Understanding the context of College English teaching in China: A case study in three universities

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Why context?

- [an utterance] becomes only intelligible when it is placed within its context of situation, if I may be allowed to coin an expression which indicates on the one hand that the conception of context has to be broadened and on the other that the situation in which words are uttered can never be passed over as irrelevant to the linguistic expression (Malinowski, 1923: 306).
• ... language is essentially rooted in the reality of the culture, the tribal life and customs of a people, and that it cannot be explained without constant reference to these broader contexts of verbal utterance (Malinowski, 1923: 301).
• it was necessary to provide information not only about what was happening at the time but also about the total cultural background, because involved in any kind of linguistic interaction, in any kind of conversational exchange, were not only the immediate sights and sounds surrounding the event but also the whole cultural history behind the participants, and behind the kind of practices that they were engaging in, determining their significance for the culture, whether practical or ritual (Halliday, 1985: 6)
• ...a classroom is best understood from a sociocultural perspective...Not only is the classroom an inherently complex and unpredictable context, it is like this because it is a context where social, cultural, psychological and institutional forces interact (Wright, 2006: 73).
• By understanding the context, we know what is going on.
• By understanding the context, we know why what is going on is not going to work.
College English

• College English: an English course offered to non-English major students in Chinese universities
According to the statistics on the website (http://www.eol.cn/gxmd_2920/20070508/t20070508_231528.shtml),

- China has 1,983 universities, in which about 50,000 Chinese English teachers teach
- College English to 19,000,000 university students (Wu, 2004).
Document-guided

College English Syllabus (CES)

College English Curriculum Requirements (CECR)
Textbook-based
“Deaf and Dumb English”

- Chinese university students can neither speak English nor understand it when they hear the language spoken. This is the phenomenon of ‘deaf and dumb English’ that people usually refer to as... In addition to less investment and lack of teachers, one of the major reasons for this is that reading has been taken as the primary goal of College English teaching. (Zhang, 2002: 4)
Reform in College English

• The reform aims at solving the problem of “deaf and dumb English”, completely changing the situation of “students’ incapability of using English orally in spite of learning it for long” (Zhang, 2008: 18)
• 15th December 2003: Announcement on the launching of the reform of College English teaching at universities as trial sites

• 30th January 2004: Announcement on the publication and distribution of the College English Curriculum Requirements (for trial implementation)

• 18th February 2004: Announcement on the implementing of the reform of College English teaching at 180 universities as first trial sites

• 9th June 2005: Announcement on the application for the extension program of the reform of College English teaching at universities as second trial sites
• From 15th December 2003 to 18th February 2004, three documents were distributed among Chinese universities within 65 days, with 45 days between the first and the second, and only 18 days between the second and the third.

• Document shift: CECR replaced CES
• College English *aims* to develop in students a relatively high level of competence in *reading*, an intermediate level of competence in *listening*, *speaking*, *writing* and *translating*, so that they could exchange information in English (*CES*, 1999: 1).

• The *objective* of College English is to develop students’ ability to use English in a well-rounded way, especially in *listening and speaking*, so that in their future studies and careers as well as social interactions they will be able to communicate effectively... (*CECR*, 2007: 18).

**Change of primary goal of teaching**
Methods

- My PhD study:
- Teacher talk in College English classrooms: Features, functions and input to language learning
- Research sites: three Chinese national universities
- “critical sampling” (Patton, 2002: 236)
- Research questions on the context:
  - How is the teaching organised in response to the reform?
  - How are students affected (What is the situation of students)?
  - How are teachers affected (What is the situation of teachers)?
• [A case study] studies a phenomenon (the “case”) in its real world context. (Yin, 2011: 17)

• A case study approach, which “aims to understand social phenomena within a single or small number of naturally occurring settings” (Bloor & Wood, 2006: 27).

• We gain better understanding of the whole by focusing on a key part”(Gerring, 2007: 1).
Questions in relation to the administration of teaching

• How do you organize the teaching in your faculty?

• Administratively, what are the special changes in your response to the new teaching goal?
Questions in relation to the situation of students

- How many classes do students have each week?
- How many students are there in one class?
- In what ways can they improve their oral English?
Questions in relation to the situation of teachers

- What is the workload of your teachers?
- What is the ratio between a teacher and his/her students?
- What are the teachers’ academic ranks?
- What are the teachers’ academic qualifications?
- What is the situation of the teachers by age?
- What is the situation of the teachers by gender?
Findings in relation to administration of teaching

- Use of ICT, e.g., there was multimedia in every classroom.
Findings in relation to students

- 4 classes/week (3 IRC, 1 LC)
- 46-90 students in one class
- Use of ICT might help students to improve their oral English
Findings in relation to teachers

- workload
- teacher-students ratio
- academic ranks
- academic qualifications
- age
- gender
### Table 1: Teachers’ Rated and Actual Workload

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Universities</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Rated periods/week</th>
<th>Actual periods/week</th>
<th>TET</th>
<th>TET’s Periods/week</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U1</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12-16</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U2</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10-18</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U3</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9-12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>31-46</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8-12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TET: Temporarily employed teachers
### Table 2: Teacher-students ratio

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Universities</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Teacher-student ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U1</td>
<td>4,491</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1:187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U2</td>
<td>6,450</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>1:174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U3</td>
<td>5,536</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>1:167</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>16,477</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>1:175</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Table 3: College English Teachers in Academic Ranks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Universities</th>
<th>Professors</th>
<th>Associate professors</th>
<th>Lecturers</th>
<th>Assistants</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4: Academic qualifications of College English teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Universities</th>
<th>Bachelor</th>
<th>Master</th>
<th>Doctor</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>37</td>
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<tr>
<td>U3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>94</td>
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</table>
Table 5: College English teachers by age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Universities</th>
<th>50 &amp; over</th>
<th>40-49</th>
<th>30-39</th>
<th>Under 30</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6: College English teachers by gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Universities</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary of teacher situations

• Young and lacking in teaching experiences: Teachers aged 30-39 accounted for 50%, and aged under 30 accounted for 21.2 %;

• Imbalance in gender: 73% were female;

• Low in academic qualifications: 44.68% were with Bachelor degree, and 55.31% with master degree;

• Low in academic ranks: lecturers and assistants accounted for 80%;

• Working under a heavy workload: All teachers overwork;

• High teacher-students ratio: 1:175
• The majority of teachers were with low academic ranks and qualifications and teaching in large class sizes. And what is more, all of them overworked and most of them were lacking in teaching experiences.
Reform in College English

• The reform aims at solving the problem of “deaf and dumb English”, completely changing the situation of “students’ incapability of using English orally in spite of learning it for long” (Zhang, 2008: 18)
Looking at College English teaching from a perspective of communicative competence

• a dramatic change of “deaf and dumb English”?
• “native speaker norms” (Burn, 2005; Cook, 2007)
• CLT, the approach “which favours so-called authentic use, modelled on native-speaker norms, and which emphasises spoken language” (Widdowson, 1997: 145).
• CLT, “the pedagogic model based on the native speaker-based notion of communicative competence” (Alptekin, 2002: 57)
• “Which approach?” (Burn, 2005)
• **Grammatical competence** refers to sentence-level grammatical forms, the ability to recognize the lexical, morphological, syntactical and phonological features of a language and to make use of those features to interpret and form words and sentences.

• **Discourse competence** is concerned not with isolated words or phrases but with the interconnectedness of a series of utterances or written words or phrases to form a text, a meaningful whole. The text might be a poem, an e-mail message, a sportscast, a telephone conversation, or a novel.

• **Sociolinguistic competence**, a broader view of what Canale and Swain (1980) identified as sociolinguistic competence, extends well beyond linguistic forms and is an interdisciplinary field of inquiry having to do with the social rules of language use. Sociolinguistic competence requires an understanding of the social context in which language is used: the roles of the participants, the information they share, and the function of the interaction.

• The coping strategies that we use in unfamiliar contexts, with constraints arising from imperfect knowledge of rules, or such impediments to their application as fatigue or distraction, are represented as **strategic competence**.  
  
  (Savignon, 2002: 9-10)
From a perspective of grammatical competence

Table 7: Comparison of vocabulary sizes in CES and CECR

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>vocabulary sizes</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic Requirements</td>
<td>receptive vocabulary</td>
<td>4,200</td>
<td>4,500</td>
<td>4,795</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>productive vocabulary</td>
<td>2,500</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relatively High</td>
<td>receptive vocabulary</td>
<td>5,500</td>
<td>5,500</td>
<td>6,395</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requirements</td>
<td>productive vocabulary</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>2,200</td>
<td>2,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Requirements</td>
<td>receptive vocabulary</td>
<td>6,500</td>
<td>6,500</td>
<td>7,675</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>productive vocabulary</td>
<td>3,300</td>
<td>2,500</td>
<td>2,360</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• a five-year-old native English speaker has a vocabulary of around 4,000 to 5,000 words (Nation & Waring, 2002), of which 2,000 to 3,000 words are productive (Richards, 1976)

• “a university graduate will have around 20,000 word families” (Goulden, Nation & Read, 1990), excluding proper names, compound words, abbreviations and foreign words (Nation & Waring, 2002: 8).
From a perspective of discourse competence

• “top priority should be given to reading and writing” in the teaching of English as a foreign language in China (Dong, 2003)

• Situation of reading:

• 7 texts/semester (16 teaching weeks), 21 to 28 texts are dealt in classrooms;

• Reading outside class: test-oriented, playing games by identifying the right answer without being confused or trapped by other misleading choices.
• The sad story is writing:
• “due to a relative lack of emphasis on developing English writing in China, where few teachers have developed a high ability in writing in English” (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006: 18).
• Students’ weakness in oral English: “lack of practice” (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006: 19)
From a perspective of sociolinguistic competence

• “foreign words and new, foreign consciousness are not necessarily linked” (Magan, 2008: 361)
From a perspective of strategic competence

- Against native speaker norms, Chinese students’ strategic competence would be groundless.
• Chinese students’ communicative competence is reflected in:
  • (a) Their vocabulary size and reading are small and limited (Du, 2004);
  • (b) They seldom speak or write in English, and have “potential cultural resistance” (Hu, 2002: 93) to CLT.
  • (c) They have little knowledge of social rules of how English is used in Western world; and
  • (d) They are familiar with Chinese strategies of communication, but know little of communication strategies in western culture.
  • They use “foreign words and structures to talk about their own cultural concepts” (Magnan, 2008: 358).
• CLT is “utopian, unrealistic, and constraining” (Alptekin, 2002: 57)
• CLT has met with “well-documented resistance” in many classrooms in China (Hu, 2005: 66)
• The “learn by using” in CLT does not fit in with the traditional “learn to use” Chinese philosophy (Hu, 2002: 99)
• teachers’ lack of language proficiency (Chen & Goh, 2011: 333; Hu, 2002; Li 2003; Littlewoods, 2007; Rao 1996)
• limited instructional time (Du, 2010; Hu, 2002)
• examination pressure (Du, 2010; Hu, 2002)
Rethinking of “deaf and dumb English”

Primary school → J. High School → S. High School → University ...

• Rather striking to outsiders who look for more communicative or learner-centred approaches is a dominant use of teacher-centred and book-based interaction which mediates learner activities... In the middle school, memorisation of vocabulary lists, knowledge of grammatical rules and the ability to recite texts become increasingly important and by the end of senior middle school English learning becomes dominated by exam-preparation activities.

(Jin & Cortazzi, 2006:10)
The problem of listening should have been solved at high school. However, it remains there because of factors inside and outside school (e.g., lack of teachers, focus on University Entrance Examination). The problem is consequently left for College English teaching to solve. (Zhang, 2008: 18)
Conclusion

• China has the world’s largest educational system with the largest number of learners of English (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006: 5).

• It is teachers who are “a key factor in the successful implementation of curriculum changes” (Richards, 2001:99).

• Instead of guiding College English towards the right direction, the new goal misleads the teaching into a confusion, in which “deaf and dumb English” will perpetuate.

• “Reproducing native-speakers or promoting multicompetence among second language users?” (Cook, 2007)
Table 7: Comparison of vocabulary sizes in *CES* and *CECR*

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<td><strong>2,000</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relatively High Requirements</strong></td>
<td>receptive vocabulary</td>
<td>5,500</td>
<td>Intermediate receptive vocabulary</td>
<td>5,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>productive vocabulary</td>
<td><strong>3,000</strong></td>
<td>productive vocabulary</td>
<td><strong>2,200</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Advanced Requirements</strong></td>
<td>receptive vocabulary</td>
<td>6,500</td>
<td>Relatively Higher receptive vocabulary</td>
<td>6,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td><strong>3,300</strong></td>
<td>productive vocabulary</td>
<td><strong>2,500</strong></td>
</tr>
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</table>
• Can listening and speaking be improved by reducing productive vocabulary?
• ...in addition to knowing the general meaning of words and phrases in a text – which is often sufficient for the listener or reader to comprehend the gist of a message – the speaker or writer must know each word’s pronunciation or spelling, its part of speech, its syntactic restrictions, any morphological irregularities, its common collocations (often words with which it is likely to co-occur), and its common contexts (texts in which it is likely to occur) (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000: 77).
• Ironically, a productive vocabulary in CECR (2004, 2007) which focuses on oral English in teaching goal is smaller at all levels of requirements than that in CES (1999) which took reading as the priority.

• The new teaching goal is not well-defined and consequently will not work.
Thank you!