movies should be played in one sitting. They should not be stopped for analysis, discussion or memorization of chunks of language; nor showed in segments.

This course will promote learner autonomy, creative thinking, enhanced reading skills, enhanced listening skills, enhanced writing skills and increased voluntary oral communications. Wang Shugua, President of Harbin Institute of Technology is quoted as saying “... university education has robbed students of their originality. The education system, particularly the higher education system, badly needs reform.”

A famous Chinese proverb provides: If you give a person a fish, he can eat for a day; but if you teach him how to fish, he can feed himself all of his life. Tao Xingzhi, the famous modern educationist, once said: The best education is to make teachers less needed. This statement concisely generalized the purpose of education is to train learners to study and work independently.

In other words, the end-product of education is an independent learner (McDevitt 1997); therefore the ultimate goal of the teacher should be to convert students from passive language learners into independent and autonomous learners and acquirers. The future society will be a world of “survival of the fittest”. People will be required to be independent, lifelong and self-developed learners so as to meet the needs of the society. In education, we should attach great importance to teaching a person the skills and knowledge which will enable him to survive independently throughout his life. English teaching, likewise, is no exception to this general proposition.

The task of English teaching is not merely to teach a foreign language, but to teach learners how to learn. Instead of making the student master foreign language skills, English teaching should help learners to obtain English learning strategies and make them become autonomous lifelong learners. English language teaching has its own special and unique features. It is somewhat different from other subjects such as mathematics, physics or geology. With several formulae, one can work out mathematic or physic problems, whereas mastering some grammar and vocabulary will not enable the learner to speak English like a native speaker. What’s more, if the learner does not continue his autonomous language learning after graduation, fossilization will occur. This means the learner will not maintain his acquired or learned level of English proficiency.

Learner autonomy (LA) can be viewed from several aspects. From the macroscopic perspective, we should create an ideal learner autonomy environment. This concerns several aspects, such as school administration, teaching methodologies, teaching materials, etc. And from the microscopic perspective, we should focus on the learner. Teaching linguistic knowledge only, will not produce an autonomous and lifelong

learner. To help the learner develop learning strategies paves their way to LA. If the learner masters effective learning strategies, the learner can get twofold results with half the effort. Learning strategy can help the learner improve learning efficiency, promote independent learning during the learning process, motivate the learner, and arouse interest in learning. After mastering learning strategies, the learner can continue self-education, even after graduation. This will prevent fossilization to occur after they leave university

The kinds of learner autonomy mentioned above are not ideal autonomy. We must understand that no autonomous learning is actually purely or truly autonomous. The learning responsibility is largely on the learner's shoulders, but its actualization requires the joint efforts of both the teacher and the society. To reach the objective of learner autonomy, society must create an ideal environment. Only under the efforts of proper school administration, teaching methodologies, teaching materials and the learner, can an ideal autonomous learning environment come into existence.

Since the ultimate goal of English teaching is communication, English teaching should equip learners with a solid foundation of the language in order to communicate with native speakers freely and naturally, without great difficulty.

In recent years, researchers have become increasingly convinced that learner autonomy and learning strategies are more important than ever in 2nd language acquisition (SLA). Although there have recently been many encouraging findings discovered in domestic and overseas related fields, teachers should not apply them mechanically. Instead, teachers should combine these findings with the characteristics of Chinese students; help them to create an autonomous learning environment in accordance with present resources and integrate learning strategies into their teaching, and train the learner to be a life-long learner.

It is generally agreed that the solution to English language teaching (ELT) in China is for learners to achieve learner autonomy, which means that the learner is taught the ways to get sufficient input outside the classroom. Modern technology makes that possible. Teaching with movies enables a native speaker to introduce a totally different genre or region of the English language to the Chinese students. The learner should have many questions in mind after watching the movie. They can bring these to the classroom and ask the teacher to explain and discuss among themselves. Therefore, the choice of movies is critical. They must be interesting, exciting and relevant.

The only solution to come to terms with English globalization for China is to shorten the time for English formal education, which means we have to avail our students of the modern technology and information era to explore input outside the classroom. China is known for its long history in education and the idea of learner autonomy is nothing new as revealed in the old saying "If you give one a fish, he can have it for only one day; but if you teach him how to fish, he can have it for life". This educational principle has not been incorporated into the process of English education due to various reasons. And now it is time to bring our teachers and trainers of English at various levels to the awareness

of this teaching principle, that is, to teach the students how to teach themselves in addition to teach them grammar and vocabulary.

What may be common sense to many may not be common sense to the students and even many teachers. Every teacher has his or her own ways of learning the English language, but their methods are not based on a systematic study of the psycholinguistic and SLA theories. Therefore, what the linguists should do now is to introduce the teaching and learning strategies which are a combination of both theory and practice, rather than a series of experience or intuitions. A summary of such strategies can help the Chinese teacher to be a much better learner of English so as to be a more effective and adequate teacher of English in class.

How to optimize and maximize output from limited input is a question which will never have an ultimate answer because we can always add more to this field of inquiry with the new findings in the neurological and cognitive sciences. But this ever growing cross-disciplinary research makes the quest for answers in one field even more exhilarating because of the light it may throw on other science and social science disciplines. We may never find the answer to how our brain works but the unknown nature of the subject makes the exploration for answers more satisfying than the answer itself.

i Forced output raises the affective filter and actually prevents language acquisition. Krashen (2004) *Applying the Comprehension Hypothesis: Some Suggestions*

ii The Comprehension Hypothesis claims that we acquire language by input, not by output, a claim is supported by studies showing no increase in acquisition with more output (Krashen, 2002b). Studies show, however, consistent increases in acquisition with more input.

iii Comprehensible input-based methods encourage speaking but do not force it. Students are not called on; rather, participation is voluntary.

iv Forced output raises the affective filter and actually prevents language acquisition. Krashen (2004) *Applying the Comprehension Hypothesis: Some Suggestions*

“There are five types of output namely reading out aloud, pattern drills, memorized matters, story retelling, and free production or communicative output. If students are forced to produce output which they are not linguistically ready for, it will only encourage them to produce deviant English or Chinglish which fossilizes if they cannot receive timely corrective feedback, which usually is the case. They stopped learning as soon as their pidgin English can manage a conversation. They use communicative strategies like avoidance, simplification, overgeneralization to express their ideas both in oral as well as written production. Therefore, same as giving students the optimal input is crucial for acquisition to take place, eliciting optimal output is also essential to guarantee acquisition. This does not mean to exclude free production altogether. It only means that at the initial stage of learning, students should learn to observe how words and phrases they learned from textbook are idiomatically used in all their complexity and contexts in the movies before or while applying them freely to their own free output. This is like building a three-floor house. You do not build the third floor without building the first two. Free production is like building the third floor. Learning the vocabulary from a dictionary and textbook is preparing students for understanding movies and reading materials. Only when the learner encounters a word frequently in different contexts, can he or she convert the declarative knowledge of a term into procedural knowledge and then later on into automatic ability. Thereafter, pattern drills like making up sentences with words and phrases is a necessary step to drill the students in how to use the words properly.” Niu Qiang (2001) “Types of Output and the Elicitation of Optimal Output”, *Teaching English in China*. Vol.24 No.1

v Suggestopedia, one of the eight teaching methodologies, is a method developed by the Bulgarian psychiatrist educator Georgi Lozanov who describes it as a science ... concerned with the systematic study of the nonrational and/or nonconscious influences, that human beings are constantly responding to. Suggestopedia optimizes learning. The most conspicuous characteristics of Suggestopedia are the decoration, furniture, and arrangement of the classroom, the use of music, and the authoritative behavior of the teacher. Memorization in learning by the suggestopedic method seems to be accelerated 25 times over that in traditional methods. (Richards, J.C and Rodgers, T.S, 1986:142) Richards, J.C and Rodgers, T.S, (1986) *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. Cambridge University Press.

vi Krashen, Stephen (1981) *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*, Pergamon Press Inc.

vii The emphasis is on language acquisition not language learning

viii There was opposition to the Freshmen II Workbook due to the inclusion of medical drawings of a breast and ovaries, in conjunction with the advance vocabulary taken from the movie *Supersize Me*. The drawings were deemed inappropriate material for college students.

There was opposition to the Business I and Business II Workbooks due to inclusion of the movies *Disclosure* and *North Country*. Sexual harassment and sexual discrimination were deemed inappropriate subjects for college students.

ix Subconscious acquisition, not conscious learning.

x Stuart Webb, 2007. "The effects of repetition on vocabulary learning" in *Applied Linguistics*. Vol. 28, No 1.