

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Rationale and Statement of the Problem

In China, English is viewed as an access to modern scientific and technological advances, and as a vehicle to promote commerce and understanding between the People's Republic of China and the rest of the world. Chinese nationals who are competent in English, especially in reading and writing, serve as conduits for China to reach out for technological, scientific, economic and agricultural advances of the world so as to realize China's "Four Modernizations"—modern agriculture, modern industry, modern science and technology, and modern national defense.

As a result, since the late 1970s, English has replaced Russian as the most favored and popular foreign language in China. English is a required subject from junior high school on and is included in high school entrance examinations, and in national college and graduate school entrance examinations. Not surprisingly, English plays a crucial role in promoting students' educational and academic advancement in schools. The Ministry of Education gives a very general English curriculum to junior and senior high schools and universities. In general, "the purpose of the English curriculum is to train students to read and write in English,

relying on grammatical analysis and translation to and from Chinese as the primary methods. Instruction includes grammatical explanation, practice with basic sentence patterns, and memorization of vocabulary” (Cowan, et al. 1979, 466). Therefore, language teaching and learning in China attends primarily to linguistic forms rather than meaningful communication, and the content of materials focuses on reading comprehension and writing. The goal of Chinese English education is to turn out individuals who are competent in reading and writing in English.

Various researchers indicated that in such an institutional and pedagogical context like that of China, students seldom hear or speak authentic conversations in English, other than the examples that the teacher uses to illustrate particular grammatical points; thus, regrettably, they have failed to develop their communicative competence, which is the ultimate goal of language teaching and learning (Wong 1980, 1982; Booz 1981; Ebrey 1981; Barton 1982; Sato 1982; Tsui 1982; Guthrie 1983; Van Naerssen, et al. 1983; Guthrie 1984; Harvey 1985; Young 1985; Maley 1986; Wu 1991; McKay 1994; Ran 1998).

Indisputably, learners need to know rules, but they also need to be prepared to interact in the real world in the target language. They need to produce sentences accurately, properly and effectively. As Smith-Berke (1987) pointed out, while it is necessary to give learners the linguistic ability to meet their needs to communicate, it is impossible to achieve communicative competence only through grammar translation and analysis.

Not only the pedagogical and institutional focus, but also cultural values play a part in students' language learning and in their classroom participation. Asian culture, especially Chinese, is greatly influenced by Confucianism and Taoism, in which silence is valued as a sign of modesty. The teachings of the *Tao Teh Ching* state: "One who knows does not talk. One who talks does not know. Therefore the sage keeps his mouth shut and his sense-gates closed" (John 1956, 347). These teachings may justify some classroom behaviors of Asian students compared with those of non-Asian students.

For example, Sato studied the classroom behaviors among Asian (Chinese, Japanese and Korean) and non-Asian (Latin American, European, and Middle-Eastern) students in two university ESL courses. She found that although 61% of the class were Asian students, they took much fewer turns and sought fewer opportunities to speak than did their non-Asian classmates (1982).

The results of research done on Chinese learners of English have shown that one of their persistent problems was their inability to express themselves adequately and appropriately in spoken English (Booz 1981; Ebrey 1981; Sato 1982; Tsui 1982; Guthrie 1983; Van Naerssen, et al. 1983; Harvey 1985; Young 1985; Maley 1986; Wu 1991; McKay 1994; Ran 1998). If learners have little or no practice of spoken English in their environment, they need teachers and materials to engage them in learning that could approximate authentic spoken English.

In light of the aforementioned EFL situations in China, this writer investigated the conditions in which the first-year undergraduates of Arts and

Sciences at Guizhou University of Technology learn English as well as their needs in using English. Particularly, this researcher sought to find out what the needs of the first-year undergraduates of Arts and Sciences at Guizhou University of Technology in speaking English are and whether the instructional material they use meet such needs.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

Specifically, the objectives of this study are:

1. To identify the long-term needs of the first-year undergraduates of Arts and Sciences at Guizhou University of Technology in terms of English oral communication;

2. to evaluate the current material (*College English Intensive Reading, Volume One*) using the six guidelines proposed by Dubin and Olstain (1990) to find out any language skills that may not have been included;

3. to design a supplementary speaking skill material that would fill the identified inadequacy based on the analysis of the first-year undergraduates' specific needs in English (see objective 1) and the findings of the evaluation of the learning material (*College English Intensive Reading, Volume One*) cited in objective 2.

1.3 Scope and Limitation of the Study

This study attempted to gain an insight into the EFL situations in China. It offers background information on the institutional and societal situations in English teaching and learning in China and how Grammar Translation has failed to create

opportunities for Chinese students to communicate in the target language. Chinese learners' inability to communicate adequately and appropriately in English was of paramount concern to educational practitioners and the learners themselves.

This study focused on the problems that the first-year undergraduates of Arts and Sciences at Guizhou University of Technology have in speaking English. After diagnosing the problems, the researcher attempted to explore pedagogical means for "real life" communication in the classroom and to bridge the gap between linguistic forms and meaning through a function-based syllabus.

Therefore, based on the local English learning and teaching situations in Guizhou, the aim of this study was to design and propose a function-based supplementary speaking skill material, which would engage the students in meaningful communication in the target language and at the same time improve their speaking skills.

However, this study, along with the proposed supplementary material, cannot give a quick fix to the speaking problems among all the first-year undergraduates of Arts and Sciences who use *College English Intensive Reading, Volume One* in China. This limitation is part of the nature of language learning and teaching in that there are many variables in these situations such as learner variables, institution variables and teacher variables. For example, in EFL contexts, students do not have ready-made contexts for communication beyond their classroom. Learning strategies, effort, time and attention in classroom learning and in creating communication situations outside the classroom door vary from one learner to another. In addition, in different

institutions, available resources for the implementation of new programs or materials, both qualitatively and quantitatively, determine the outcomes of new programs or materials. Finally, such variables as teachers' attitudes towards the changes of new materials, teachers' professional training and their command of English play an important role in obtaining success with pedagogical applications.

In light of all these aforementioned variables, this study could only shed light on the problems that the first-year undergraduates of Arts and Sciences at Guizhou University of Technology have in terms of speaking English. The proposed supplementary material would go a long way to enable learners to achieve their long-term needs in speaking English.

1.4 Definitions of Terms Used in the Paper

Authentic materials: This term refers to materials that students will actually encounter in the real world other than materials that are rewritten, simplified or adapted for a particular audience or for a specific studying purpose.

English as a Foreign Language (EFL): This term refers to contexts in which students do not have ready-made contexts for communication in English outside their classroom as opposed to ESL contexts in which English is available outside their classroom (Brown 1994).

Evaluation: In this study, this term refers to the scheme of checking whether the objectives of each lesson have been achieved. It adopts learners' self-evaluations,

peer assessment and teachers' assessments on learners' speaking skills and their participation in speaking.

Function-based syllabus: The function-based syllabus, which develops alongside the notion-based syllabus with various attempts to combine the two, focuses on the social functions of language as the central unit of organization. Thus, a function-based syllabus is concerned with elements such as invitations, suggestions, apologies, refusals, etc (Dubin and Olsain 1986, 37).

Long-term needs: This term refers to what learners need to learn in order to achieve current academic task objectives and future career requirements.

Needs analysis: This term refers to the process of determining the needs for which a learner or group of learners requires a language and arranging those needs according to priorities. It makes use of both subjective and objective information (Jordan 1997, 20).

Official language: This term refers to "a language which government uses to conduct some of its official business. Generally, the country recognizes the special status of the language in one of its government documents and promotes its use in some way" (McKay 1992, 138). In China, the official language is Mandarin; English is only used as an accessory language in some business and institutions.

Supplementary materials: A term refers to materials designed to be used in addition to the core material of a course. They are usually related to the development of reading, writing, listening or speaking skills rather than to the learning of language items (Tomlinson 1998, xiii.)

Teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL): This term refers to the teaching of English to students of other languages. It therefore embraces Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL), Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) or an additional language (McKay 1992).

The first-year undergraduates of Arts and Sciences at Guizhou University of Technology: This term refers to a group of college students who are enrolled in the first semester of the first academic year and required to study *College English Intensive Reading, Volume One* at Guizhou University of Technology.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study would be beneficial for the learners, teachers, Guizhou University of Technology, multinational business companies, and other researchers and syllabus/material designers.

First of all, the first-year undergraduates of Arts and Sciences at Guizhou University of Technology would directly benefit from the function-based supplementary speaking skill material, which aims to assist in fulfilling their long-term needs in speaking and raising their awareness of the English culture.

Secondly, the teachers at Guizhou University of Technology may become more aware of their students' long-term needs. Such awareness would guide teachers in varying their teaching methods (instead of relying heavily on Grammar Translation) and incorporating the proposed function-based supplementary speaking skill material into *College English Intensive Reading, Volume One*.

Thirdly, in the long haul, Guizhou University of Technology, as an institution, would gain a better reputation in Guizhou province or even in the whole of China because of the improved speaking proficiency level of its graduates.

Fourthly, multinational business companies, particularly in Guizhou, as well as those throughout China, would be able to recruit more and more personnel who are competent in English speaking, which in turn can bring various benefits, including goodwill and profitability to the companies.

Lastly, this present research would be beneficial for other researchers and syllabus/material designers in that it affords them background information on the first-year college students' long-term needs.

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