

**College English Teaching:  
How useful is this course for Chinese postgraduate students accessing  
tertiary education in Central Queensland?**

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**Abstract**

In this paper we report on some initial findings from our small qualitative study that explored the usefulness of College English Teaching for Chinese postgraduate students coming to study at CQU. College English Teaching is a compulsory two-year English language course taught at universities in China. After completion of this course all Chinese tertiary students then sit an exam – CET Band IV. Graduation from a university is dependant on successful passing of this exam. Obtaining the CET Band IV is highly valued by Chinese employers however recently there has been growing criticism concerning the level of English language understanding of students who were successful in passing the exam. Anecdotal evidence suggests that students simply learn for the test and that overall the CET course does not enable students to develop listening, speaking or comprehension skills desired by Chinese employers. Eight Chinese postgraduate students who were enrolled at CQU were interviewed about their experiences of arriving and settling in Central Queensland and their perceptions on how useful the CET course had been in enabling these students to understand English as communicated in Australia. Our study found that these students used a variety of local activities that assisted them to develop a deeper understanding of English language use. These results are discussed in relation to the potential for newly arrived Chinese students to remain dependant on Chinese speakers and isolated from native English speakers.

**Introduction**

College English Teaching (CET) refers to teaching English to non-English-major students whose majors may be Engineering, Information Technology, Architecture, Physics and Chinese. In tertiary level, all the students are required to learn English. Mainly they study English as a communicative tool to enhance their major fields and their professions in the future (Hui Du, 2002).

English is becoming the most popular foreign language in modern China. It is estimated that the number of people studying English in China is much larger than that of all native speakers around the world. Chinese people now regard English primarily as a necessary tool which can facilitate access to modern scientific and technological advances in the countries where English is a major language. Learning English has been seen as a way of China being able to 'join the global village' and to strengthen the economy (Jen Lin-Liu, 2001; Jia Ni, 2003, p. 74; Maosheng Guo, 1994). Economic globalisation is driving the increasing emphasis on learning English as China's first dominant foreign language. For the country to prosper it is deemed that learning English will enable Chinese citizens to read international research and development, use European methods in industry and business and to learn from foreigners to assist in the economic prosperity and growth of China.

Therefore English has now become a compulsory course in primary schools, secondary schools and higher education institutions. In September 2001 a new national curriculum was introduced at the primary school level with English now being taught from grade three (age nine). English is a major course offered during the six years of secondary school. College English is taught to non-English major students at tertiary level where this subject is learnt in the first two years as Basic Stage English. In the third and fourth years English is set as an elective subject (Jia Ni, 2003). The number of Chinese students studying in overseas countries such as Britain, America and Australia has increased. Being able to speak English has become a requirement for those seeking postgraduate study overseas and also for those seeking highly paid employment. Many employers are seeking people who can understand English language as a "smart" business move.

Over the past twenty years college English teaching in China has developed rapidly with many changes being experienced (Jia Ni, 2003). With the peculiar history of English teaching development in China, the educational background of English teachers in the universities of China has also experienced its developmental stages. After the 1960s, a lot of teachers used to teach Russian had to switch to teach English when Russian was no longer learnt (Hui Du, 2002; Zhang Yu, 2005). During the 1980s many English majors took the position of college English teachers when they graduated. After 1990s more postgraduates of English majors have begun to work in the universities as teachers of English. English majors may not necessarily be qualified language teachers.

Therefore in this study we wanted to know how useful CET was for those students who went overseas to extend their studies. At Central Queensland University (CQU) there is a large cohort of international students. These students are located across multiple campuses with the most popular campuses being those in major cities such as Sydney and Brisbane. However there are some international students who choose to enrol as on campus students at the Rockhampton campus situated in regional Queensland. There was the opportunity to access a group of Chinese students at Rockhampton.

### **The study**

Eight Chinese nationals were invited to participate on this study. These students were known to one of the authors, herself a visiting scholar from China. The eight students

were all postgraduate students enrolled across different Faculties within CQU. These students had previously met One author through different research meetings and social activities held at the university. Semi-structured interviews were done to explore their lived experience as international students at CQU (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The interview schedule consisted of three parts. The first part collected personal, demographic information including majors, years abroad, years in CQU, and majors and universities in China. The second part consisted of 5 questions, each of which dealt with their experience of English learning in Chinese universities, their ideas about college English teaching, and their feedback on CET in China. These items were included because the author believed that Chinese students had different classroom learning experience in Chinese universities and colleges. The questions in the last part were concerned with the ways that they improved their English and dealt with the study and life when they first came to Australia, and what was useful in improving their understanding of English used in Australia.

In particular we wanted to know how they had experienced their first few weeks in Rockhampton and what kinds of activities or strategies they had used to settle into an Australian way of life. We began from the assumption that their understanding of English would be limited and that they would be doing extra ‘work’ at improving their understanding. The reason for this assumption was that in her experience one author, who teaches CET at a large Chinese university in Heibei province, had suggested that many students learnt enough English to pass the CET Band IV test and then promptly forget what they had learnt. Before discussing our findings it is useful to explore college English teaching in China.

### **Background: College English Teaching in China**

The Ministry of Education in China authorises the syllabus that is used in tertiary institutions. Individual universities have no authority to develop or implement their own programs. In 1985 the first tertiary level syllabus that incorporated English language provided for language structure, function, vocabulary and emphasised both fluency and accuracy. The process of CET was divided into six bands each having specific requirements. Band I – 4 are set as mandatory stages while Band V and Band VI are electives. During the Band I to 4 stages students are required to develop their receptive skills such as listening and reading as well as productive skill such as speaking, writing and translating. The advanced stage of CET is designed to introduce the student to scientific texts written in English that relate to their profession. The syllabus also stipulates a national College English standardised test — College English Test Band IV and CET Band VI — as a means of evaluating students’ English level (Du Hui, 2004; Jia Ni, 2003).

The focus of CET has gone through a series of changes (Hui Du, 2002; Jia Ni, 2003). When the course was first developed reading ability was the main focus. This was because most undergraduate students were required to read English language based texts during their university courses. As these students were unlikely to be travelling overseas reading rather than speaking ability was more important. The students had access to foreign literature but there was limited travel abroad.

Table 1: Chronological changes in Syllabus focus

Syllabus	Goal	Pedagogical approach	Vocabulary
1985	Proficient reading ability, certain listening ability and elementary speaking and writing ability	Teacher-centred	1,600-4,000 words
1999	Develop a strong reading speaking and translating ability for students and a fairly good ability for listening, so that students are capable of exchange information in the target language	Student-centered	4200 words
2004	Improve students' comprehensive abilities, especially, abilities to listen to English and speak English so that they can use English effectively in their work	Autonomous learning of students, based on the integration of network, software and classroom teaching	4500 (general level), 5,500 (high), 7500 (higher level)

In 1999 the syllabus was reviewed and the focus changed (Du Hui, 2004). This change was in parallel to a shift in the change in foreign policy. Development of the economy and global trade meant an increasing emphasis on a more open-door policy with Chinese citizens developing trade links with overseas partners through increased travel to English speaking areas worldwide. Within the syllabus the focus was broadened to include reading, writing and translating. There was an expectation that graduates would be able to gather information in English, translate this information into Chinese or vice versa and to be able to write to foreigners in English. With this shift there was also a growing understanding of the need to be able to listen and speak in English. In 2001 the Ministry of Education ordered some universities to start lecturing in English and teaching with English language textbooks (Jen Lin-Liu, 2001).

In 2004 there was another review of the CET course. Since this review the primary focus has been to develop students' abilities to listen and speak with a secondary focus on the ability to read English texts. We argue that there has been a shift from learning functional language to that of developing communication skills (Liangzhang Liu, 2003; Xiao Qing Liao, 2000). Chinese employers want graduates who can speak and converse with foreign business people.

Since 1998 the Chinese government has expanded undergraduate education with most colleges and universities in China increasing their enrolment (Hui Du, 2002). As Xin-Ran Duan (2003, p. 3) reported

A rapid expansion of colleges and universities has reduced the gap between the strong desire for higher education and the limited access to it. According to official figures the total enrolment for common colleges and universities (government controlled public institutions) almost doubled in the past three years from 6.43 million in 1998 to 12.14 million in 2001.

Unfortunately teaching resources have not been increased to match the increased enrolment. The increased enrolment has led to changes in many aspects of classroom teaching, including teachers' workloads, teacher-student ratios, and class sizes, which we would argue is highly likely to affect the quality of teaching (Hui Du, 2002, p. 74).

Despite the stated changes in the syllabus (see Table 1) there was no corresponding change in teaching approach or pedagogy. While the syllabus denotes a student-centred approach there is no evidence to support the notion that teachers changed their delivery. In one author's experience the teaching style adopted by many teachers mirrors that of their own teaching at school and can be seen to demonstrate a teacher centred approach where it is easier for teachers to teach grammar, vocabulary, and explain texts, translate English into Chinese, or vice versa, and do exercises. Chinese English teachers, although they are adept at teaching English grammar, reading comprehension, and writing, they generally have some difficulty in communicating orally in English. Part of this difficulty could be due to having been taught English by non-native English speaking teachers themselves.

It is difficult for teachers and students to practise oral English. Students sit and listen to the teacher, and take notes. They try to rote what the teacher said, do exercises in the book and take exams (Jia Ni, 2003). Of all the resources of college English teaching, teachers are the most important (Hui Du, 2002). Their improvement in English might have positive impact on the improvement of quality of college English teaching. However workload and class sizes are continuing issues for CET teachers. Class sizes are large and teachers have on average 14 class periods (1 class period = 50 minutes) per week of face-to-face teaching (Hui Du, 2002). As part of the CET program there is also the CET test.

### **The College English Test**

The College English Test (CETest) is a national level test of college English for non-English-majors carried out by the Ministry of Education. CETest Band IV was initiated in 1987 and had 100,000 participants. Two years later CETest Band VI was implemented. The CETest is held nationally twice a year, in June and December respectively and takes up two hours. The CETest paper contains subjective and objective questions, and the total score of the test is 100 points with 60 points considered as "pass line." It is made up of five sections that check listening, reading, writing and translating skills (Jia Ni, 2003). Many colleges in China require bachelor degree students to pass CET Band IV and receive CET certificates as a necessity before being granted their bachelor diplomas. CET Band VI is optional. Employers, including foreign companies, prefer applicants with a CET certificate. Other privately educated graduates also take these tests in order to apply for jobs (Jia Ni, 2003; Zhang Yu, 2005).

While the CETest was designed to evaluate college English learning, indirectly, this test can be used to assess the practices of the CET teachers. These days the test has become one of the world's largest examinations in terms of the number of participants. In 2004 there were about 11 million participants (Zhang Yu, 2005). Unfortunately the CET band IV does not assess oral or speaking ability and the writing test does not reflect 'daily life' expression. The students learn the type of English language required to pass the test, consequently they are unable to use English language when attempting to communicate with native English speakers.

Table 2. Profiles of eight postgraduate students

Name	Gender	Year of Graduation in China	Location of universities
Participant 1	male	1989	Ningxia
Participant 2	male	1992	Tianjin
Participant 3	male	1997	Hannan
Participant 4	male	1996	Hunan
Participant 5	male	2000	Hubei
Participant 6	female	2003	Beijing
Participant 7	male	2004	Shanghai
Participant 8	male	2004	Shandong

### **Some perceptions of the usefulness of CET**

All participants had passed the CET Band IV test however only 4 of the 8 students had passed CET Band VI. When asked about their own perceptions of their English understanding two students felt their English was not bad at university in China, two thought their English was bad and the other 4 were not confident about their English understanding. Three students did not spend a lot of time in learning English because that was not their major interest while 5 students spent some time learning English because they felt knowing English would be useful in the future.

English is the course that students spend the most time studying from primary school through to university graduation. Although students spend up to ten years learning English language at school and at university non-English majors spend a further two years learning English they are still unable to converse in everyday English language. When asked if they thought that the CET in their university was useful in coming to study and live in Australia all of the participants agreed that it had been useful. As one student remarked "without studying in the Chinese university it would have been impossible for her to have the level of English". The other students commented that they had learnt basic grammar and words at university so this was useful. They had a foundation in reading but not necessarily in any other aspect of language:

Reading ability was better, yes at least I could understand some things in written form. We practised a lot of reading comprehension in China, although the training was for tests they were useful but I had not got enough words and

expressions. The words we learnt in university were not enough (participant 2).

Reading ability was better than the other skills. This was the skill that they had practiced the most in China. Because there was limited vocabulary reading speed was perceived as slow. All participants felt that their writing skills were very bad in that they could not write grammatically correct sentences or use the appropriate vocabulary.

Six participants agreed that they had problems with listening and speaking English when they arrived in Rockhampton. One participant felt her problem was with vocabulary because she did not know the correct words to use. Participants had problems with listening because the 'native speakers' spoke too quickly and also informally. Confidence grew once some of them had attended oral classes at the university language centre. While participant 2 felt he did not have enough vocabulary, participant 4 expressed that his reading skills were good in that:

In English teaching reading and grammar are focused on. After we came abroad it is not very hard for us to read textbooks. I feel that listening was hard for me at first. But it is easy to read textbooks and it does not take long to increase reading speed (participant 4).

The participants indicated that although there were foreign teachers working within each of the universities these teachers were not involved in teaching English to non-English-majors but to those students enrolled in English courses. Although there is an emphasis on communication traditional Chinese culture values the word of the textbook over that of the teachers. This presents an ideological dilemma for both student and teacher. In Chinese culture textbooks have authority over teachers and teachers follow the content of the textbooks. Du Hui (2002) suggests that reading is the best way to increase vocabulary especially when there is a lack of fluent or native English speakers available to learn from. Therefore CET should still focus on reading despite the current focus on developing communication skills (Zhang, 2004).

All 8 participants stated that their teachers had followed the traditional teacher-centred method of knowledge transmission. The teaching at university level was the same as at high school where the teacher stood in front of the class, wrote things on the Blackboard and had students recite words. When the teachers taught reading they focused on explaining new words, emphasised grammar and sentence structures and look at passages in the textbook. The students listened to the teacher and then did the exercises in the textbook. Six of the participants stated that their teacher actually taught in Chinese and only two had teachers that taught the lesson in English:

The teacher just talked in class with students listening to him all the time. Reading aloud and pronunciation were ignored. We were asked to read a passage for awhile silently and answer the questions attached after the passage... at that time our teacher taught English mainly in Mandarin, now I think the thing is different. Teachers tend to speak English in class to students and students communicate with their teachers in English (participant 1).

While 5 said that they had had listening classes these were not often and most of the time the classes were designed for the purpose of practicing the CET test. Participant 5 felt that his reading ability was his best aspect of English understanding and that:

When I first came to Australia, in the language centre [at CQU] there were a lot of foreigners, Indians and Columbians. We were better at reading in English than others. We did better in the tests. Although their English was good compared to us, we were good at taking tests and know how to answer the questions (participant 5)

Any writing examples done by the students were again texts that were used in the CET test. Only one student had access to an English speaking class while the others said that “speaking” as an activity was not seen as important so very little if any time was given to speaking practice. From this it can be argued that due to various constraints many of the CET teachers have focused on teaching to the test and as reading made up 40% of the test, reading was a dominant focus during class. Participants commented that CET learning was geared towards CET tests and that this focus limited any development of skills able to be transferred to other environments such as the workplace.

Besides English classes there was “English Corner” an activity where students could congregate to practice their speaking skills. It seems that the English major students were more likely to do this activity and the CET students were less likely to participate. One perceived limitation was that there was a relatively uniform level of understanding among the CET students and that this was similar to the English spoken in “English Corner” therefore they believed that they were unlikely to improve their overall speaking ability. There was no-one present with better skills to learn from.

This activity was not seen as a learning exercise, but more of a social activity. There was no connection made between speaking practice, social conversation and learning. Here the students needed (expected) a facilitator with better speaking skills than themselves. There was a suggestion that students should be encouraged to speak and listen to English being spoken.

### **Improvement exercises**

Since being in Rockhampton the participants had undertaken various activities that could enhance their understandings of an Australian way of life and everyday language. What these participants found useful were speaking with locals, having to interact through such things as organising accommodation and doing classes at university. Relaxation activities such as watching television and listening to radio offered another form of access to native English speakers where the participants could improve their listening skills. Participant five made the following comment:

I feel that living here is a kind of improvement, immersion in life. I watch a lot of TV programs. I like watching the news here, especially the ABC news. The English they use is standard and good pronunciation. I am interested in world affairs. I organise a football team and join a football club. Of the players, they are Australian, German but there are no Chinese. We have to talk in English (participant 5).



Two participants felt extra reading of different kinds of materials such as local newspapers and magazines had helped. While all participants agreed that their range of abilities had improved since being in Australia most were still unsure of correct or appropriate language to use while one participant finds it hard to speak for any extended period. This he stated was noticeable when he was required to do oral presentations during university classes at CQU.

### **Conclusion**

The areas of strength of the language abilities of all participants correspond to the practices developed in China. Most students felt relatively comfortable with their reading and this was an area where students had practiced during CET classes. Listening and speaking were skills that needed further development and this corresponded to the limited time that had been spent on these activities in CET classes. Currently the teaching style does not reflect the pedagogy encouraged in the new syllabus. Changing teaching practice is inhibited by various constraints such as large classes, lack of appropriate professional development and training of CET teachers, a long with limited access to material resources and ICT. These teachers are more often likely to be English majors from foreign language faculties rather than graduates with teaching qualifications.

There is a relatively small community of Chinese international students currently enrolled as on-campus students at CQU but there is the possibility that these students may remain culturally and socially isolated from Australian students. There are enough Chinese students for them to remain as a single cultural group without the need to seek out other social networks or contacts. This means that they are less likely to converse with native English speakers except for the tutors and lecturers of the classes that they attend. While some students preferred 'homestay' accommodation but there were also issues around food and cultural activities. What this has meant for one author, as a CET teacher, is a reinforcement of the need to change pedagogical practice so that CET students are able to communicate in everyday language. This change in pedagogy could provide a platform for students to actually learn more vocabulary, provide listening and speaking practice that did not solely reflect the CETest. The reflections of the participants provide evidence for this change. It also made us think about the kinds of support that could be provided for Chinese students coming to Rockhampton where there is a small community of Chinese speakers. Some of that support could be in the form of both Chinese and English newspapers and magazines; alerting students to the different television and radio stations; networks of local Chinese citizens plus more importantly, educating the local Australian community about the cultural norms, beliefs and customs of modern day China. This would then invite more of a social mix of international and local people and assist with facilitating a comfortable interaction during the time that these international students are living in the local community.

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