

## **University Teachers And Students' Perceptions Of ELT Methodologies And Their Effectiveness**

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### **Abstract**

Since the mid 1970's, a number of Asian countries have been concerned with economic reform and a firmer position in the global market. As such, a great deal of attention has been devoted to the improvement of English language teaching and learning, especially at the tertiary level. The purpose of this study was to investigate English language teaching and learning at three universities located on China's mainland so as to identify issues worthy of more in-depth investigation. Perceptions sought from 25 English teachers and 312 English majors included: degree of satisfaction with materials and facilities; importance of English skill areas; effectiveness of teaching methods used; and factors contributing to effective language learning. Questionnaire data also included teacher/student talk time and how classes were typically structured. In addition, teachers were asked to give their views of their roles in the class and the importance of various assessment factors. Students were asked to indicate their perceptions for learning English, their perceived responsibilities in class, and their mastery of various English skills.

One issue which emerged was the perception by students that they have little opportunity to practise English in the class. Teachers dominate "talk time" and this, combined with a lack of group work, indicate that little actual change has taken place regarding traditional teacher and learner roles in the classroom. Both groups were dissatisfied with textbooks and felt a lack of involvement when selecting materials or deciding syllabi. An interesting finding was the emphasis students placed on the importance of the social university environment for their success in English.

**Keywords:** ELT in Asia, curricular reform, methodology, perceptions of students, perceptions of teachers.

### **Introduction**

Since the mid 1970s, a number of Asian countries have been concerned with economic reforms. As such, a great deal of attention has been devoted to the improvement of English language teaching and learning, especially at the secondary and tertiary levels. Thailand's education reform bill of 2003 (see Jarvis & Atsilarat, 2004), reform efforts in

Korea (Li, 1998), and sweeping changes in Malaysia (see Hamid, 2005) are among the many examples which can be found. On China's mainland, the context of this research investigation, the national program of "Four Modernizations" (first announced in 1978), brought in a new era of political, economic, cultural, and scientific exchanges with the outside world. Lam (2005, p. 73) terms this period from 1977 – 1990 the "English for modernization" period. English Language Teaching (ELT) was recognized as a professional discipline and support was given to local and overseas experts to begin the lengthy process of curricular, materials, and syllabus reform (Lam, 2005, p. 78). Teachers began to function as materials designers in some settings, assisting in the creation and revision of syllabi and textbooks (Dzau, 1990).

Developments since the early 1990s have exerted profound influences on education in general and English Language Teaching (ELT) in particular. Lam refers to this period as the "English for international stature" period (p. 82-83), with professional organizations being formalized, research centers established, and ELT in China becoming more international. At the same time, there was a growing awareness and willingness to consider more communicative, student-centered approaches. In 1992 the State Education Development Commission (SEDC) replaced the 1981 national syllabus with a new one that "set communication as the teaching aim" (Yu, 2001, p. 195). The 1992 syllabus called for English skill development to enable students to "gain basic knowledge of English and competence to use English for communication" (p. 1).

Syllabi for primary and secondary schools were published by the mid-1990s and a revised syllabus for English majors at university approved in 2000. Besides an integrated-skill, more content-based approach, student-centered instruction is clearly emphasized. English classes are required throughout all four years of study in colleges and universities. National English standardized testing has been instituted from primary through tertiary levels of education and the construction of a standardized ELT program of instruction (from Chinese primary through tertiary levels) is currently underway (Ji, 2002). With economic growth and the attention of the world increasingly oriented toward Asia, the emphasis on English as a global language is becoming even more apparent.

### **New Challenges for Teachers, Students and Administrators**

ELT curricular reform efforts in Asia are impressive but have taken, for the most part, a top-down approach. Long-lasting change will depend upon the beliefs, responses, and efforts put forth by participants as they strive to meet the challenges of change. For example, many teachers of English have become increasingly aware of the need for more communicative approaches (Liao, 2001). At the same time, change is difficult, especially when beliefs and attitudes are not fully addressed and when *how* to teach in new ways is not modeled or experienced by the teachers themselves. We tend to teach as we were taught, and many of us have been taught using a transmission of information (teacher-dominated) approach. Xiao (1998) points out that "the inefficient grammar-translation approach is continually reinforced." English teachers who themselves were taught English with the grammar-translation method are "likely to use the same method in their

teaching” (p. 28). Others point to the possibility of combining approaches, recognizing that both communicative and analytical approaches can be beneficial (e.g. Wang, 1999; Yu, 2001).

A recurring theme among a number of specialists in EFL settings is the need to help teachers view themselves as instructional designers as they develop context-specific and context-sensitive approaches to language teaching and learning. Kumaravelu (2001: 538) discusses the need for a “postmethod pedagogy” that must be a pedagogy of “particularity, practicality, and possibility.” Teaching and learning approaches must be relevant and appropriate for a particular group, must be interactive with theory and practise informing and evolving from each other, and must recognize social practises pertinent to the context and culture. In a sense, a classroom can be viewed as its own “culture,” with social interaction the overall concern as we learn together and with each other. Local intellectual traditions and value systems must be considered as we recognize the interaction of language, culture and identity (see Canagarajah, 2002). Sun and Cheng (2002) emphasize that understanding the local context is particularly important in EFL settings and must be considered from the first stages of curriculum design. Jarvis & Atsilarat (2004) advocate a paradigm shift from CA (communicative approach) to a context-based approach (C-bA). They state:

With the C-bA comes a view of methodology as being only one of several factors in language learning and teaching and that other methods and approaches which are often dismissed as "traditional" and "old-fashioned" may be equally valid. The educational framework for a C-bA is that language learners learn best in teaching and learning environments that are harmonious with their learning styles and expectations - this is greatly influenced by culture (p. 3).

The pressure on teachers can be tremendous. They are required to transform their views on language teaching, to give more importance to students’ ability to use the language, to improve their own language proficiency, to study modern language theory, and to drastically change their teaching approaches. Even more importantly, perhaps, they may need to reconsider their roles and responsibilities in their classroom contexts and be encouraged to begin to consider themselves as instructional designers.

The focus of this study is on investigating teachers and students’ perceptions of English language teaching in selected universities in China. A preliminary investigation, the main goal is to identify issues and concerns worthy of more in-depth investigation. The primary researcher has firsthand experience with English language educational development in China from both teachers and students’ perspectives. Educated throughout primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education in China, she majored in English Studies as a graduate student, later working as a foreign language (English) teacher at a university in Shanghai and as a lecturer at a university in Shenzhen. Through her work with English majors, many of whom are likely to become the next generation of ELT teachers in China, she wondered if they think they are being exposed to communicative approaches within their English classes in the university. More

specifically, in this investigation, students and teachers were asked to give their views as they relate to the following general areas of concern:

- i) satisfaction with materials and facilities;
- ii) importance of various English skill areas;
- iii) use and effectiveness of particular teaching methods;
- iv) factors contributing to effective language learning;
- v) student and teacher talking time and class structure.

The teachers were also asked about their perceived roles in class and asked to rate the importance of various assessment factors when judging students' abilities. The students were additionally asked about their motivations for learning English, their perceived responsibilities in class, and the extent to which they felt they had mastered various skills in English. Data collection procedures and methodology are discussed briefly in the next section of the paper before moving on to a summary of findings, a brief examination of areas where teachers and learners' views diverged, and a discussion of issues and concerns for further investigation.

## **Methodology**

Three major universities in China's mainland were identified in this investigation. It was felt these three universities were representatives of high quality English language education programs at the tertiary level in China. The first is located in Shanghai, a large metropolis and port city in the eastern part of China. The second is in Beijing, the capital of the Peoples' Republic of China and an independently administered municipal district situated in the northeastern part of China. The third is located in the southern city of Shenzhen, a major port for Chinese foreign trade and international exchange due to its proximity to Hong Kong. Students enrolled in these three universities are drawn from throughout China. The primary researcher had access to the university in Shanghai, having studied there for six years and taught there for two years. Teacher friends provided access to the universities in Shenzhen and Beijing, and assisted in questionnaire distribution, administration, and collection.

Three hundred and thirty-seven participants provided research data through completion of questionnaires, including twenty-five teachers. Due to support from administrators in the three data collection settings, response rate was 100%, with all invited participants agreeing to complete the questionnaire. Three of the teachers were from English-speaking countries (two Americans and one Canadian), but had lived in China for over five years. The remaining 22 teachers were from the same city in which they taught. Of the 25 teachers, ten taught in Shanghai, nine in Beijing, and six in Shenzhen. Years of language teaching experience ranged from a minimum of two years to a maximum of thirty-eight years. The teachers were, for the most part, very experienced, with 20 having over ten years' teaching experience. A third of them have been teaching more than 20 years.

Three hundred and twelve students participated in the study. All 312 majored in English Studies, with most having studied English over ten years. Data collected in Shanghai were from 113 first-year students. In Beijing, all 121 respondents were second-year students. The 78 student informants in Shenzhen were all third-year students. Data collection was conducted using a questionnaire constructed by the primary researcher. Teacher and student versions were constructed in English but a Chinese version made available for those who preferred it. There were 22 items on the teacher questionnaire and 21 on the student questionnaire, including structured questions, open-answer questions, and questions to collect background information. The questionnaires were checked and pilot-tested before final revision and use in the main study. Nine individuals (7 students and 2 teachers) were involved in the review, critique, and pilot-testing of the questionnaire. (Please refer to Appendix A for the student (English) version of the questionnaire). The teacher version differed from the students' in that they were asked about teaching experience, perceived roles in class and the importance of various assessment factors when judging student abilities.

The primary researcher went in person to collect data in Shanghai and Beijing. Data were collected in Shenzhen by a teacher friend working on that campus. Students completed the questionnaire either at the beginning or end of a regular class session, in the absence of their teachers. Appointments with teachers resulted in their completion of the questionnaire. Data from Shenzhen were collected by an English teacher and past colleague of the primary researcher. Numerical data were coded and analyzed using descriptive statistics and responses to open-ended questions summarized and collated. Results were organized into summary charts and figures, some of which are presented in the discussion of most interesting results, which follows.

### **Results from Teacher Respondents**

Despite curricular reform that encourages student-centered instruction, a communicative approach, and teacher involvement as materials designers, a different picture emerged from our teacher respondents. Over half of the teachers reported having over 40 students in their classes with only two (8%) indicating class sizes of less than twenty students. Teachers were generally satisfied with teaching facilities, but were very unhappy with their teaching materials. Nearly all (91%) reported that their current textbooks were dull and ineffective. The majority of teachers (20 out of 25) felt a strong lack of control or involvement when selecting teaching materials or deciding syllabi despite being expected to follow an imposed program of instruction.

Teachers were asked to indicate the teaching methods they typically use in class by checking the ones they use most from a choice of eight possibilities: grammar-translation method, audio-lingual method, natural approach, communicative language teaching, the silent way, community language learning, suggestopedia, and total physical response. They were also asked to list methods used if they could not find suitable answers within the given choices.

As can be seen in Table 1, the communicative language teaching approach (CLT) was selected by 23 of the 25 teachers as a commonly-used method, followed by audio-lingual method (13 out of 25 and, surprisingly, grammar-translation approach (10 out of 25). All but six (76%) of the teachers indicated regular use of the grammar-translation approach.

Table 1: Approaches typically used in class – Teacher respondents

<b>Approaches</b>	<b>No. n=25</b>	<b>%</b>
Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)	23	92
Audio-Lingual Method (ALM)	13	52
Grammar-Translation Method (GT)	10	40
CLT + ALM + GT	8	32
CLT + GT	7	28
The Silent Way	4	16
Suggestopedia	3	12
Community Language Learning (CLL)	2	8
Total Physical Response (TPR)	2	8
Natural Approach	2	8

A pattern emerged when examining which teachers preferred which methods. Of the ten teachers who selected the grammar-translation method, all had over twenty years of teaching experience. The audio-lingual method seemed more commonly-selected among those with 21 – 30 years of teaching experience, while those with less than twenty years of experience seemed to favor CLT or a combined approach. To summarize, when looking at the top three approaches indicated (CLT, ALM, GT), those with less teaching experience indicated a combined approach; those with over twenty years of experience were more likely to list GT as a preferred approach, as can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2: Teaching approach typically used and length of teaching experience

<b>Experience</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>Approach typically used</b>
Over 30 years	2	CLT (n=2); GT (n=2)
21 – 30 years	10	CLT (n=8); ALM (n=9); GT (n=8)
11-20 years	8	CLT (n=8); ALM (n=4); CLT + GT (n=4)
10 years or less	5	CLT (n=5); CLT+ALM+GT (n=5); CLT+GT (n=3)

The teachers were asked to rate the effectiveness of each approach using a four-point scale ranging from 4 (very effective) to 1 (very ineffective). Overall trends indicated that communicative language teaching was considered most effective (mean = 3.52) followed by the audio-lingual method (mean = 2.96). While most (64%) considered the grammar-

translation approach to be “very ineffective,” a surprising finding was that five of the teachers (20%) considered it “very effective.” It was also surprising that so many considered the Natural Approach “very ineffective.” Follow-up is needed to clarify results found in this preliminary investigation since it appears that these teachers considered some approaches effective but did not use them much in class. It would be interesting to work with a larger number of teachers so as to see if patterns emerge in regard to length of experience and preference for particular approaches. We also wonder if patterns would emerge in regard to length of experience, interest and participation in recent professional development activities and teacher evaluation of the effectiveness of particular approaches.

Table 3: Effectiveness of various teaching approaches - Teachers’ perceptions

ELT Approaches	Ratings				Mean (SD)
	4	3	2	1	
Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)	20	1	1	3	3.52 (1.02)
Audio-Lingual Method (ALM)	13	8	4	0	2.96 (0.75)
Community Language Learning (CLL)	6	7	7	5	2.56 (1.06)
Suggestopedia	7	6	5	7	2.52 (1.17)
The Silent Way	5	8	5	7	2.44 (1.10)
Total Physical Response (TPR)	3	8	8	6	2.32 (0.97)
Natural Approach	5	4	6	10	2.16 (1.16)
Grammar-Translation Approach (GT)	5	1	3	16	1.80 (1.19)

4 = very effective; 3 = somewhat effective; 2 = somewhat ineffective; 1 = very ineffective

When asked to indicate their proportion of talking time in class to that of their students, the teachers indicated that their talking time accounted for more than 70% of total class time (the average was 73%). Most of the teachers indicated that their students do not actively participate in class (80%) nor do they ask questions (72%). These results may be linked to the way in which teachers conduct and organize class activities, however. Almost all of the 25 teachers preferred to organize either individual or whole class work. Ten of the 25 teachers reported “seldom” organizing group work. Only three of the teachers (all foreigners) reported “often” organizing group work.

The lack of emphasis on group work is particularly surprising given that, when asked to rate the importance of various criteria for assessment of students’ work, 80% of the teachers viewed “interaction and cooperation with teachers and other students” as an important criterion. The majority viewed class participation as an important factor. This finding again contrasts sharply with the overall picture we find of teacher-dominated classroom talk, lack of student participation, and little group work.

Students’ behaviors in obedience to regulations, examination scores, and homework fulfillment were considered most important by the Chinese teachers, while these were of

much less importance to the foreign teachers, who instead valued participation in group work, interaction with others, and presentations/project work. This is an interesting area in which to conduct further research.

### **Results from Student Respondents**

General trends indicated that students did not feel involved as active participants in their language learning classrooms nor did they seem to be aware of the movement toward more student-centered approaches. While most reported feeling satisfied with the quality and quantity of their learning facilities, they were unhappy with their learning materials. Similar to the dissatisfaction expressed by teachers, over half of the students believed that their textbooks were dull and useless and that they had little involvement when deciding learning topics or materials.

When asked why they were learning English, over 80% indicated that they were learning English because they wanted to get a good job in a joint-venture corporation. Nearly two-thirds (64%) wanted to learn English so as to study abroad. Neither of those two findings was particularly surprising. However, one interesting finding is that over two-thirds of the students indicated learning English because they had a desire to “know more about the world outside China.” Another third indicated an interest in the language itself or in Western culture. It is clear that, while these students are instrumentally motivated, they also seem eager for knowledge and wish to expand their horizons beyond China’s mainland.

Since syllabus reform efforts set communicative competence as a major teaching objective, we asked students to self-evaluate their mastery of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English. The majority rated their listening and speaking as poor while self-assessing their reading abilities as excellent or good. Results for writing were mixed, with about 60% indicating their skill in English writing to be poor or fair and over 40% indicating their English writing skills as good or excellent.

When asked to use a four-point rating scale to rate the importance of each skill, interesting differences emerged. First-year students tended to view listening as extremely important, followed by reading. Almost half of those students viewed the expressive skills of speaking and writing as less important. It is noteworthy that speaking and writing were the same two skills that most of the 312 students rated as poor or fair when asked to self-evaluate their skill mastery.

In contrast to responses from the first-year students in Shanghai, the second-year students from Beijing greatly valued speaking, rating it as extremely important or important. Listening was also viewed as important among the second-year students, with 92% marking it as extremely important or important. Second-year student ratings on the importance of reading were fairly evenly distributed. Similar to results from year-one students, writing was considered least important by year-two participants. Third-year students in Shenzhen all valued speaking as extremely important, with other skills valued equally. Interestingly, the skill of writing, considered less important by both first and the

second year students, was marked as extremely important or important by almost 90% of the third-year students. Figure 1 shows overall importance ratings for the four skills by students' group, students' overall and teachers.

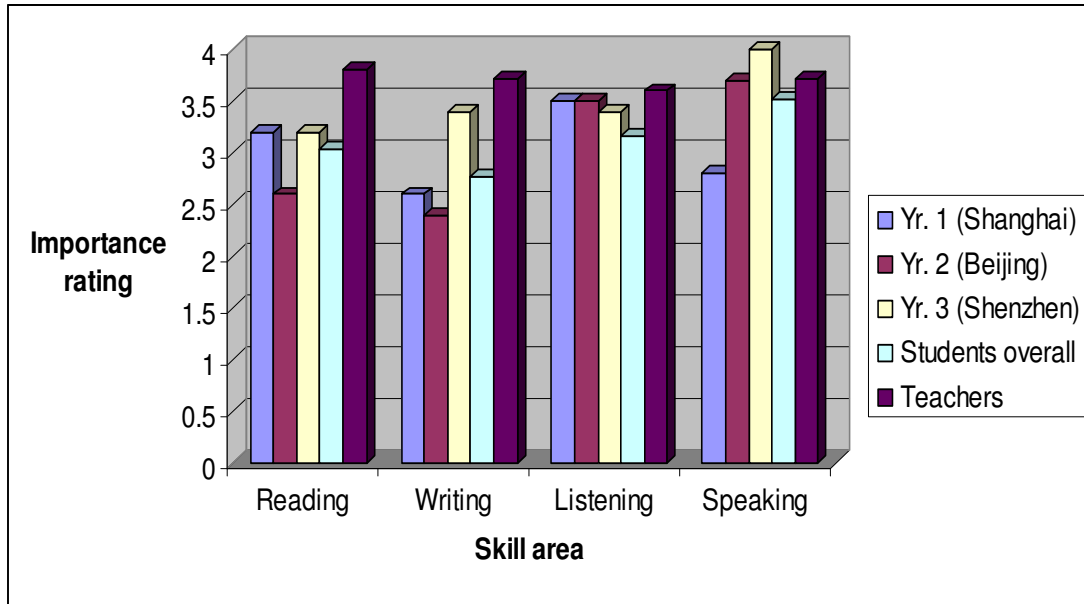


Figure 1: Skill importance ratings

In order to investigate students' perceptions of English language teaching methods most commonly used in their English classes, the students were asked what teaching methods are used by English teachers at university and what teaching methods were most commonly used by previous English teachers (in school settings). The students indicated Grammar Translation (GT), Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Audio-Lingual Method (ALM) as the most common teaching methods used in their university English classes and GT and ALM as the most frequently-used methods used in school settings. Very few students (20%) reported being exposed to a communicative approach before entry into university. Rather, the vast majority (93%) reported grammar-translation (GT) as being commonly used prior to university, and two-thirds reported GT being used in their university English courses, as well. Figure 2 provides results from both teacher and student respondents when asked about teaching approaches typically used in English classes.

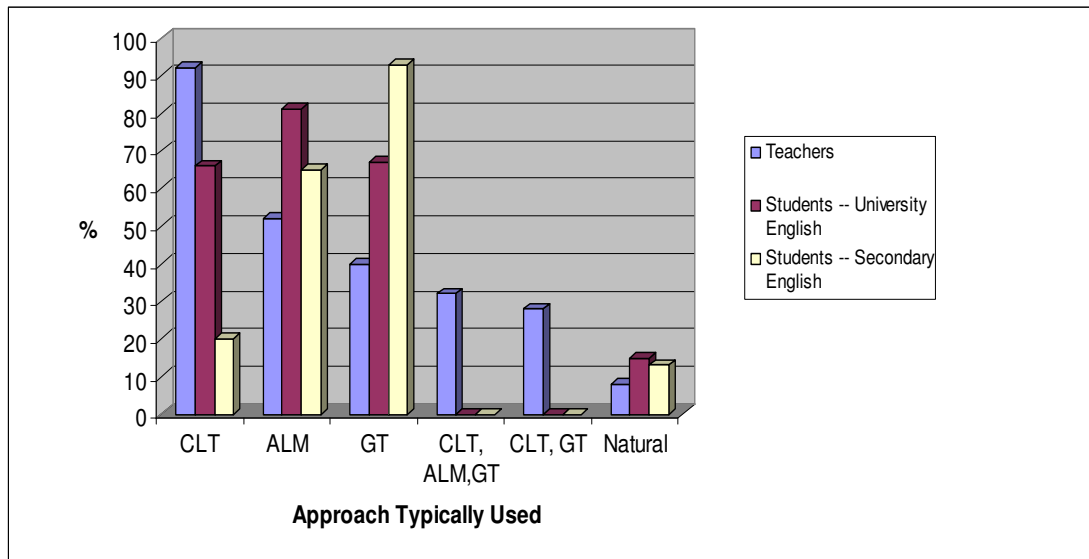


Figure 2: Approaches typically used – Teachers' and students' responses

While CLT was rated by over 90% of the students as being effective for English language learning, ALM and GT were also considered as being effective by approximately 80% of the respondents. Results were encouraging in that students perceived the communicative approach as being used widely and effectively at the university level. However, they are nearly as positive regarding the effectiveness of the audio-lingual method and the grammar-translation approach. It could be that these are methods with which they are familiar and with which they have experience, so students consider them effective even though communication is not the main focus. Even more worrisome were results indicating that communicative use of English is limited due to teacher talk time, lack of group work, and perceptions regarding roles and responsibilities in class.

When asked about the proportion of teacher to student talking time in class, students' responses tallied with those of their teachers. Teacher talking time, as perceived by the students, averaged 76%. When asked whether they were given opportunities to practise speaking in class, almost half of the students said no, and when asked how frequently they spoke in English, 292 out of the 312 students (94%) felt that they spoke English in class only "sometimes." Only 12 students indicated they "often" used English in class and only six indicated "always" using English in class. The picture that emerges, therefore, is a teacher-dominated language learning classroom in which the students perceive little opportunity to practise communicative (especially their speaking) skills.

Regarding students' perceptions of how class activities are organized, the students reported whole class work as most common (96%), followed by individual work (94%). Only 16% of the students reported "often" having group work, with an additional 13% having group work "sometimes." Over half (193 students, or 62%) indicated that group work was "seldom" organized by their teachers. These results tally with those obtained

from teachers and further support students' perceptions of little opportunity to interact or communicate in English in the class.

Data regarding students' perceptions of their roles and responsibilities in class were collected using a four-point scale, ranging from "extremely important" (4) to "not important" (1). Over half of the students (181 out of 312) responded that their most important responsibility was to understand what teachers say. About half indicated that the essential task in class was to follow the instructions of teachers and to complete required assignments. One-third of the students viewed class participation as their major responsibility. Only 5% indicated that helping the teacher keep class running smoothly was of importance.

Students were asked to rate factors thought to contribute to their English learning effectiveness. Some of these results were quite interesting. The vast majority of students (94%) strongly agreed that social & university environment were important factors. Most (85%) also strongly agreed that individual learning strategies were important. In regard to teaching methods, student responses were more diverse with over half (58%) strongly agreeing and 29% agreeing that teaching methods contributed to effective learning of English (21% were neutral and 20% disagreed). The lowest-rated factors were family support (given a neutral rating by nearly half of the students) and texts and materials, with 60% disagreeing that texts and materials contributed to their effective learning of English. These results are interesting in that students view the campus context as most important to their success as language learners.

### **Comparison of Participant Views**

Some areas of divergence were found when comparing views of students and teachers. The first area of divergence was in perceptions of the main teaching approaches used, as well as their effectiveness. A second area was in perceptions by first-, second-, and third-year students and by teachers of the importance of various English language skills. Another area of divergence was in perceptions of factors thought to contribute most to effective language learning. Finally, differences were found in perceptions of teacher and student roles and responsibilities in the language learning classroom. Each of these areas of divergence will be discussed briefly.

### **Views regarding language teaching methodology**

In regard to the main methodological approaches used (CLT, ALM, and GT), we found that teachers' perceptions were different from learners' perceptions (see Figure 2 above). Nearly all the teachers (92%) indicated that they commonly use CLT, but only 66% of the students thought the same. The majority of students (81%) perceived of ALM being used by teachers quite a lot whereas only half the teachers (52%) indicated ALM as a preferred method. From the findings, the vast majority (93%) indicated that GT was the most preferred method used in secondary school, with two-thirds (67%) indicating it a preferred method used by their university teachers, as well. Of the 25 teachers surveyed, 10 (40%) indicated GT as a preferred method. It may be that this reflects how they themselves were taught, or may reflect how society thinks languages should be taught.

Again, this seems an interesting area for further investigation, especially since five of the teachers considered GT a “very effective” method.

The respondents reported different attitudes towards the main three methodological approaches used (CLT, ALM, and GT) when rating their effectiveness. Most notably, the majority of students (approximately 80%) rated GT as effective while only 20% of the teachers did the same. Most of the teachers indicated the effectiveness of CLT and the shortcomings of GT. However, this finding was in contrast to the results found when surveying teachers’ preferences for different teaching methods. As already noted, a number of teachers (over 40%) indicated GT as one of their most frequently-used methods, despite most rating it as relatively ineffective.

### **Views regarding skill importance**

When asked to rate the importance of each of the four skills, the teachers marked all four skills as “extremely important” or “important.” Listening was considered slightly less important and reading considered slightly more important as compared to speaking and writing. Overall, the students considered speaking to be most important, followed by listening then by reading and writing (Please refer to Figure 1 for a summary of overall and group responses).

One interesting finding was that students from different year groups clearly placed different values on the various skills. For first-year students from Shanghai, interpretive skills of listening and reading were rated as most important. Second-year students in Beijing thought speaking and listening were more important than reading and writing. Third-year students at Shenzhen rated all four skills as important, but rated speaking as “extremely important.” This finding may be worthy of future investigation. It may be that the syllabi vary greatly from university to university, that curriculum and assessment schemes change as learners move through their four-year program or it may be that students perceive more of a need for interpretive skills early in their program and more of a need for expressive skills as they enter their final years of coursework.

### **Factors contributing to effective learning**

Most of the teachers (82%) considered teaching methodology as an essential factor contributing to effective learning. Teachers and students rated individual learning strategies as another important factor for successful learning. In contrast, the most important factor contributing to effective learning as perceived by students was their social and university environment.

### **Perceptions of teachers’ and students’ roles and responsibilities**

Responses from both teachers and students indicated that teachers dominate class with regard to talk time, a result in conflict with teachers’ view of themselves as counselors and facilitators. One important and surprising finding was the lack of group activities, with both students and teachers indicating an emphasis on whole group or individual activities rather than group or pair activities which foster interaction and communication. These results indicate a continued tendency toward traditional, teacher-dominant classrooms despite reforms to promote a communicative approach. Students’ perceptions of their responsibilities in class further supported the conclusion that classes followed a

traditional information-transmission approach, with the majority of students indicating that their role is to understand what teachers say, to follow instructions, and to complete assignments.

Both teachers and students were encouraged to respond to an open-ended question by noting the major obstacles in regard to language teaching and learning. Two-thirds of the teachers and one-fifth of the students responded to this open-ended question. The most frequently mentioned difficulties the teachers reported facing were the students' inactivity and large class sizes. The students, on the other hand, stated that lack of opportunity to speak in the target language within and outside of class retarded their learning. Some students indicated that their universities should create more opportunities for them to study English in English-speaking countries.

### **Limitations**

There were a number of limitations to the study, which is why we consider it a preliminary investigation to identify potential areas worthy of future investigation. First and foremost is the problem of using a survey instrument to determine what really occurs in classroom settings. Student and teacher perceptions may differ greatly from actual practices. The questionnaire itself was limiting and fairly simplistic in regard to questions about methodologies. Although a "note" page was included to describe the various approaches, we cannot guarantee that the students recognized the salient differences between Natural Approach, Suggestopedia, ALM, and so on. The questionnaire would have benefitted from more open questions in which, for example, students and teachers described a "typical" language lesson from secondary school and from university. We hope to follow up with a research based on authentic classroom observations. We also hope to meet with participant teachers to glean their responses to the findings presented in this paper.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Despite the limitations, we were successful in identifying main issues arising from this preliminary investigation of teachers and students' perceptions of ELT in three universities in China's mainland. Issues considered worthy of further investigation include:

- i) dissatisfaction with texts and materials by both students and teachers;
- ii) perceptions by teachers that they have little control over syllabi and little input as instructional designers;
- iii) teachers' perceptions that they are implementing CLT but, on the other hand, both teachers and students agree they dominate talk time in class, are inclined toward whole group instruction (versus group work), and provide little opportunity for students to communicate in class;
- iv) student emphasis on the importance of the social and university environment as a means to improve their English.

Textbooks can have a great deal of influence on the effectiveness of language learning and teaching. Results of this study revealed that most of the teachers and students believed their current textbooks to be dull and of little use. This finding is of particular concern because textbooks are viewed as essential components in Chinese classrooms. Textbooks provide input, suggest approaches and methodology, and guide the course of learning. With improved textbooks, teachers may be encouraged toward more student-centered, active learning approaches. Good textbooks can reduce burdens on teachers to supplement and create materials while, at the same time, guiding teachers to teach in new ways. Textbooks designed for the local context can also help to balance the desire for both analytical and communicative approaches.

Although efforts are being made, results from this study indicate that -- even in major, progressive universities -- teachers feel they lack freedom to base instruction on the ongoing needs and interests of their students. There appears to be a need to promote a view of teachers as instructional designers so as to draw upon their knowledge and develop context-specific and context-sensitive approaches to language teaching and learning, as proposed by Kumaravedivelu (2001), Canagarajah (2002), Sun and Cheng (2002) and others.

Change is never easy, requiring a reassessment of individual beliefs and attitudes, as well as a great deal of effort to revise and adapt materials and curriculum. Perhaps, as found globally, there is a problem in that most of us teach as we were taught. Until teacher educators can themselves model and link theory to practise -- showing novice teachers how to organize and implement interactive communicative approaches; showing how to evaluate, adapt, and use effective materials; and demonstrating the employment of alternative assessment schemes -- real change and progress may not occur. Of teachers in this study who reported often having group work, all were foreigners. Further research may be needed to determine how native Chinese versus foreign teachers adapt to the local context and whether there are widespread differences in beliefs and approaches used in English classes.

Another concern is with educating students and helping them to make the transition to more active learning and involvement in their language classrooms. Students accustomed to educational systems in which active learning and interaction are neither required nor assessed and in which a transmission of knowledge approach is encouraged will experience a great deal of anxiety and stress when exposed to methodology requiring interaction, risk-taking, and learner responsibility. Teachers and students must be given time to adjust to these new roles and responsibilities and must psychologically "invest" in a new way of teaching and learning in order to benefit.

In Asian cultures in particular, teachers are viewed as knowledge holders. When teachers do not display their knowledge in lectures or if they organize and implement a great deal of group work in class, they may be regarded as "not doing the teacher's job" and therefore can suffer from criticism. The teacher is viewed as a person of high prestige, deserving of great respect. It may thus be uncomfortable for students to interact with them as co-participants in class decision-making and language learning activities. Asian

students, affected by politeness and respect precepts that seek compromise between people, may not be willing to negotiate or express opinions for fear of offending others. This can explain why group discussion is often viewed as a less practical way to learn compared to individual essay writing or whole class work. Many students have learned to play a relatively passive role in their language learning classrooms. This role feels safe and easy for them compared to more active learning. Students may need training in group work, and they should be told the purpose and significance of various class activities. Texts and curricula should include good ideas for group work, which can help inexperienced teachers to better organize and implement learner-directed activities.

As perceived by students in this study, the most important factors contributing to effective learning were social and university environment and individual learning strategies. Results indicate that students view language learning as a social activity and feel that the university environment as a whole should provide language learning opportunities. Campus and social contexts, rather than English teachers and methods, were viewed as mainly responsible for providing learning and practise opportunities. This may be due partially to the fact that many university settings in China's mainland are a world of their own, with students living in university hostels, socializing in university canteens, and spending the vast amount of their time on campus. Students' strong desire for more authentic English learning environments on campus is reflected from their responses and indicates an interesting area for further research. In the last decade, Chinese students have become more aware of the importance of their communicative abilities and they desire more opportunities to practise their English both within and outside the class. On a personal level, many students have a great deal of motivation to learn English. Fluent English will help considerably in their future careers or studies -- to obtain better jobs, especially those in companies or joint ventures with international connections; to read technical materials; and to study abroad. It would be interesting to examine what English practise opportunities are provided on university campuses. Students appear to want extracurricular activities involving English but do they themselves take the initiative or do they rely on teachers and the university administration for such activities? Are there designated places and times for talking in English, English clubs, contests, etc. and which help students the most? To what extent do teachers incorporate projects-based learning activities to help students gain exposure to a real world of communication? Projects can help students to have a purpose for meaningful communication, to study actively and to construct knowledge rather than merely receive it but to what extent are they included in university coursework? This seems a fruitful area for further investigation.

Research results stressing the perceived importance of learning strategies reflect students' increasing awareness of their own role and responsibilities in the learning process. Some are beginning to realize that they should be responsible for their own learning and are considering the effectiveness of their individual learning strategies and methods. These student respondents seem to feel fairly independent, not rating family support as particularly important to their success as learners. This combination of motivation to communicate and practise, awareness of strategies, and growing independence can lead to

very effective communicative skill-building, given support language learning environments that universities and teachers can provide.

Results from this study indicate that teachers should be encouraged to take the lead in instructional design while at the same time supported in their efforts to adopt and adapt more learner-directed, interactive approaches within their local contexts. Students perceive a lack of opportunity to use English for communication, perhaps due to pedagogical approaches used. There is a need for more in-depth study of approaches preferred and how instruction is actually implemented by native Chinese versus foreign teachers as well as how it is perceived and received by learners. There has been much recent debate regarding issues of cultural appropriateness and a “match” between learning preferences and teaching approaches (see issues raised in the *Asian EFL Journal*, for example, by Yoon, 2004; Jin, 2004; Jarvis & Atsilarat, 2004; Kim, 2004).

Our position is that a mixture of approaches is often best, with “master” teachers considering the individual and group needs of students and also determining the most effective means of achieving instructional objectives. Teachers realize that, at times, the audio-lingual approach might be best; at others times, a concept may best be taught using a grammar-translation approach. A focus on one method as compared to another is not realistic or reflective of what happens in most language learning classrooms. At the same time, there *is* a need to help learners shift from passive to active learning and a need for both teachers and learners to reflect upon their roles and responsibilities in class. Teachers may need strategies and encouragement to change their own roles in class while guiding students toward more active roles. Perhaps one of the greatest benefits of the widespread focus on communicative language teaching is in this shift in focus from passive to active learning. However, such change can be extremely stressful for learners regardless of their cultural backgrounds. “Western” students often have just as much difficulty as “Asian” students when asked to take more responsibility and control over their own learning (see Wilhelm, 1997a). Based on teaching experiences within a Malaysia setting, Wilhelm offers a number of suggestions of how to make a transition from a teacher-dominated approach to learner-centered instruction (see 1997b). Teacher beliefs about effective learning should be clearly stated, as well as their expectations as to student roles and responsibilities within the classroom.

A particularly interesting finding of this study was students’ perceptions that the university itself has an obligation to encourage target language use and language improvement among students. There is a need to examine how university environments encourage language improvement through social interaction. In order to function effectively within global markets, Asian countries must bring large numbers of people to much higher levels of proficiency in English. Success in English language teaching and learning depends largely on participants believing in and acting upon the principle that English is a tool for social interaction.

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**Section Two: Questions**

6. What teaching methods do your English teachers use at university?

- Grammar-Translation
- Audio-Lingual
- Natural Approach
- Communicative Language Teaching
- The Silent Way
- Community Language Learning
- Suggestopedia
- Total Physical Response
- Other (please specify)

7. What teaching methods did most of your English teachers use previously (in school)?

- Grammar-Translation
- Audio-Lingual
- Natural Approach
- Communicative Language Teaching
- The Silent Way
- Community Language Learning
- Suggestopedia
- Total Physical Response
- Other (please specify)

8. How often do you speak English in class?

Seldom  Sometimes  Often  Always

9. What's the proportion of teacher talking time to student talking time in your class?

Give a percentage: Teacher talking time % Student talking time %

10. Are you given many opportunities to practise English in Class? Yes  No

11. Do you "argue" with your classmates in class? Yes  No

Are you willing to have discussions with your classmates in English in class?

Yes  No

Explain (if your answer is "No"):

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12. How often does your teacher organize the following activities in class? Please rate the frequency of the following items using the four-point scale.

- 4 – never
- 3 – seldom
- 2 – sometimes
- 1 – often

Individual	4	3	2	1
Group	4	3	2	1
Whole class	4	3	2	1

13. What are your responsibilities in class? Please write numbers according to this four-point scale.

4 – extremely important

3 – important;

2 – not very important

1 – not important

\_\_\_\_\_ To understand what teachers say

\_\_\_\_\_ To follow the instruction of teacher and fulfill the assignment required

\_\_\_\_\_ To help teachers keep class running smoothly by volunteering, asking questions, helping others to learn, etc.

\_\_\_\_\_ To participate in class activities (individual, pairs/groups, whole class) actively

14. Please indicate the effectiveness of the following items using the four-point scale.

4 – very effective

3 – somewhat effective

2 – somewhat ineffective

1 – very ineffective

Grammar-Translation (GT)	4	3	2	1
Communicative language teaching (CLT)	4	3	2	1
Audio-Lingual	4	3	2	1
Natural Approach	4	3	2	1
The Silent Way	4	3	2	1
Communicative Language Learning	4	3	2	1
Suggestopedia	4	3	2	1
Total Physical Response	4	3	2	1

15. How do you evaluate your English language skills?

4 – Excellent

3 – Good

2 – Fair

1 - Poor

Listening	4	3	2	1
Speaking	4	3	2	1
Reading	4	3	2	1
Writing	4	3	2	1

16. What do you want to improve in your English language learning? Please rate the importance of the following items using this four-point scale:

- 4 – extremely important
- 3 – important;
- 2 – not very important
- 1 – not important

Listening	4	3	2	1
Speaking	4	3	2	1
Reading	4	3	2	1
Writing	4	3	2	1

17. Can you help choose textbooks or class materials? Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_

18. What do you think of the content of the textbooks used in your class?

- \_\_\_\_ Interesting and useful for language learning.
- \_\_\_\_ Interesting but not very useful for language learning.
- \_\_\_\_ Dull but useful for language learning.
- \_\_\_\_ Dull and useless.

19. How do the following items contribute to the effectiveness of your language learning?

- 4 – strongly agree
- 3 – agree
- 2 – neutral
- 1 – disagree

Individual Intelligence (IQ)	4	3	2	1
Individual learning strategy	4	3	2	1
Teacher personal charm	4	3	2	1
Language learning ability	4	3	2	1
Teaching methods	4	3	2	1
Social and University language learning environment	4	3	2	1
Family support	4	3	2	1
Texts and materials	4	3	2	1

20. Considering the teaching methods typically used in your university, what are some of the obstacles or difficulties you face?

21. In regard to the above questions, would you be willing to discuss your ideas more in a personal interview? Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_

If you answer is “Yes”, list your name and a contact number:

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Contact Number \_\_\_\_\_

### **Principles of the Teaching Methods**

(A note sheet for the questionnaire)

<b>Teaching Method</b>	<b>Principles</b>
Grammar-Translation Method (GT)	Emphasis on the transmission of structural rules; emphasis on translation; emphasis on reading and memorizing rules; grammar taught in L1.
Audio-Lingual Method (ALM)	Emphasis on structure and form; aim is linguistic competence; errors must be prevented; teacher must specify what language the student will use; accuracy is a primary goal; language is a habit.
Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)	Language learning involves communicating; emphasis on meaning; aim is communicative competence; error is part of language learning; fluency is a primary goal; teacher role is a facilitator; emphasis is on the use of authentic materials.
Natural Approach	Emphasis on basic communication skills – both oral and written; focus on meaningful communication rather than language form; purpose of learning varies according to the needs and interests of students; charts, pictures and other realia are used; pair or group work is employed, followed by whole-class work led by the teacher.
The Silent Way	Silence is considered the best vehicle for learning; the learning system is activated only by way of intelligent awareness.
Suggestopedia	Vocabulary, reading, role-plays and drama are accompanied with classical music; students are sitting in comfortable seats and become “suggestible”.
Community Language Learning	It draws on the counseling metaphor to redefine the roles of the teacher (the counselor) and the learners (the clients). Learners tell what they wish to deliver to others in L1; knower restates learner’s message in L2; learner replays the L2 message.
Total Physical Response	Comprehension abilities precede productive skills; teaching emphasizes meaning rather than form; teacher minimizes learner stress; teacher is the director of a stage, and the students are the actors; learners respond both individually and collectively.

Sources: Brown (1994), Brumfit & Johnson (2000), Howatt (1984), and Littlewood (1981).

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