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# Progress and challenges of China college English reform: An analysis of a prevalent teaching material “*Experiencing English*”

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**Abstract:** As communicative language teaching (CLT) has gained prominence over the traditional language teaching methods, the ultimate goals of language teaching are not only language knowledge but also the function of language, thus students’ communicative competence becomes the focus of the compilation of teaching materials. This paper aims to analyze “*Experiencing English*” by the criteria of the 5 components of a communicative curriculum, i.e. Language Arts, Language for a Purpose, Personal L2 Use, Theater Arts, and Beyond the Classroom, to see if its design, organization and material selection are in conformity with the development of learners’ communicative competence. Results show that “*Experiencing English*” has well incorporated language knowledge, the negotiation of meaning, the development of communicative competence, and the cultivation of autonomous learning, and also put an emphasis on abilities such as problem solving, self expression, and creative use of language. Challenges of College English teaching in China are discussed as well.

**Keywords:** Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), College English Teaching, Material Compilation

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## 1. Introduction

Since Hymes proposed the concept of Communicative Competence in 1971, communicative language teaching (CLT) has gradually gained prominence over audio-lingual approach in English as a Second Language (ESL)/ English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching and pedagogy. The fundamental tenet that distinguishes CLT from the former second language teaching approaches is that CLT does not deem learning process as a unidirectional process in which learners receive input and produce output. CLT approach takes into consideration the large social and discourse context in which a learner encounters in real life communication through language. In ESL teaching, not only language knowledge but also the function of language is considered. Therefore, students’ communicative competence becomes the focus of curriculum design, material selection, classroom activity organization, assessment and evaluation.

In the past 20 years, China has witnessed a great enthusiasm in English learning. However, the problem with English teaching in China is that learners are taught “dumb English” (i.e., cannot effectively and freely use the

language to express themselves) due to an overemphasis on reading, and a failure to recognize and develop communicative abilities. In recent years, the increased friction drew researchers’ and learners’ attention, which resulted in an increasing need to improve college students’ communicative competence, in other words, the ability to use English. In January 2004, Ministry of Education released *College English Teaching Requirements (on Trial)* in an aim to develop college students’ communicative competence in English. The reform was on trial in 180 rigorous chosen universities national wide, with new notions, new teaching materials, and new teaching approaches. The textbook series “*Experiencing English*” is among the four teaching materials recommended by Ministry of Education, and it has been adopted by 49 universities among the 180 trial programs.

This paper aims to analyze “*Experiencing English*” by the criteria of the 5 components of a communicative curriculum proposed by Savignon, i.e. Language Arts, Language for a Purpose, Personal L2 Use, Theater Arts, and Beyond the Classroom to see if its design, organization and material selection are in line with the development of learners’ communicative competence. Process and

challenges of College English teaching in China are also discussed.

## 2. A Review of Communicative Competence and CLT Approach to ESL Teaching

Since Hymes (1971) proposed the concept of Communicative Competence, and Canale and Swain (1980) considered its implications for the language teaching and specified that there are 4 components of Communicative Competence, (i.e. grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence). *Grammatical competence* is mastery of the linguistic code, the ability to recognize the lexical, morphological, syntactic, and phonological features of a language, and to manipulate these features to form words and phrases. *Sociolinguistic competence* requires an understanding of the social context in which language is used. *Discourse competence* is concerned with the connection of a series of sentences or utterances to form a meaningful whole. *Strategic competence* refers to the strategies that one uses to compensate for imperfect knowledge of grammatical rules. An integrated combination of the four elements will decide a person's proficiency in conducting communicative tasks. Hence, the aim of ESL teaching is to create an environment in which the learners are given opportunities to develop an integrated ability of fulfilling communicative needs (Sato and Kleinsasser, 1999; Savignon, 1997). As a further step, Savignon (1997, 2003) proposed 5 components of a communicative curriculum, i.e. language arts, language for a purpose, personal second language use, theater arts, and beyond the classroom. *Language arts* are the formal instruction of syntax, morphology, and phonology. *Language for a purpose* means that language use should be built in the learning environment, and learners should be provided with opportunities for experience with the new language. *Personal second language use* is to say that learners' needs and personality are considered in language teaching. Learners' affective factors and cognitive aspects are taken into account in teaching practice. *Theater arts* are based on the assumption that sociocultural rules of appropriateness have to be considered within classroom activities. Therefore, role plays, games, and other interactional activities are encouraged to the classroom. *Beyond the classroom* is to prepare learners to apply what they have learned to real world communication and use English in the world beyond. The core of a CLT approach is to consider language learning not as the confined and solitary activity of the learners, but as a process going on within a larger and more complicated social and discourse context. The learning itself is not simplistically input and output, but involving the "expression, interpretation and negotiation of meanings". It is a process of constructing and reconstructing meaning. Also, the social and cultural

strategies are indispensable to achieve successful communication. Therefore, learners' needs are the foci of CLT curriculum design. Questions such as how learners are to use the language, and how often they use the language, for what purposes, should be born in the mind of teachers. In a CLT classroom, the native-like proficiency is not as important as students' free expression and their formation of L2 personality.

## 3. The context of China College English Reform and "Experiencing English"

College English teaching in China has faced tremendous challenges and undertaken great changes in the past 10 years. The major criticism has been that what the learners learned is "dumb English", which means after completed more than 10 years formal instruction, students are still unable to cater for the social needs and communicative requirements at a global scale. This is a big dilemma for College English teaching. In January 2004, China Ministry of Education released *College English Teaching Requirements (on Trial)*, and initiated College English Teaching Reform in 180 colleges and universities throughout the nation. The objectives of the reform are to develop students' comprehensive ability of using English for communication, in particular listening and speaking, so that they are competent in using English to conduct oral and written communication in future career and social interaction (Section of Higher Education, 2004).

Against the backdrop of the economic globalization and information reformation, traditional teaching approaches and teaching models that focused more on language knowledge and grammar structures, were not in conformity with the requirements of higher education. Therefore, new teaching models were to be explored to improve students' ability of autonomous learning, and to enhance understanding about the culture of English-speaking countries so that they meet the needs of China economic development and international communication. And teaching approaches and teaching models are the focus of the present Reform. By the reform of teaching models, it means the introduction of multi-media and computer-assisted language learning to College English practice to improve students' listening and speaking abilities. As teaching materials are the prerequisite of teaching approaches, the foremost procedure of the Reform has been the compilation of textbooks and design of teaching materials carrying the notion of the Reform.

Four national level agencies were granted by China Ministry of Education the privilege of developing College English teaching materials, i.e., "New Era Interactive English", "New Horizon College English", "New College English", and "Experiencing English". The series of "Experiencing English", with the motto of "Experiencing English, Experiencing Happiness, Experiencing Success", include the following volumes, as it is illustrated in fig. 1.

Experts and professors on ESL teaching from more than 15 universities collaborated in designing the *Integrated Book* and *Extended Book*. Listening and Speaking was an adaptation of *Impact Listening* produced by Longman Education Press. The *Learning System* was a product of CALL experts. The series are designed for first year and second year college students in China. It has been adopted by 49 colleges and universities which accounted for 27% of the total 180 universities.

#### Textbooks

- *Integrated Book (1-6)*
- *Extended Book (1-6)*
- *Listening and Speaking (1-6) + Learners' CD (1-6)*

#### Web-based courses

- Web courses (1-6)

#### Computer-based Learning system

#### Teacher materials

- *Teacher Book (1-6)*
- *Teachers' electronic teaching plans (1-6)*

Figure 1. “*Experiencing English*” Series

Since the primary objective of the Reform is to develop college students’ communicative competence, i.e. the ability to use English to do things, it is worthwhile to evaluate “*Experiencing English*” from the viewpoint of CLT. In what follows, this study aimed at analyzing the teaching materials by the criteria of the 5 components of a communicative curriculum, i.e. Language Arts, Language for a Purpose, Personal L2 Use, Theater Arts, and Beyond the Classroom. Through the analysis and with a consideration of the realistic situations in China, we are able to see the progress that China College English teaching has made and the challenges it faces.

## 4. Analysis of “*Experiencing English*”

### 4.1. An Overview of the Textbook

Based on the categorization of organizational framework proposed by Savignon (1997), the overall organization of “*Experiencing English*” is a topic-based framework combined with a distinction of language skills, i.e. listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The topics in “*Experiencing English*” not only serve as the context in which language materials are introduced, more importantly they create the immediate and natural need of using English to communicate. Overall, the topics are well-chosen with an aim to be relevant and closely related to college life, and appeal to college students’ interests. For examples, those in *Integrated Book 1* are (1) College Life, (2) Study Online, (3) Leisure Activity, (4) Living on Your Own, (5) Sources of Information, (6) Olympic Volunteers, (7) Learning Strategies, and (8) Love and Friendship. They are closely related to first-year college students’ life and appeal to their interest. Despite the deficiency that some topics are not so inherently relevant to each other, these topics do fit well to

form a whole picture of college life. Working on these topics, college students are able to describe and share their college experience.

The general organization within a unit displays a distinction of respective language skills. The consistent sections are (1) Listen and Talk, (2) Read and Explore, (3) Write and Produce, and (4) Culture Salon. On surface level, the four skills are dealt with respectively. However, a close look at the design of activities and exercises, one could see that each part is in fact an integrated module with an emphasis on using the language.

### 4.2. Language Art

Authenticity of materials is one of the biggest considerations of “*Experiencing English*”. The reading passages in *Integrated Book* and *Extended Book* are English newspapers and magazines articles; excerpts of conversations are naturally happened in daily life scenario. The dialogues in *Listening and Speaking* are authentic dialogues, with background noises, fillers and pauses. A problem with the selected materials is that no sources of the citations are provided. It indeed lessens the authenticity of the materials. Still, the authentic materials are found to have some grammatical mistakes and inappropriate usages of language, which may not be conducive to students’ development of grammatical competence.

An important aim of language class is the instruction on language knowledge and grammatical forms. “It involves stepping back momentarily from communication to look at the forms that the communication is taking” (Savignon, 1997, p 171). The two approaches to language forms are inductive and deductive. Designed for advanced English learners, most of whom have already had a sound basis on grammar, the language instruction of “*Experiencing English*” is mainly on vocabulary and sentence patterns. In its presentation of language knowledge, “*Experiencing English*” adopted the deductive approach. The following exercise is a typical example of it.

Ex1. Fill in the blanks with the words given below. Change the form where necessary.

Ex2. Complete the following sentences with phrases or expressions from the passage. Change the form where necessary.

Ex3. Translate the following sentences into English.

Ex4. Read the following sentences carefully, and then make your own sentences using the patterns in bold.

With a prevailing emphasis on communicative abilities, “*Experiencing English*” does not downplay the instruction on language arts. The key vocabulary and sentence patterns are highlighted and succinctly explained, with following-up exercises. The Web courses are a good supplement to the language arts instruction as well.

Learners come to the classroom not only to learn specific grammatical forms; they would like to learn the function of the language forms. Good teaching materials should take into account the functional aspects of L2, the ways in which the functions of language are met in different

settings (Savignon, 1997). “*Experiencing English*” realizes this functional consideration through its topic-based organizational framework. With a topic as its focus, the activities are designed to realize the communicative functions to explore on the topic. Not only are functional tasks provided, but also the key words and tips are available as well. The following oral exercise is from the first unit about College Life.

Ex5: Work in pairs and discuss the following topics.

Before an examination, students may feel differently.

*Tips:*

A: How do you feel before an examination?

B: I usually feel ... if I’m interested in it. But I feel ... if I ...

A: How about the coming exam? Are you...?

B: Yeah, I’m ... How about you?

*Other key words:*

Confident, assured, certain, at ease

Nervous, uneasy, excited, restless, anxious

Indifferent, scared, upset

Exercises of this kind assured that what should emerge from such observation and discussion is an awareness of communication as a process of expression, interpretation, and negotiation (Savignon, 1997). Its outcome depends on the cooperation of the interlocutors involved.

#### 4.3. Language for a Purpose

To achieve the communicative purpose, the language use should always aim at real and immediate communicative goals (Savignon, 1997; 2003). It is always the case that learners learn best by doing; hence, a language learner learns best by using the language. China English teaching has been for long criticized to be neglecting using the language. “*Experiencing English*” made effort to counter the long-existing criticism by an adaptation of topic-based framework. Closely related to college life, the topics greatly appeal to the learners. When students’ interest is aroused, they would like to explore on the topic, talk about the topic, and share their experience with each other. Furthermore, “*Experiencing English*” is task-based. In each unit, various communicative activities are recommended. To fulfill the tasks, students need to explore the website to collect information, present their findings, and work in pairs or groups. In the process, they are using English to do something, and these tasks highly involve them to achieve the immediate and natural communicative goals.

#### 4.4. My Language is Me: Personal Second Language Use

The development of communicative competence involves the whole learner, including their personality and interests, their affective and cognitive needs (Savignon, 1997, 2003). The aim of the Reform, as is reflected in the designing of “*Experiencing English*”, is to take into consideration students’ individuality. The three dimensional materials, i.e. paper-based textbooks, web-based Courses, and computer-based Learning System, cater to the needs of

both lower level students and more advanced learners. The lower level students may start from the paper-based textbook, and focus on the language arts to lay a solid foundation. The more advanced students may spend more time on communicative activities and challenging tasks. In one word, learners of different levels can find something appropriate for them, which facilitate the individual development and cultivates a sense of autonomous learning (Preface to *Experiencing English*, 2002). An innovation of “*Experiencing English*” is the design and operation of Computer-based Learning System. It is based on learners’ language levels, especially those of the listening and speaking. In the Learner System, the students can move on to the next level only when they satisfactorily fulfill the communicative tasks of the previous level. The Learner System is a good attempt in achieving individual development.

To facilitate individual needs, another approach suggested by Savignon (1997) is enlarging the width of communicative activities. Let us observe some communicative activities in “*Experiencing English*”. In Listening and Speaking Book, an Interaction Link is included in each unit, which suggests a variety of communicative activities. In Integrated Book, the writing exercises include design of registration form and names cards, poster and invitation cards, the filling out of bank account forms and order forms, compiling of notes of apology, etc. It can be observed that the variety of communicative activities in “*Experiencing English*” have made a dramatic leap from previous teaching materials. The topic-based design leaves space for teachers to develop communicative activities based on their students’ level and needs. In such practices, students’ use the L2 for self-expression are respected, and they are encouraged to develop an L2 personality with which they are comfortable.

#### 4.5. You be..., I’ll be...: Theater Arts

“*Experiencing English*” does not suggest a lot in making the classroom a theater by introducing various communicative activities. However, it leaves room for teachers to develop these activities to engage the students. It is not hard to have some topics for students to play theater arts. In the author’s class, various communicative activities were designed specifically for the students, such as commercial/ advertisement appreciation, short plays, debates, Nobel Prize Speech, simulated Press conference, etc. The students greatly enjoy such on-stage performance, and their performance frequently surprised and impressed the author with their enthusiasm with such activities, and the time and energy they invested in the preparation.

#### 4.6. Beyond the Classroom

Language learning and use should be extended from within the classroom to outside class, such as the L2 community in the neighborhood. This may be the most

difficult for learners of English in China, because China is a homogeneous language community, with Chinese as the only prevailing language. It's hard for Chinese students to find native English speakers to talk with, let alone L2 communities.

A possible compensation for the lack of English speaking environment may be the creation of an English-speaking community. This is exactly what is suggested by "*Experiencing English*". This is what implied by its mottoes "Experiencing English, Experiencing Happiness, Experiencing Success". Based on the materials, it is suggested that various campus activities should be held, such as English corner, English culture salon, campus English week, etc. The college I worked with successfully held Poster Design Competition, English Songs Competition, English Speech Contest, English Movie Simulation Contest, and English Culture Week, which created on campus an atmosphere of using and learning English, and aroused a new enthusiasm in speaking English on campus.

## 5. Progress and Challenges of China National College English Reform

### 5.1. Progress

"*Experiencing English*" is one of the examples among teaching materials and learning systems that illustrate and implement the new notion of China College English Reform. From the reform of teaching materials such as "*Experiencing English*", we could see an inspiring start of China College English Reform. It has well incorporated language knowledge, the negotiation of meaning, the development of communicative competence, and the cultivation of autonomous learning. It could also be seen that abilities such as problem solving, self expression, and creative use of language are stressed.

These teaching materials and learning systems lay a good foundation for teachers to implement CLT. It embodies the new notions, and makes good implementation of them. A survey conducted among 513 students showed that about 75% students agree that this new teaching model had a great influence on their learning methods and styles. 63.14% students agreed that the web-based English learning is helpful for individualized learning. 73.18% students like the web-based new courses, and agree that this new model is helpful in developing communicative competence in English (Jia, 2003).

### 5.2. Challenges

Still, China College English Reform is facing great challenges. First, considering the large size of the class and lack of teachers, it's somehow impractical to allocate much class time to the conduction of communicative activities. The proportion of teachers to students is 1: 137 (Liu & Zhang, 2006). Therefore, the average class size is 40-50 students. The class time is so limited that there are not enough chances

for every student to express and communicate.

Second, the web-based teaching approach cannot be easily applied national wide. The 180 universities which participated in the trial reform have the priority, but even students in these universities, not all students have the access to the Learning System, because the facilities are too limited for all universities and all students to have a share. Take the university I worked with as an example, only one English learning center which supports the Learning System has so far been set up, which has a capacity of only 80 students. However, the total number of students is about 5000.

Third, it is shown that students' capability of autonomous learning is not as good as what is expected. The survey showed that students have the sense of autonomous learning, but they are not sufficient in the ability and self-disciplined learning (Liu & Zhang, 2006). For most of the time, they are not able to learn with efficiency by themselves. It takes time for students to get accustomed to the new notions and new learning styles, and make the best out of it.

Still there are external pressure from the tests, especially College English Test – 4 (CET-4) and College English Test – 6 (CET-6). Since the tests remain to be based on paper, students' ability to use language especially speaking and listening cannot be effectively assessed, which leads to a wrong conception among students that speaking and listening are not as important as language knowledge and grammatical rules. Even teachers have similar doubts. So in the fourth semester of college, the classroom activities are overwhelming devoted to grammatical exercises and simulated tests practices. Although CET-4 has been undergoing changes, still it is far from easy to evaluate speaking and communicative abilities if the test remains to be based on paper.

## 6. Conclusion

"*Experiencing English*", as a prevailing teaching material, stands for the major concepts of the current reform. Its content selection and activity design have obvious inclination to cultivate students' communicative competence, while not neglecting the traditional drills of language knowledge in terms of vocabulary and grammar. The web-based learning system satisfies different learning levels and promotes learners' autonomous learning. However, due to the limited class time and the disproportionate number of teachers and students, it is not an easy task to effectively conduct the communicative activities. Moreover, lack of a certain level of autonomous learning ability, students cannot make full use of the web-based system, or even tend to use it for some recreation purposes. There are still some universities that encounter capital troubles to apply the online system.

To sum up, taking into consideration the huge population of China and the homogenous language environment, it is no doubt that college English teaching has made considerable progress. The College English reform that is undergoing now is especially inspiring in that it aims to

compensate students' deficiency in using the language to conduct communication for real life purposes. Moreover, it takes into account the individual differences and needs of learners. However, there is always a gap between good wishes and reality. To carry out the reform, the following suggestions are given:

1. More investment on hardware and technological support from the government and the universities part are expected.
2. College English teachers need to be aware of the changing notions and themes underlying the Reform, and transform their role of knowledge transmitter to organizers and facilitators.
3. College students should assume more responsibility on English learning, and assume their new role as the center of learning process. A conscious development of autonomous learning and active use of English for communicative purposes are encouraged.
4. Major English tests such as CET-4 and CET-6 is expected to be reformed in the direction of evaluating students' communicative competence.

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