

Perceptions of ELT Among English Language Teachers in China

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There has been growing enthusiasm for English learning in China in recent years. This development, along with the introduction of a new English curriculum in 2001, has brought a breakthrough in English language teaching (ELT) in China. In the new curriculum, the traditional emphasis on grammar and vocabulary is replaced by a focus on the development of communication skills. How do Chinese mainland teachers perceive ELT these days? Are they ready for the paradigm shift? This article reports a study that attempts to answer these two questions. The study includes a questionnaire survey with 214 primary English language teachers from Guangdong and observation of two demonstration lessons conducted by local teachers. The findings reveal that although many teachers had a heightened awareness of the importance of using the learner-centered approach to enhance students' communicative competence, their teaching was still directed by textbooks, with authentic teaching materials seldom being used. This article identifies some issues that the education authorities in China need to address in order to implement curriculum reform successfully.

Enthusiasm for English learning has been growing in China at a rapid rate over the past few years, facilitated by the growing perception that being competent in English can increase one's economic and social mobility (Adamson, 2004; Lam, 2005). As China has increased contact with the outside world, with the introduction of the four modernizations in the 1980s, the entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001, the hosting of the 2008 Olympics in Beijing and the Expo 2010 in Shanghai, English learning has become more important and popular

throughout China. Taxi drivers, shop assistants, and civil servants can be seen with English books in hand. Books such as *English for Policemen* and *Taxi Driver's English* are available in bookshops (Y. Jiang, 2003). With English learning becoming a mania in the nation, television courses, radio lessons, part-time or evening schools have offered various learning opportunities for people to learn English. Launched in 2000, CCTV-9 (CCTV International in English), the English-language 24-hour channel of China Central Television (CCTV), has been a breakthrough for English learning in China in the 21st century. CCTV-9, together with the *China Daily* (the largest official English-language newspaper) and China Radio International, provides Chinese people with much easier access to authentic English these days.

In formal education, English has become a requirement for university entrance examinations in China. In big cities like Shanghai, regular English classes are offered in some kindergartens. It is considered important to let young children learn English early so that they can achieve high scores, enter elite universities, and find good jobs in the future. In most cities and towns, children now start to learn English as a foreign language in Primary 3. With 456,900 primary schools having an enrollment of 121,567,100 students in 2002 (Ministry of Education, 2003), the English language teaching (ELT) industry in China is rapidly developing and is in the process of reform and renovation (Wu, 2001). There is now an urgent demand for English language teachers.

Are teachers in China ready for such changes? Culturally, under the influence of Confucianism, teachers are regarded as “knowledge holders” (Yu, 2001, p. 196), and pedagogy is “classroom-based,” “teacher-centered,” and “textbook-directed.” The classroom is characterized by teachers’ authoritative teaching of the textbook and students’ passive acceptance of that teaching. Emphasis is placed on learning of grammatical structure, use of memorization and rote learning, correction of mistakes, and use of translation (Rao, 2002). Song (2000) describes a typical Chinese classroom as follows:

In their classroom ... texts are being translated into exact Chinese, sentences are being analyzed, and grammar rules are dwelt upon and learned by heart. Textbooks remain a crutch for both the teacher and the students. The classroom atmosphere tends to be monotonous and uninspiring with the teacher doing all the talking and the students listening. (p. 36)

Geng (2007) uses the word “toxic” to describe the authoritarian teaching style in China. This kind of “toxic” teaching, which focuses on command and control, with no regard to diversity or pedagogical effectiveness, fails to help young people develop critical and creative mind, and improve learning motivation. Studies such as Zhang, Lu, and Shao (2000) reveal that students’ interest in English learning is low in China and that their interest declines as they progress through school (X. N. Jiang, 2004; Liu, 2002; Yang & Nicholas, 2008). What makes the situation worse is that most teachers in China lack sufficient knowledge of, and training in, current ELT methodologies, and their language proficiency, especially their oral proficiency, is low (Liu, 2002; Penner, 1995; Song, 2000).

With the introduction of the new basic education curriculum system for the 21st century by the Ministry of Education (2001), the underlying philosophy of the new curriculum for Primary 3 to Senior Secondary 3 came to focus on the transformation from a traditional “teacher-centered” approach to a “learner-oriented” approach based on the development of children. In contrast to the traditional emphasis on imparting knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, the new curriculum focuses on skills development, with special attention to developing students’ analytical thinking and cultivating their interest in learning. It is now widely accepted that students should learn the English language through using and experimenting with it. The new curriculum aims at developing the learners’ capacity to use English for communicative purposes through the development of: (a) the four language skills; (b) English language knowledge, including pronunciation and intonation, vocabulary, grammar and language functions; (c) affective expressions and values, including enhanced learning motivation and confidence through the use of songs, stories, games, and so on, and being respectful of others and other cultures; (d) learning strategies; and (e) cultural awareness. According to J. Huang and Conti (2009), ELT in China has experienced steady improvement, with priority given to the development of communicative competence in order to develop learners’ abilities to function in the real world.

The Present Study

The intended shift from a traditional English teaching method — teacher-centered, textbook-directed, and grammar-focused — to a

learner-centered and communication-based curriculum represents a paradigm shift. It would be interesting to find out whether teachers in China who learned English in a traditional manner are receptive to education reform and whether they are ready to implement the reform. So far, little has been done on these. The purpose of this study is to find answers to these two research questions: (a) What are the perceptions of ELT among Chinese mainland teachers these days? (2) Are teachers ready for the paradigm shift? It is anticipated that this study will provide valuable insights in this area.

This study was conducted with some primary school teachers who joined a collaborative training project organized jointly by the Hong Kong Institute of Education (HKIEd) and the Guangdong Education Bureau. The training took place in two cities in north-eastern Guangdong, namely Heyuan and Meizhou, and lasted for two days in each of the cities. The aim of the training project was to introduce the teachers to current ELT methodologies and expand their repertoire of teaching strategies. At the end of the training, the participants were invited to complete a questionnaire. This convenient sampling method was chosen because it allowed the researcher to gain access to a large sample of respondents with different school backgrounds. The first part of the questionnaire (see Appendix) focused on their perceptions of ELT and their daily practice in the classroom. The second part focused on the effectiveness of the training project and whether the knowledge from the training would change their classroom practice. This article will mainly present the findings of the first part of the questionnaire. The discussion below includes: (a) the participants' biographical data, (b) their teaching style, (c) their perceived aims of ELT, (d) the factors affecting their teaching approach, and (e) the teaching materials that they used. Implications of the present study will also be discussed.

The quantitative data were strengthened by the data collected through observation of two demonstration lessons with Primary 3 students conducted by two local teachers. Both teachers had 6–10 years of teaching experience, and had previously joined a three-week professional development course run by the HKIEd. The two lessons were recorded and analyzed. The findings were useful for comparing the teachers' perceptions of ELT with their performance in the classroom. Because of limited space, only selected qualitative findings are reported in this article.

Findings and Discussion

Participants' Background

A total of 214 valid questionnaires were collected. Among these respondents, 71 came from Heyuan and 143 from Meizhou; 196 were female and 15 male (the remaining 3: sex unknown). The trainees were young teachers, with 76.2% falling into the 21–30 year range, and 22% into the 31–40 year range. As for their English teaching experience, 27.1% had taught English for less than two years, 43% for 3–5 years, and 23.4% for 6–10 years. Only about 6% of them had taught English for more than 11 years. Most of the respondents (86.9%) had received either university education or training in education colleges, with 34.6% having English as their major. Some 57.5% indicated that they had undertaken English language teacher training (including short courses) before. However, when asked whether they had sufficient English language knowledge to teach English, only 26.6% of the respondents answered affirmatively. The present author believes that this finding is not attributable to traditional Chinese modesty. The low English proficiency of many teachers in China, which has been commented on by various scholars (e.g., Liao, 2000; Penner, 1995; Song, 2000; Sun & Cheng, 2002; Zhu, 2003), was also revealed in the present study. The English questionnaire used in this project was set with Chinese characters at the side and the researcher had to explain the questions orally in Chinese to make sure that the respondents could understand the questions. These findings suggest that English teaching is still a new career in China, and many teachers need to improve their own English competence so as to extend “the limits of their knowledge of English” (Penner, 1995, p. 6).

Teaching Style

Despite the fact that Chinese classrooms are traditionally dominated by the teacher-centered approach, 77.1% of the respondents in the present study indicated that they were either very learner-centered or mostly learner-centered. This finding suggests that the new curriculum reform, which advocates the learner-centered approach and cultivation of learners' interests, could have impacted on teachers' attitudes toward ELT. It seems that Chinese teachers are now more aware of the

importance of student participation in the learning process. As seen in the two demonstration lessons, the teachers designed a number of student-centered activities, such as singing with body movements, guessing games, competitions, pair work activities, and “listen and show.” Students’ good interaction with the teachers and other students was evident. Nevertheless, as these two were demonstration lessons and the quantitative data were based on the respondents’ self-reports, whether the findings reflect the actual classroom teaching situation or whether they only reflect the lip service paid by the teachers to the curriculum reform is worth further investigation through real classroom observation.

Aims of ELT

When the respondents were asked to select the most important three aims of ELT, the aim which topped the list was that of helping students communicate in English effectively, with 89.3% of the respondents opting for it (see Table 1). The second most favored aim was to help students develop vocabulary. However, as compared with the aim to help students communicate in English effectively, this aim was selected by a much smaller proportion of teachers (58.4%). These findings suggest that in accordance with the principles of curriculum reform, the traditional form-focused approach is less valued than the contemporary communicative approach by Chinese mainland teachers these days. They now have heightened awareness of the need to provide learners with opportunities to use English for communicative purposes so as to develop the learners’ language skills and communicative competence.

Table 1: Aims of ELT

Aims	Percentage
1. To help students communicate in English effectively	89.3
2. To help students develop vocabulary	58.4
3. To help students develop creativity	46.3
4. To help students further their studies	36.9
5. To help students appreciate the English history and culture	24.3
6. To help students learn grammar rules	19.2
7. To increase students’ job opportunities	14.0
8. To host the 2008 Olympics in Beijing successfully	8.4

The two demonstration lessons, which focused on vocabulary development through communicative activities, were good evidence of how teachers tried to realize the two top aims in the classroom. In the lesson on food items and cutlery, the teacher designed a pair-work activity in which each student was asked to find the items according to their partner's request and stick them onto their partner's worksheet. In the other lesson on stationery vocabulary, the teacher invited the students to conduct a group survey to find out what stationery items their members had put in their pencil case.

Meanwhile, to help students develop creativity was selected by 46.3% of the teachers, and it was considered the third most important aim of ELT. This study indicates that many Chinese teachers' current attitudes toward the aims of English teaching are congruent with the shift of focus to communication and development of affective values (including imagination and creativity) in the new curriculum. This was evident in the two demonstration lessons, in which the teachers used pictures, realia, and PowerPoint slides to present and elicit language in order to add interest and help stimulate students' thinking.

Nevertheless, another important component included in the new curriculum, the promotion of cultural awareness, was opted for by only 24.3% of the teachers. This might be explained by the fact that the teachers in this study came from two outlying cities in the Guangdong province. They had only minimal contact with Westerners. As a result, they might have considered understanding English culture not to be a priority. This finding confirms the argument that most Chinese mainland teachers traditionally neglect the role of culture learning in foreign language acquisition (Song, 2000; Zhu, 2003). A number of ELT scholars (e.g., Brown, 2007; Byram & Risager, 1999; Lange & Paige, 2003; Nault, 2006) have recommended an explicit focus on culture in English learning contexts to develop competence. With English now being used across diverse cultures, not being confined to Britain and the United States, English educators and publishers in China need to design teaching materials with a global and multicultural focus, with world cultures integrated in their materials and lessons so as to promote cultural awareness, international understanding, and English competence.

While vocabulary learning was still considered important by the Chinese teachers, as mentioned above, the traditional emphasis on grammar learning nearly vanished under the curriculum reform — only

19.2% of the teachers chose this item as an important aim. This might be explained by the different emphases on these two language points in the new curriculum document, *Yingyu Kecheng Biaozhun* (Ministry of Education, 2001). There are only three pages in the appendix on the grammar structures to be taught, but 139 pages on vocabulary items, which take up more than half of the whole curriculum document. These significant changes in teachers' attitude toward ELT are in line with the shift from a grammar focus to the communication-based approach in the new curriculum. Other aims which were considered not so important include that of increasing students' job opportunities, and successfully hosting the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. As the respondents were primary school teachers, it was not surprising that they did not regard job prospects and assistance in the Olympics as essential to their young learners.

Factors Influencing the Teaching Approach

Table 2 shows the ranking of the factors which have most influence on the teachers' approach to English teaching. The top five very important/important intertwining factors selected by over 70% of the respondents include: (a) teacher training, (b) motivation/needs of students, (c) school/Education Bureau policy, (d) personality of teacher, and (e) current trends in EFL (English as a foreign language) teaching. With the current ELT trends emphasizing communicative language

Table 2: Factors Affecting the English Teaching Approach

Factors	Percentage
1. Teacher training	79.3
2. Motivation/needs of students	73.0
3. School/Education Bureau policy	72.3
4. Personality of teacher	71.5
5. Current trends in EFL teaching	70.5
6. Class size	67.3
7. Availability/quality of teaching aids (e.g., computers, audio/ visual equipment, language labs, etc.)	64.9
8. Availability/quality of teaching materials	64.2
9. Examination requirements	63.6
10. Physical environment (e.g., class space)	46.8

teaching, the Ministry of Education has introduced changes in the English curriculum, shifting from teacher-centered, form-focused teaching to learner-centered, function-focused learning. Many in-service English teachers in the Chinese mainland, however, lack training in communicative language teaching and their teaching beliefs need refining (Li, 2003). They need to learn how to design interesting communicative activities to enhance students' learning motivation. According to Gardner (1985), motivation has a clear link with the language learning success. As revealed in the findings of the present study, many Chinese mainland teachers are aware of their need to receive teacher training to update their pedagogical knowledge and skills. The two teachers who conducted the demonstration lessons indicated that the professional training they had received at the HKIEd allowed them to assemble a repertoire of activities, and to become aware of their strengths and weaknesses through reflection. The education authorities, in collaboration with teachers' colleges and publishers, therefore need to develop high-quality professional development courses to equip teachers with the pedagogy and English competence so that they are more prepared to implement curriculum reform.

For a number of respondents, the availability and quality of teaching aids and teaching materials, and the physical environment had less influence on their approach to English teaching. These three factors were ranked 7th, 8th and 10th respectively out of the ten factors included in the questionnaire. Communicative language teaching methodology, however, emphasizes authentic language input, real-life language practice, and the creative generation of language output (Sun & Cheng, 2002). The relatively smaller amount of attention paid to these three factors might be a reaction to the inadequacy of public funding for education over a long period. Even in modern China today, many Chinese schools, especially those in the rural areas, do not have enough financial resources to purchase audio-visual equipment, photocopiers, or the authentic print materials that are necessary to support the dynamic teaching required by contemporary teaching methodologies (Rao, 2002). Class sizes are also large, around 50–60 students, leaving little space for interactive activities in the English lesson. These external constraints, which were also mentioned by some teachers in the present study, hinder communicative language learning from being effectively carried out, and need to be addressed by the government for the successful implementation of the curriculum reform.

Although the Chinese education system has been criticized as “examination-oriented,” the factor “examination requirements” was ranked 9th (near the bottom) by the primary school teachers in the present study. This might be due to the gradual implementation of 9-year compulsory education by governments at various levels in China since the promulgation of the *Compulsory Education Law of the People’s Republic of China* in 1986. It is to be hoped that being freed from the pressure of preparing students for examination, primary level school teachers will accept the role of implementing change and fostering innovation in their teaching.

Teaching Materials Used

Teachers’ lack of equipment and resources, as mentioned above, might be a contributing factor in their heavy reliance on textbooks. According to Table 3, 87.5% of the respondents indicated that they always/often used textbooks. There is no doubt that textbooks are essential in formal education in China under the influence of Confucian ideas. In Wu’s (2001) words, textbooks “provide input, suggest approaches and methodology, and guide or impose the course of learning” (p. 193). In the past, the Communist government of China tightly controlled the content of the textbooks: only the central government had the authority to compile, publish, and distribute textbooks, which were teacher-oriented instead of focusing on the learner’s learning (F. Huang, 2004). Xu (1997) commented negatively on the nationwide textbooks, saying that they did not have adequate coverage of culture learning because the publisher claimed that the majority of the students who lived in the countryside found a foreign culture remote. Liu’s (2002) study reveals that 56% of the teachers surveyed were not satisfied with the textbooks used. Today this situation has improved. Regional educational departments, educational institutions, and experts are encouraged to compile, publish, and distribute textbooks in compliance with the basic requirements set forth in the syllabuses of 9-year compulsory education. The central government or local governments are only responsible for examining and approving textbooks to be used nationwide or in a local area. The decentralization of the textbook market will create an incentive for innovation — the development of wide-ranging materials to supplement the textbooks, such as teachers’ guides, multimedia resources, internet materials, wall charts, maps, and so on.

Table 3: Teaching Materials Used

Teaching materials	Percentage*
Textbooks	
always/often	87.5
sometimes	9.6
seldom/never	2.9
Songs	
always/often	72.7
sometimes	24.9
seldom/never	2.4
Authentic audio materials	
always/often	40.2
sometimes	22.5
seldom/never	37.2
Grammar exercise books	
always/often	33.2
sometimes	40.5
seldom/never	26.4
Story books	
always/often	19.2
sometimes	39.4
seldom/never	41.3
Authentic visual materials	
always/often	12.4
sometimes	34.7
seldom/never	53.0
Authentic reading materials	
always/often	10.6
sometimes	33.7
seldom/never	55.8
Newspapers	
always/often	8.1
sometimes	27.8
seldom/never	64.1

* The percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

As shown in Table 3, songs were another resource widely used by the teachers (72.7%). The songs selected, however, are sometimes unrelated to the theme of the lesson. This practice was evident in the two demonstration lessons conducted by the Chinese mainland teachers in the training project. For example, in the lesson on food and cutlery vocabulary learning, the teacher started with asking students to sing two songs — “Do you like baseball?” and “How many are there?” — with body movements. Similarly, in the other lesson, which was on stationery vocabulary learning, the teacher started with the songs “Hello, how are you?” and “Head and shoulders, knees and toes.” Despite the fact that the students obviously enjoyed singing, the songs chosen were not related to the learning objectives or the themes of the lessons. This indicates that many Chinese mainland teachers have realized the affective role that songs can play in the learning process. However, they are not familiar with how to integrate songs into the language learning sequence purposefully so as to provide a meaningful learning context. Provision of more professional development courses for teachers to enhance their teaching methodologies would be desirable.

As seen in Table 3, other than songs, authentic materials such as stories, newspapers, brochures, and TV programs were not in common use by the respondents. These findings reveal that many Chinese mainland teachers are not yet aware of the value of using authentic materials despite widespread commentary on this among a number of ESL (English as a second language) or EFL experts these days (e.g., Allen, Bernhardt, Berry, & Demel, 1988; Bacon & Finnemann, 1990; J. F. K. Lee, 2003; W. Y. C. Lee, 1995). Drawing Chinese teachers’ attention to how to use authentic materials to enhance teaching and learning and to make learning more personal and more life-like should be one important component in professional development courses.

Conclusions and Implications

The present study indicates that the perceptions of ELT among many Chinese mainland teachers are congruent with the philosophy of recent curriculum reform. The traditional emphasis on grammar learning has declined. In accordance with the guidelines of the new curriculum, many teachers have begun to realize that an important aim of English teaching is to help students develop effective communication skills and affective values. This breakthrough requires a more learner-centered approach

and a change in the role of teachers — from a unidirectional transmitter of knowledge to an organizer, an adviser, and a facilitator of learning. It seems that the teachers are cognitively ready for such a paradigm shift. However, in terms of professional competence, the present study reveals that many Chinese mainland teachers are in need of further professional training. It was found that a number of teachers lacked an appreciable level of English proficiency. Their teaching was still directed by textbooks, and authentic teaching materials and cultural traits were seldom included. Although songs were sometimes used, they were not always used effectively. To implement curriculum reform successfully, it is crucial to improve the quality of teaching through large-scale, high-quality, and high-efficiency training and continuous education. Chinese mainland teachers need to raise their own English proficiency, and become familiar with trends in teaching methodology, teaching resources, facilities, and target culture. They need to develop skills in materials production, adaptation, and evaluation. The institute at which the present author works has a cooperative arrangement with education authorities in the Chinese mainland and has been providing various professional development courses for English teachers from the southern part of China. This kind of cooperation assists in preparing teachers for the implementation of education reform in China.

Further, there is an urgent need for more financial support from the government in order to carry out education reform. The preconditions for a communicative language classroom include a variety of teaching resources and facilities, and an appropriate teacher-student ratio. Such constraints as inadequate classroom space and the large size of Chinese mainland classrooms have to be addressed in order to enable teachers to implement curriculum reform successfully.

Limitations of the Study

The present study was based on teachers' self-reported views about ELT in China and observation of two demonstration lessons. The discrepancy between the data collected and actual classroom practice was not examined. It would be of interest to further investigate the real teaching of Chinese mainland teachers through classroom observation. Further, the participants of the study were mainly young teachers who joined a training project. This group of teachers might be better motivated and have more awareness of the curriculum reform and

the current trend in ELT than average English teachers in the Chinese mainland. The views of the experienced teachers who are used to traditional pedagogy are worth investigating in future studies.

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- To help students learn grammar rules
- To help students develop vocabulary
- To help students develop creativity
- To help students appreciate the English history and culture
- To help students further their studies
- To increase students' job opportunities
- To host the 2008 Olympics in Beijing successfully
- Others (please specify)

12. In your own opinion, which of the following factors has most influence on your approach to the teaching of English? Please rank them according to the following scale.

1 = most important 2 = important
 3 = not so important 4 = not important at all

- _____ a. Class size
- _____ b. Physical environment (e.g., class space)
- _____ c. Examination requirements
- _____ d. School/Education Bureau policy
- _____ e. Current trends in EFL teaching
- _____ f. Motivation/needs of students
- _____ g. Availability/quality of teaching materials
- _____ h. Availability/quality of teaching aids (e.g., computers, audio/visual equipment, language labs, etc.)
- _____ i. Teacher training
- _____ j. Personality of teacher
- _____ k. Other factors (please specify)

13. How often do you use the following materials in your English language teaching? (Put a “✓” in the appropriate space.)

	Always	Often	Sometimes	Seldom	Never
a. Textbooks					
b. Grammar exercise books					
c. Songs					
d. Story books					
e. Newspapers					
f. Authentic visual materials (e.g., news reports, cartoons, current affairs programs, etc.)					
g. Authentic audio materials (e.g., radio programs, real-life conversation between native English speakers, etc.)					
h. Authentic reading materials (e.g., brochures, bank deposit slips, advertisements, menus, etc.)					