English Language Learning in the Asian Context

Forward by David Nunan with Rod Ellis & Paul Nation
Editors: Paul Robertson, Peter Dash, and Joseph Jung

The Asian EFL Journal Press
English Language Learning in the Asian Context

Forward by David Nunan with Rod Ellis & Paul Nation
Editors: Paul Robertson, Peter Dash, and Joseph Jung

The Asian EFL Journal Press
Asian EFL Journal Press
A Division of Time Taylor International Ltd
Trustnet Chambers
P.O. Box 3444
Road Town, Tortola
British Virgin Islands

http://www.asian-efl-journal.com

© Asian EF Journal Press 2005

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of the Asian EFL Journal Press.

No unauthorized photocopying
All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the Asian EFL Journal.
editor@asian-ej-journal.com

Robertson, P., Dash, P., Jung, J.
English Language Learning in the Asian Context

ISBN 89-90841-23-2 93740
Contents

Volume 1

Forward

David Nunan, Hong Kong University

Learning in Context

Paul Robertson, Peter Dash and Joseph Jung
Asian EFL Journal

Section A Learning Principles and Aspects

1. Principles of Instructed Language Learning
   Rod Ellis, University of Auckland, New Zealand

2. Consideration of Age in L2 Attainment: Children, Adolescents and Adults
   Annie Hong Qin Zhao and Carol Morgan, University of Bath, United Kingdom

3. The Role of the First Language in Foreign Language Learning
   Paul Nation, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

4. A Non-native Approach to ELT: Universal or Asian
   Hideo Oka, University of Tokyo, Japan

Section B EFL/ESL Development: National Case Studies

5. Change and Continuity: English Education in Singapore
   Phyllis Chew, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

6. ELT in India: A Brief Historical and Current Overview
   Deepthi Gupta, Panjab University, India

7. The Influence of Confucius and Mencius in Modern Day EFL
   Paul Robertson, Asian EFL Journal

Section C Role of Culture

8. Communicating Effectively with Chinese Learners in the EFL Classroom
   Li Minsheng, Open Polytechnic of New Zealand

9. Language Learning and Personality Types in Chinese Settings
   Alastair Sharpe, Lignan University, Hong Kong
10. Challenging Beliefs in Teacher Development: Potential Influences of Theravada Buddhism upon Thais Learning English
    John Adamson, Shinshu Honan College, Japan

11. Consideration of the Role of the Four Iddhipada and the Sutta in Teaching English in Thailand
    David Brown, Dhurakijpundit University, Thailand

Section D  Methods and Approaches

12. Shifting Paradigms: From a Communicative to Context Based Approach
    Huw Jarvis, University of Salford, United Kingdom and Sirin Attalarat, British Council, Thailand

13. Developing Oral Skills by Combining Fluency with Accuracy Focused Tasks: A Case Study in China
    Pedro Luchini, Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata, Argentina

14. Computer Mediated Communication: The Use of CMC to Develop EFL Learners' Communicative Competence
    Yu Hua Chen, University of Melbourne, Australia

Section E  Communication and Learning Strategies

15. Keeping Up with Native Speakers: The Many and Positive Roles of Repetition in the Conversation of EFL Learners
    Eranawati Sadir, Monash University, Australia

16. How Learners from Different Cultural Backgrounds Learn a Foreign Language
    Nenden Sri Lengkanawati, Indonesia University of Education, Indonesia

17. Nationality and Language Learning strategies of ELT Major University Students
    Mustafa Zulkaf Altam, Erciyes University, Turkey

Section F  Learning Strategies: Special Feature Article:

18. The Relationship of School Year, Sex and Proficiency on the use of Learning Strategies in Learning English of Korean Junior High School Students.
    Kyung Ok Lee, Busan Board of Education, Korea
Section G  Discourse, Pragmatics and Sociolinguistics

19. Intercultural Communication and Grice’s Principle
   Roger Numm, Kochi University, Japan

20. Subliminal Sexism in EFL Textbooks
   Hasan Ansary and Esmae Babai, Shiraz University, Iran

21. Cross-cultural Pragmatic Failure: A Definitional Analysis with Implications for
    Classroom Teaching
   Peter Dash, Asian EFL Journal

22. Toward a Critical Notion of English as an International Language
    Phan Le Ha, Monash University, Australia

23. A Study of Writing by Native Chinese Freshmen: Teaching English Requires the
    Teaching of Cultures
    Yanpu Zhong, Jilin University, China

Section H  Reading and Vocabulary

24. Extensive Reading Reports – Different Intelligences, Different Levels of
    Processing.
   Marc Helgesen, Miyagi Gakuen Women’s College, Japan

25. Teaching Vocabulary Using Short Texts
   Scott Thornbury, freelance teacher trainer and materials writer

26. The Impact of Text Length on EFL Students’ Reading Comprehension
    Sioed Mehrpour and Abdolmehdi Riazi, Shiraz University, Iran

27. Frequency Effects on Japanese EFL Learners’ Perception of Morphologically
    Complex Words
   Takahiro Irooi, Kochi Women’s University and Masayoshi Otagaki, Naruto,
   University of Education, Japan

28. Teaching Vocabulary
    Paul Nation, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand
Communicating Effectively with Chinese Students in EFL/ESL Classrooms

Mingsheng Li
The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand

1. Introduction

China embraces the largest number of English learners. It is estimated that there are about 350 million Chinese learning English\(^1\). Students from primary to postgraduate levels learn English as a compulsory subject. English proficiency has become a gate-keeping mechanism for educational pursuits, employment, promotion, career advancement, and professional evaluation. People with sufficient English skills are perceived as “talents” whereas people with little or no English skills at all are categorised as “second-class talents” or “non-talents” (Wang, 2003). In order to acquire the expected English proficiency, Chinese students spend more time, effort and budget on English than any other subjects to the detriment of the mother tongue (Xu & Wang, 2005).

The Chinese interest in English has created an insatiable demand for English language teachers, native English speakers in particular. About one in three Chinese students seeking overseas tertiary education in English-speaking countries studies English at a language school before being admitted into a tertiary institution. In 2003, an estimated number of over 100,000 Chinese students studied at language schools in the USA, the UK, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Ireland, South Korea, Singapore, Thailand, and Japan to prepare for tertiary education in the host countries.

A large body of the research literature relating to the studies of Chinese language learners (much of which has been conducted by Western teachers, researchers and scholars) has contributed significantly to the understanding of Chinese learners, their attitudes towards teaching and learning, their classroom behaviours, and their conceptualisation of learning. In Western dominated research, Chinese students are often blamed as sources of problems if something goes wrong in the classroom while foreign EFL/ESL teachers acting as transformers or as agents of change rarely review and appraise their own practices and the teaching approaches they adopt in the classroom. Chinese students’ voices have rarely been heard, their concerns rarely attended to, and their perceptions of education quality and pedagogical effectiveness by English native speakers rarely studied from the student perspective.

I did a survey in nine universities in a southwestern province in China in 1997 to collect information for my PhD dissertation at a university in Australia. More than 300 university students majoring in English language and literature participated in the survey (Li, 1999).

---

In 2003, I did a parallel study in New Zealand. I interviewed 40 Asian students (31 Chinese) studying English at two New Zealand language schools (Li, 2004). In both research projects, I attempted to make exploratory studies of Chinese students’ learning experiences in the classes taught by native English EFL/ESL teachers. The purpose of my second research project was to identify similarities and differences in Chinese students’ learning experiences in China and in New Zealand and to find out if changes in learning environments would lead to changes in Chinese students’ learning conceptualisations. Comparing the findings of the two research projects, I came to find that there were almost no changes in Chinese students’ learning concepts, assumptions, beliefs, and role expectations in spite of the changes of their learning environments: the problems identified in China reappeared in my findings of my research in New Zealand.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight some of these challenges faced by foreign EFL/ESL teachers teaching English to Chinese students either in China or in other countries. I will first introduce an intercultural communication model and then discuss and analyse the major elements of this model, especially the most dynamic ones: the teacher and student. I will then discuss other interconnected issues: language awareness, role concepts and expectations, pedagogical issues, the participation discourse and Chinese students’ responses to the teaching practices. Finally, I will look essentially at border pedagogy as a solution to the problems identified in these two research projects.

2. The intercultural communication model in EFL/ESL classrooms

In Dwyer’s (2003, p. 5) communication model, seven elements are involved in the communication process: sender, message, channel, receiver, feedback, context, and barrier (interference/noise).

In this model, the *sender* encodes a *message* and sends it to the *receiver* through a *channel* of communication. The receiver decodes the sent message and may provide *feedback* to the sender. Communication takes place in a *context* where both the sender and the receiver belong. A possible communication *barrier* may arise from any one or a combination of the other six elements. In this two-way dynamic communication process, all the elements are interrelated and interdependent and form a “communicative causation” (Arno, 1993, p. 33) each being the cause of the other. I am now applying this communication model to the discussion of the intercultural communication issues identified in my research.
Teaching involves a two-way dynamic communication process. Teachers deliver the course content/knowledge through pedagogical methods to students who make an effort to interpret, process, understand and respond to what is delivered and to achieve the desired learning outcomes (see the diagram above). Both teachers and students, the two most active elements in the communication process, have their own sets of cultural values, norms, assumptions, beliefs, attitudes, role concepts, perceptions, expectations and meaning-making systems, which impact on the ways they communicate and prescribe the roles they play. In an intercultural classroom communication where the participants’ behaviours do not seem to be compatible with each other’s values, norms, beliefs, and expectations, conflicts become inevitable in spite of the good intentions that both parties have toward each other. Indeed, all intercultural communication involves uncertainty, ambiguity, and incompatibility (DeVito, O’Rourke, & O’Neil, 2000, p. 107).

The classroom or the educational establishment provides a platform (context) for teachers to deliver the needed knowledge packaged in a course or programme. The course content, reflecting the course writers’ cultural values and education philosophy, determines what knowledge and how much knowledge is to be delivered and how it is to be delivered.

Pedagogy, as a socio-cultural product shaped by specific cultural values and ideology suitable to the society where the pedagogy originates, contains socially approved methods and plays a mediating role in teacher-student role relationships. Therefore, it maintains its own cultural identity wherever it is enacted (Berstein & Solomon, 1999). When value-laden teaching approaches and methods are implemented or transplanted, there may be potential clashes in values, beliefs, and learning conceptualisations, which may affect learning outcomes (Pennycook, 1994). These clashes may be muted or masked because of the cultural values of the students as discussed later in this paper.

Ideally, both teachers and students expect to achieve successful outcomes in their communication. However, they are faced with many barriers to overcome in order to achieve such a goal, such as teachers’ professional skills, teaching experiences and communication skills, the course content, and the pedagogical methods, students’ prior learning experiences, attitudes, expectations, perceptions, and motivations.

Apart from the five essential elements, the context (the situation, circumstances or setting) where teaching and learning take place is an important factor to be taken into account. Teaching English to Chinese students in China is different from teaching them in other English-speaking countries. In different socio-cultural contexts, teachers and students face different challenges, such as local structural conditions, power and control, ideology, language policies and discursive rules that generate practice of inclusion and exclusion.
Section C: Role of Culture ...

(Berstein, 1996; Phillipson, 2001). Teachers and students in a foreign context generally lack familiar frames of references and therefore may find the situation seemingly unwelcome, unfriendly, inhospitable, and “confusingly varied and unpredictable” (Holliday 1994, p.151), and may fail to recognise and meet both learners’ or teachers’ expectations. Reliance on their past teaching or learning experiences and public and personal theories may often lead to misunderstanding and frustration.

It can be seen from this model that to achieve successful or satisfactory results from intercultural classroom communication between teachers and students involves many aspects: teachers, students, learning context, course content, and pedagogies. Effective communication, therefore, requires an eco-systematic balance and stability.

3. The communicators in EFL/ESL classrooms

Communication between teachers and students is influenced by social, cultural, psychological and contextual factors and it involves values, assumptions, beliefs, and role expectations held by all participants. Therefore, teachers and students become the most active and important communicators in the process. Teachers play a key role as an initiator and facilitator, and as the primary classroom resource (Maley, 2005). The teacher-student role relationship and patterns of communication largely determine the success or failure of classroom communication.

3.1 EFL/ESL teachers

The English language teaching industry in China has attracted many native and non-native English-speaking teachers. It is reported that there are about 100,000 foreign EFL/ESL teachers working in China, from different countries, such as the UK, the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Holland, and Singapore, ranging from secondary school leavers to higher degree holders (Qiang & Wolff, 2004a).

My own research in China showed that only 41.5% foreign ESL teachers teaching English language majors at the nine universities were reported holding relevant qualifications in English teaching or education (Li, 1999). Nearly sixty per cent of other foreign teachers had not received any training in English language teaching. Some were grabbed from the streets while they were travelling in China. Many of those with relevant qualifications had been awarded the four-week-long Cambridge Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA) and the Trinity College Certificate in TESOL (CertTESOL).

As in other parts of the world where the notion has remained the fundamental tenet of the field that English native speakers are the ideal teachers of the language (Brutt-Griffler & Samimy, 2001), the native-speaker-ideal fallacy (Phillipson, 1992) has taken so deep a root in China that its validity is rarely questioned. The hegemonic power of the fallacy seems to have justified all the recruiting practices and legitimised foreign EFL/ESL teachers’ special and highly honoured status in ELT in China. For example, a school leaver from an English-speaking country may earn as much as, or more than, a Chinese professor who has a PhD in applied linguistics from an English speaking country. It is not uncommon to find that, amongst many of those foreign teachers, a PhD in biology may be asked to teach
linguistics and a BA in fashion design to teach English literature, and a librarian to teach other skills. It is worth noting that some of these employed foreign teachers are highly specialised in their own fields, but language teaching is beyond their areas of speciality.

The fallacy has driven some Chinese employers into a psychological inertia and routine. The employment of native speakers to teach the language has become a procedural formality. The employment is routinised as a procedural formality and it is seen to produce no more than its symbolic effects — a sign of the positive reputation of the institution, and a sign for marketing purposes. Hence, the involvement of foreign teachers in ELT in China may become more counterproductive than helpful (Qiang & Wolff, 2004a, 2004b). Whether foreign teachers are really needed and what kind of foreign teachers are needed has remained unexplored. There always seem to be vacancies for foreign teachers to fill: oral English, English literature, and English writing, in a strong belief that these courses can only be taught by native speakers, regardless of the employees’ teaching competence and the relevance of their qualifications and fields of their specialities. There have been no government policies in place to regulate the industry, especially the recruiting criteria for English language teachers (Qiang & Wolff, 2004b). Being native speakers of English becomes the sole criteria for the selection. Rarely have the Chinese employers, who have been self-colonised, made an effort to investigate the teaching outcomes of these foreign teachers, and to hear the students’ voices. Foreign teachers are routinely recruited, given the teaching tasks, and then “dumped” in the classroom, and nobody cares what happens next. Job inductions are very rare because these employed foreign teachers are seen as experts and therefore they are expected to know what to do. Many of them, qualified or not, have to teach on a trial-and-error basis. Very rarely do they receive any feedback from any other parties involved.

Some foreign teachers, without language awareness, pedagogical skills, cultural competence, may find it very difficult to effectively communicate with Chinese students. The hurt or damage done to ELT in China by those unqualified and inexperienced foreign EFL/ESL teachers is irreparable. It also damages the reputation and the hard-earned image by other English language teaching experts and professionals. Positive changes may not take place and the Chinese students’ perceptions that foreign teachers cannot teach may not be altered if the “spell” of the fallacy remains untouched (Li, 2003).

3.2 Chinese students

It is well acknowledged that Chinese students are extremely diligent, hardworking, high-achieving, respectful, cooperative, trustworthy, persevering and well disciplined (Chan, 1997; Kennedy, 2002; Hu, 2002). They take learning seriously and show deep respect for English native speakers in a hope to learn “real English” and get the best from them (Boyle, 2000). In their learning, Chinese students tend to exhibit a high degree of sincerity in improving their knowledge of both western culture and the English language through diligent study and practice, and this can be a very stimulating motivation for a teacher.\(^2\)

\(^2\) Retrieved on March 26, 2005 from: http://www.i-english.us/Tes.htm
Most Chinese students under the age of twenty-five are from one-child families. To these families, “education has always been the first priority” (Young & Young, 2003). Respect for education and striving for education excellence have become social expectations. Some foreign teachers teaching in China may find it rewarding and a privilege to teach Chinese students. The following statement from Giffone (1999) may be a clear evidence to support this view:

Teaching in China is inspiring. It is an inspiration that grows from the students, their optimism, their belief in the future, their enthusiasm, their lack of pretension, their kindness, their generosity, their warmth, their hope amid change, their belief in infinite possibilities.

There is also evidence to suggest that students from Confucian heritage cultures (CHC) often outperform their Western peers on the same academic achievement tests (Biggs, 1997), although they are often stereotyped as passive rote learners (Martinsons & Martinsons, 1996).

As Chinese students do not take learning lightly, they often hold very high expectations of their teachers. They show profound respect for their teachers on the grounds that these teachers live up to their expectations. Respect must be earned. Students’ learning enthusiasm can be dampened when they realize that they cannot learn much from their foreign teachers and their learning expectations cannot be met. Their previously held expectations and assumptions about native speakers may turn to another fallacy: foreign ESL/EFL teachers do not know how to teach Chinese students (Li, 2003). Chinese students can go to another extreme if they see their expectations unmet. These seemly silent students may change their personalities and launch protests against foreign teachers they perceive to be “incompetent” and irresponsible. It is not uncommon to see the sackings of some foreign ESL/EFL teachers in China. In New Zealand, for example, Chinese students became most vocal, fighting for their rights. They sent thousands of letters of complaints about poor education quality in some language schools to the Chinese Embassy in Wellington, asking the Chinese government to pass the messages to the New Zealand government and demanded the government to take actions to regulate the industry (Quirke, 2002).

It should be noted that not all Chinese students are as industrious and motivated as the descriptions above. Some may have little enthusiasm in learning English. Some learn English to pass the exams because it is a compulsory subject, or they have to come to the class because of the school’s strict discipline, or they learn it to meet their parents’ expectations, or mostly likely, they learn it to pass the IELTS test in order to study overseas as they may not have any chance of being admitted by any Chinese tertiary institutions, or they learn it in order to migrate to an English-speaking country (Capbell, 2004). Qiang and Wolff (2004b) found in their survey that some Chinese students lacked both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and that absenteeism had become a common phenomenon in foreign ESL/EFL teachers’ classes. Hill (2004) reported that in his class, only about half of the students attended the class. He reported, “at times I have felt like a waste of resource. … but as a teacher, they’ll never truly like me”. Of course, there may be other reasons for Chinese students’ lack of interest in foreign teachers’ classes. The following discussions will further elaborate on the issues.
4. Language awareness for EFL/ESL teachers

The research literature in language learning and teaching has provided theoretical and pedagogical insights into the constructs of “consciousness-raising” (Rutherford & Sharwood-Smith, 1985), “language awareness” (Wright & Bolitho, 1993, 1997), “explicit’ and “implicit” instruction (Ellis, 1994), and “form-focused instruction” (Spada, 1997). Students are expected to be able to encode and decode messages of communication, to process, to comprehend, to store, to retrieve these messages for communicative use (Pica, 1995), to be aware of, and to be able to analyse, the language system, and to use it communicatively (Widdowson, 1992). If learners are required to acquire an ability to analyse the language and to understand the operating system of the language, there is no doubt that teachers themselves must be competent in this area. It is reasonable to expect language teachers to be aware of the language system and of the actual process of what teachers do in the classroom, how they do it and why they do it. Language awareness that forms an essential part of teacher professionalism (Andrews, 2003, p. 83) will enable the teacher to understand the language working system, develop sensitivity to students’ learning needs and difficulties (Wright, 2002, p. 115) and to adopt appropriate teaching methods to help students achieve learning objectives. Carter argues (2005) that “the best language teachers are those who have most language awareness.”

Being a native speaker is not necessarily a licence to teach the language. A language teacher requires specific adequate professional training. It is well acknowledged that not all native speakers know the operating systems of their language. Language teachers need relevant expertise, skills, and knowledge to allow them to accomplish tasks such as

- lesson planning
- learner needs assessment
- creation of teaching content
- materials selection
- syllabus and curriculum designing
- assessment of learner performance.

An untrained and unqualified native speaker who has some degree of literacy may not have the language awareness that is essential in language teaching. One’s ability to speak the language does not guarantee that one is competent in teaching the language.

English language teaching has become an industry. As the term industry means, students are consumers. The products they purchase from EFL/ESL teachers are all aspects of English. If teachers do not know anything about the subject matter they teach, such as phonology, morphology, semantics, pragmatics, and discourse, they have nothing to base their teaching on. That means they do not have anything to sell, and as a result, a deal cannot be struck. Therefore, professional expertise and linguistic awareness and skills (a thorough knowledge of the linguistic operating system) should be a prerequisite for being a language teacher (Andrews, 2003).

The quality of education is anchored on teacher quality. Teacher quality rests on the teacher’s acquired professional skills and experiences. It is unrealistic to expect teachers who are unqualified and who do not have adequate teaching competence to safeguard the quality of the ELT industry. Some foreign teachers in China, except for their speaking skills and their limited linguistic knowledge acquired during their primary and secondary
school education, do not have adequate linguistic competence and language awareness to enable them to analyse the language system and structure, to plan and effectively deliver the course, to assess learning outcomes, and to adopt appropriate teaching methods to help students achieve learning objectives. Language descriptions and analysis, one of the most important language teaching components, requires teachers’ awareness of the language learning process, the structure, and the usage of the language (Andrews, 2003). In language teaching, it is the teacher’s linguistic expertise, rather than speaking competence, that will facilitate language learning. It is not “who you are” but “what you know” that makes learning and teaching accountable (Rampton, 1996).

Some foreign EFL/ESL teachers in China have received the CELTA and the CertTESOL. The standards for acquiring these teaching qualifications are very relaxed in many training establishments. The courses are open to people who have “little or no experience of teaching English” as a second language. The 4-week training courses (mostly self-directed learning, with 6 hours of on-site supervised teaching practice) are largely “prescriptive, limited and shallow, usually influenced by the dominant ideology of the day” (Gabrielaltos, 2003). Though “brilliant in their directness and practicality…, they are insultingly too short” (Rinvuluci, 2005). These qualifications have been commercialised. Every year more than 10,000 CELTA certificates are issued. As long as the money is in place (about $US2,100), the qualification is guaranteed. The trainees are often assured by the trainers that the successful completion rate is 100 percent.

It is common sense that “professional competence takes years to build up, whether one is a native speaker or not” (Phillipson, 2003). These teachers, having gone through the short training, armed with little professional knowledge and language awareness, are faced with tough challenges in their teaching and in communicating with their students. Just like those who have read some books about swimming cannot actually swim, these trainees, having read one or two books about language teaching and the pedagogies, are not yet equipped with sufficient language awareness and adequate teaching skills to cope with the complexity and challenges of the intercultural communication situations. Many of them have to battle in EFL/ESL classrooms with their half-baked linguistic skills and undigested pedagogical methods, not realising that these methods are but the products of “ethnocentrism in TESOL teacher education” that “give little consideration to the millions of ESOL students” (Liu, 1998, p. 4). While transplanting the educational model that they themselves are not sure of, these EFL/ESL teachers meet strong resistance and challenges.

The Chinese confusion of user competence with teacher competence and “the native-speaker fallacy” have led to the flow of unqualified and lowly qualified teachers into the ELT profession and have done serious damage to the reputation of English teachers in China (Qiang and Wolff, 2004b). These teachers’ linguistic poverty and lack of cultural and pedagogical awareness (discussion to be followed) may have resulted in their overuse of some coping strategies such as games, group activities, discussions and debates, which do not require language descriptions and analyses.

---

3 Entry requirements set by the Trinity College London: http://www.trinitycollege.co.uk/downloads/TESOL/documents/certTESOL_Summary.pdf
4 See “The University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations” web page: http://www.cambridgeesol.org/teaching/celta.htm
5. Roles and role expectations

Central to the teacher-learner classroom interactions are the archetypal teacher-learner roles (Hofstede, 1986). Widdowson (1987) describes roles as “kinds of conventional script, or prescript, which constrain the individual person to assume a persona in conformity to normal and expected patterns of behaviour” (p. 83). Roles are often associated with expectations. Wright (1987, p. 5) suggests that expectations and behaviours associated with the prescribed roles are automatically intertwined, and that the role is governed both by our expectations and the actual behaviour and by the expectations of others. According to Stryker and Statham (1985), the level of consensus on role expectations is determined by the degree of clarity of role identity defined and interpreted by the participants, and role conflicts can arise when people from different cultural backgrounds define and interpret their role identities and role expectations by using their individual cultural cues and interpretive systems.

Between teachers and students, there exists a role boundary that influences their role identities and expectations (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). Teachers and students act out the roles assigned to them by their cultural norms. Roles are so internalised and routinised that they are generally not noticeable, and become visible and problematic only when the prescribed sanctions are violated (Prabhu, 1992). Both teachers and students judge the appropriateness of their actions and their behaviours on the basis of these expectations and their own meaning-making systems. Role conflicts are likely to arise when the role boundary is breached and expectations are unfulfilled (Coleman, 1996; Widdowson, 1987).

When teaching Chinese students, foreign EFL/ESL teachers expect, explicitly or implicitly, Chinese students to conform to the teachers' cultural norms as to what it means to be a teacher and a student. At the same time, Chinese students also expect their teachers to conform to the classroom protocols that they are familiar with. Consequently, in one classroom there are at least two different sets of expectations of the role functions. Foreign teachers and Chinese students communicate in the classroom, using different sets of interpretative frameworks based on different frames of references. Despite the good intentions on both sides, it is evident that misunderstandings and even antagonism may become a regular feature of cross-cultural discourses (Tang & Absalom, 1999).

Traditionally in China, the teacher’s role has been socially prescribed as that of a model, a knowledge transmitter, a learning guide, an authority, an expert, a nurturer, and a virtuoso, and the student’s role as that of a receiver, a follower, an apprentice, and an audience (Kelen, 2002; Paine, 1990). Such role expectations entail teacher-guided, text-centred, knowledge-based, and examination-oriented pedagogical methods and a hierarchically structured teacher-student relationship (Ward, 2001).

In the Chinese educational context, the teacher as role model is responsible for the progress and achievements of students, and the teacher’s skilful management of classroom activities and performing expertise become social expectations. Chinese education strives for perfection and thus a teacher’ perfecion in the profession is often idealised. In order to achieve this idealised role expectation, teachers are expected to be actors, spending years preparing for the final stage performance in the classroom (Paine, 1990). It is the teacher’s performing skills and the profound knowledge that count.

In line with such social expectations, a good student is expected to be diligent, well disciplined, well behaved, and obedient to the teacher authority (Tang & Absalom, 1999).
One of the teacher’s role is to explain in meticulous detail all the ideas and concepts from an authoritative textbook that is coherently, logically, and systematically structured. The student’s role is therefore to absorb with diligence all the transmitted knowledge from the teacher and the textbook. The teacher is seen as a *guru* whose authority should be respected. As a result, teachers, students and textbooks form a triangular relationship, with the teacher playing a central role. Students depend on the teacher and the state prescribed textbooks for learning.

Very rarely can foreign teachers, often seen as agents of change, fulfil the role expectations prescribed by the Chinese teaching contexts. The mismatched expectations often cause teacher-student role conflicts derived from different sources and thus lead to communication breakdowns.

### 6. The McPedagogy

In the course of McDonaldization of the English language, ELT teaching pedagogies and methods have also been McDonaldized (Thornbury, 2000). The McPedagogy has become a marketable and lucrative product sold to many parts of the world by its disciples. The mentality of these messengers is locked in a “caged society” (Ritzer, 1993) where the philosophy of one-size-fits-all becomes so routinised and scripted in a “standardised and dehumanised” format (Littlejohn, 2001) that any departure from the norm will be frowned upon. In exporting and transplanting the pre-packaged pedagogical methods promulgated by their qualification validating institutions, these faithful disciplines rarely consider the value of their educational nutrition, cultural compatibility, educational contexts, and learner realities (Hu, 2005). They rarely realise that pedagogical methods are not value free and “they are synthetic constructs, influenced by theories, beliefs, received wisdom and earlier methodologies” (Gabrielatos, 2003).

Some foreign EFL/ESL teachers in China, having gone through the short training course, exhibit a kind of “disciple mentality” (Gabrielatos, 2003) to a particular teaching approach as if teaching is but a wholesale copying of such a pre-packaged approach, without a deep understanding of the philosophies of these approaches. Such teacher preparation programmes emphasise the omnipotent power of teaching methodologies, procedures, and techniques, operating with a notion that the methods will work in all situations, with little attention to linguistic knowledge, language awareness, cultural implications and compatibilities, relevance, students’ life experiences, and the politics underlying the social fabric of teaching (Holliday, 1994; Pennycook, 1994). This “methoditis” (Gabrielatos, 2003) ignores the fact that language teaching is very often contextualised and culture-specific. Pre-packaged methods may become dysfunctional or inoperable when engaging with real learners in real classroom communication (Page, 2003). Even for experienced professionals, it will take some time to identify certain appropriate teaching methods, that is, to identify a pedagogical fit, to meet learners’ needs in the classroom dynamics. Teaching can be a failure if pedagogical methods are rigid and pre-programmed (Gardner, 2004).

Identifying a rough pedagogic fit in an intercultural setting can be a challenge for many foreign EFL/ESL teachers. Once in the classroom, they are involved in a complex local cultural environment. Foreign EFL/ESL teachers, usually not knowing the local culture and the local language, have to rely on their prior experiences and belief systems about teaching and learning that they have acquired from their home cultures, in order to interpret their
teaching tasks, the course content, and teacher-student role relationships and to identify students’ learning needs and expectations in the foreign culture (Warford & Reeves, 2003). The interpretations they make, generally based on personal perceptions and assumptions, can often be misleading and problematic.

When teaching Chinese students either studying in China or overseas (for example, in New Zealand), ESL teachers are often faced with challenges in implementing their pedagogical methods, especially the communicative approach which focuses on the principles of learner-centeredness, student participation and interactions, teachers’ facilitating roles, learner autonomy, fluency, and communicative competence. Of course, it is unfair to blame the communicative approach for having failed to meet Chinese students’ learning needs and expectations. The problems often lie in the practice of the practitioners who may misinterpret, misuse, or abuse the underlying teaching philosophy of the approach. The approach has often been simplified as one that focuses on conversations and meaning-based activities only, while the fundamental concepts of the approach, while being McDonaldised, have often been distorted.

7. The participation discourse

A central characteristic of foreign EFL/ESL teachers’ teaching in China is the participation discourse or the communicative discourse that emphasises students’ participation in pair and group work, games, group discussions or group projects, and debates. It is based on the rationale that such classroom activities can

- provide opportunities for oral fluency
- encourage co-operation and exchange of ideas
- create a more democratic learning atmosphere
- give learners autonomy and a sense of responsibility for their own learning
- involve learners in meaning-focused rather than form-focused classroom interactions.

To some foreign EFL/ESL teachers, structured delivery and presentations would be seen as a hindrance rather than a help to students’ learning and intellectual development. The ability to organise interactive activities appears to have become a touchstone of education quality and a symbol of Western modernisation. They firmly believe that learning cannot take place without engaging in physically interactive activities.

To be followed are discussions of the features of the participation discourse: the reduction of the teacher talk time, emphasis on oral skills, spontaneous communication, learner autonomy, creativity, active interactions, individual development, and minimal use or non-use of textbooks. These features, it will be argued, are incompatible with Chinese education philosophy and Chinese students’ learning conceptualisations and thus they become more problematic than successful when implemented in Chinese EFL/ESL classrooms or in ESL classrooms where most students are Chinese.
7.1 Reduction of the teacher talk time

The participation discourse stresses the importance of students’ interactivities. In order to give students more opportunities to interact with one another in the classroom, the teacher talk time (TTT) is reduced to a minimal level. In some New Zealand language schools I visited, for example, some had very strict regulations for their teachers: The TTT should not exceed 30% of the class time; the rest of the time was used for group activities. Teachers were not allowed to dominate the class in this learner-centred teaching method, regardless of the nature of the courses. In my observation, the group work was often dominated by those who could speak well whereas those who could not speak were often sidetracked.

Chinese students studying English in China do not have any possible access to listening or speaking to a native English speaker. They meet their foreign teachers for about one or two hours per week. In some private language schools, students have to pay higher tuition fees only because of the presence of foreign teachers. These Chinese students highly cherish the time with their foreign teachers. However, they feel very disappointed when they realise that the TTT in foreign teachers’ classes is minimal and that they have to sit in groups, listening to their fellow students, whose English is as bad as, if not worse than, theirs. They feel that their opportunities to be exposed to native speakers have been deliberately withheld.

Listening is a very important part of the English language learning process for Chinese students and it is a very difficult part (Huang, 2004). Children of all ethnic groups begin their language learning by listening. Exposure to native speaker’s speech (be it classroom English or not) for about a meagre amount of 10-20 minutes per week reduces the chances of language acquisition for students. The strength of native speakers lies in their nativeness in their speech as shown in their pronunciation and their use of the language. The reduction of the TTT largely downplays such strength and the value of a native speaker.

7.2 Emphasis on oral skills

The participation discourse emphasises very narrow aspects of language — oral skills. With this “classroom cultural regime” (Holliday, 1997, p. 410), students are expected to speak English like native speakers, or as native surrogates (Phillipson, 2003). Chinese students, in spite of their unwillingness to participate, are compelled to participate those endless activities and tasks, for example, talking about the weather, foods, environmental issues, hobbies and interests, family life, school life, and future plans. Their expectations are rarely met that their teachers help them improve their communicative competence by systematically, structurally, logically delivering them the knowledge of phonology, morphology, semantics, pragmatics, vocabulary and collocations (Li, 2003, 2004). They do want to improve their speaking, but it is difficult to imagine how a conversation could proceed if students lacked the very basic vocabulary and grammatical knowledge.

In one of the classes I observed in a New Zealand language school, the students spent two hours responding to the teacher’s so-called “meaning-based” task:

What did you eat last night?
These students knew what they wanted to say in their own languages, but their limited English vocabulary and grammatical knowledge became a stumbling block and prevented them from expressing their intended meanings and concepts in English: sushi, mushrooms, corned beef, coconut cream, taro, tapioca, briskets, roti, bobotie, peri-peri, curry, pickles, chutneys, masalas, mole sauce, enchiladas, and green bean briedie. The students had not been taught the basic grammar, such as the past tense of eat, had not been supplied a list of the vocabulary to be used for the group work, and had not been taught how to pronounce some basic sounds and how to accentuate multi-syllabic words. This task-based teaching approach failed to understand students’ learning needs and difficulties. In real life, nobody would care about what someone else ate the night before. A careful review would reveal that there was not much learnable and meaningful input or uptake in the two-hour period. The students in this class, from different cultural backgrounds, felt they had not learned anything from the teacher except for a long string of difficult words, some of which could not be found in their powerful dictionaries. The teacher’s intention to develop students’ oral skills was ideal but not pragmatic, or at least the teacher’s selection of the task was inappropriate. It is unrealistic to expect students being taught in this way to improve their oral skills.

Speaking involves many factors: the size of the vocabulary, grammar rules, discourse and register. Simply practising speaking may not help develop speaking skills. Good language communicators are usually the ones who have large vocabularies (Moran & Williams, 1993). As a second language learner, a moderate size of vocabulary is needed in order to understand what is being said and to make an appropriate response. It is unreasonable to expect a learner with a very small vocabulary and lexical collocations, and restricted grammatical knowledge to cope with normal communicative interactions (Laufer & Nation, 1995). Nation and Waring (1997) suggest that at least 2,000 basic common words, their inflexions and derivatives are required. According to Aitchison (1993), English-speaking children need to possess a critical mass of 20,000 potentially usable English words in order to grasp adult-world information, and the average educated English-speaking adult has a large vocabulary of more than 50,000 potentially usable words. If proper and compound words are included, the pool of potential vocabulary increases to 111,000 (Goulden, Nation, & Read, 1991). Therefore, the participation discourse that focuses on oral skills and students’ ability deficit, without presenting enough amount of learnable and comprehensible input, can discourage students from communicating and hinder the development of their oral skills.

7.3 Spontaneous communication

Another feature of the participation discourse is spontaneity in classroom communication. It is based on the theory that instant and prompt communication is believed to be the norm of ordinary life and therefore, teachers should create a learning situation for students to undertake instant and spontaneous real-life activities (James & Gordon, 2000). Preparation is not encouraged because it is considered to be somewhat programmatic and prepared scripts are thought to be detached from real-life communication. It is the teacher who is to improvise all the learning tasks and activities right on the spot based on the teacher’s judgment of the situations in the classroom. The teacher’s authoritarian role is obvious. In the spontaneous communication process, students, not knowing what is going to happen in this unpredictable learning situation, are forced to contribute, especially when the dice or
The teddy bear is thrown into their hands for them to speak, whether they are willing to talk or not. It is assumed that learning takes place when students make contribution in the instant communication process which allows them to drop their learning anxieties, frustration, and embarrassment (Shanahan, 1993). The reality is that spontaneous communication can create more anxiety and frustration than a well-structured one.

Chinese students, who are used to the mode of formal classroom communication (Hu, 2002), often find this teaching method bizarre and often criticise it for being “unsystematic”, “disorganised”, “shallow”, “unstructured”, and “irresponsible” (Li, 2003, p. 72). They feel that foreign teachers’ strong emphasis on classroom spontaneity lacks careful preparation and planning, without a clear pedagogical purpose and a well-planned course delivery structure. This kind of teaching practice seems to breach the classroom communication protocols that Chinese students are familiar with, which require both teachers and students to carefully prepare their lessons before class and both have their shared teaching and learning objectives to achieve in a predictable way. When a teacher is perceived to be irresponsible, the teacher’s accountabilities would fail to win the hearts and trust of the students. Learning with an “irresponsible” and “disorganised” teacher would be seen as a waste of time, effort and money.

7.4 Learner autonomy

Central to the philosophy of the communicative approach is learner centeredness and learner autonomy (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983). Teaching is expected to be learner-centred and to be responsive to learners’ needs and interests. Learners are encouraged to take an active part in all games, group activities, group discussions and debates, which are thought to provide learners with ample opportunities to interact with each other by using the language in real situations. It is believed that once learners are given autonomy, their learning can be enhanced and other autonomy-related characteristics can be developed, such as critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving skills, and analytical skills.

It is to be acknowledged that autonomy is very important in language learning. However, gaining autonomy is conditional. Uninvited and underdeveloped autonomy may hinder learning. Learner autonomy involves multi-dimensional constructs of capacity, such as learner’s adequate control of the learning environment, existing language skills, confidence, perceived competence, balanced intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, self awareness, awareness of the subject matter, awareness of learning process, meta-cognitive skills, and expert counselling (Fazey, 1996; Chuk, 2004). It is unreasonable to expect Chinese students to have independent learning skills who, with very limited language skills and little confidence, study in an environment quite beyond their control, struggle to understand the learning process and who need assistance from teachers. It does not mean they do not want autonomy. They have a strong desire to become autonomous learners (Hu, 2002). Autonomy is a desired universal human capacity (Little, 1999). However, before one can walk and run, one needs to crawl first, with the help of someone else. Teacher’s assistance, counselling, and effective course delivery can contribute significantly to the development of student autonomy.

5 In the classroom context, whoever gets the dice or a teddy thrown by another speaker will have to speak.
Foreign EFL/ESL teachers’ pedagogy designed to give students autonomy becomes a pedagogical imposition, and an imposition of the teachers’ own cultural values and beliefs. Instead, students find this a hindrance to autonomy because the learning environments created by teachers do not contribute to effective language learning. Foreign teachers’ attempts to give Chinese students autonomy and responsibility for their own learning are often perceived by Chinese students as abandonment of the students and an abdication of responsibility, and as a failure to fulfil their expected roles. The discourse that emphasises learner participation and learner autonomy is regarded as unrelated to students’ learning expectations: increasing the linguistic and cultural knowledge as well as their communicative competence essential for their individual success in the competitive class. The role confusion tends to demotivate students, and make them feel negative about the learning tasks set by teachers.

7.5 Creativity

The participation discourse is assumed to help develop students’ learning autonomy and also their potential creativity. Chinese students are often perceived by foreign EFL/ESL teachers to be passive, non-responsive, and uncreative (Orton, 1990), and therefore the participation discourse is considered a cure. However, these observations of Chinese students being passive and uncreative are but the results of some foreign teachers’ interpretations based on their own cultural values, beliefs and stereotypes.

Creativity is not a simple matter. Creativity involves past experience, domain-specific knowledge, and the restructuring and intelligent use of prior knowledge (Smith, Ward, and Finke, 1995). It does not come “out of the blue”, nor does it come from one particular way of teaching. Quinn, Anderson and Finkelstein (1996, p. 72) rank creativity as the highest of four points of professional intellect:

- cognitive knowledge (know-what)
- advanced skills (know-how)
- systems understanding (know-why)
- self-motivated creativity (care-why)

What is suggested here is that creativity is self-motivated rather than taught or imposed. The primary source of creativity is the self not the outer force (Stryker & Statham, 1985). Forcing students to conform to the teacher’s imposed discourse without considering students’ actual needs – linguistic knowledge and skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking, communication) – can only stifle students’ creative potential, despite the beliefs of teachers who attempt to target their teaching at developing Chinese students' creative potential. Research indicates that the greater the role expectations are, the less the chance of creativity (Goslin, 1969). The more students are forced to do what they are unwilling to do, the more the students’ potential creativity may be stifled. Moreover, in second language learning, one cannot become creative in the use of the language until the language is mastered.

7.6 Silence

Contrasted to the participation discourse is silence that is often identified in a Chinese classroom. Cultural differences and Chinese students’ own perceptions of the relevance and
significance of the classroom activities and teachers’ classroom performance may have led to Chinese students’ reticence which is often negatively perceived as a barrier to communication (Zhou, Knoke, & Sakamoto, 2003).

From a cultural perspective, respecting the teacher is a social expectation in China, or perhaps it is universal in other parts of the world. Silence in the class is a disciplinary requirement, a Chinese classroom communication protocol, and a sign of students’ respect for the teacher and serious attention to and profound interest in the teacher’s delivery. Silence is a virtue that has to be cultivated from early childhood. It is a form of active participation and is a socially prescribed role that students are expected to fulfill. To Chinese students, participation would include their attention to and interest in the lectures, note-taking, obedience, pre-class preparations and after-class reviews, on-time submissions of the assignments, and most important of all, their active mental activities, critical thinking, and internal dialoguing (negotiating and understanding what is being taught through critical mental reflections), which are often indiscernible to foreign teachers who would interpret silence as passivity, non-responsiveness and non-collaboration.

Chinese students are accustomed to the teacher-front way of teaching in which classroom discussion, group activities are not encouraged (Krause & O'Brien, 2001). Their socialisation and enculturation have shaped their learning conceptualisation. Classroom discussions, group work, and debates may not be interpreted as learning in their repertoires of learning concepts. Of course once they recognise the benefit of participation and the relevance of group activities to language learning, they may change their past learning beliefs and will be willingly cooperative in the classroom discussions and group work (Wen & Clément, 2003). However, when these hardworking and ambitious students feel they cannot learn anything from the teacher and from the group activities, these silent students become most vocal (Collins, 2001).

More often than not, Chinese students are confused when required to participate in the many classroom activities where teachers seem to have relinquished their expected teacher’s authority roles. To them, the teachers organising too many classroom group activities that are considered irrelevant to their language acquisition seem to have violated role expectations. The teacher’s concept of participation does not seem to match theirs. There is a huge disparity between teachers' intentions in their pedagogical enactment and students' interpretations of the meanings encoded in the teaching philosophy.

7.7 Conformity

While emphasizing learner autonomy, the participation discourse is meant to foster individuality, which is culturally incompatible with Chinese education philosophy that advocates collectivism, conformity, and uniformity (Triandis & Singelis, 1998; Wilcoxon, 1990). In the classroom communication, students are expected to seek conformity, obedience, group coherence, sharing and self-control and recognition of group rather than individual performance (Pikcunas, 1986, p. 25). Like other issues discussed above, conformity is also a social construct that entails teacher-student role expectations.

Foreign EFL/ESL teachers whose pedagogy is based on the participation discourse are less likely to achieve expected results in China than in other individualistic societies. Chinese students are more comfortable with conformity and uniformity than individual participation. Their cultural framing that their interpreting system operates on informs them that
conformity is the only impartial and fair approach in a competitive society like China. From their childhood, they have become accustomed to using the same textbooks, and passing the same examinations against the same national marking criteria as other cohorts in other parts of the country. They seem to find justice, impartiality and fairness in uniform classroom activities in which all share the same sources of information and perform against the same set of criteria set by professionals. It would be considered unfair if the teacher, the perceived authority-expert, divided the class into many small groups, gave some special support or attention to one particular group and ignored the other, and assessed students learning outcomes by the degree of their participation. The participation discourse can thus create a communication barrier for having violated the classroom norm and role expectations, unsettled the group coherence and uniformity, and eroded the students’ learning confidence. The problem is further complicated by Chinese students’ distrust of fellow students who are often seen as rivals in the Chinese fiercely competitive educational environment in which whoever gets more information, more help, more attention, and more learning resources from the teacher would have a higher chance of winning than those who get less (Li, 2003).

7.8 Use of textbooks

Foreign EFL/ESL teachers teaching English in China who are interested in the participation discourse generally do not use learning resources to facilitate students’ language learning. The communicative discourse requires students to “produce” learning output rather than to “receive” adequate teaching input. Students are assumed to improve their speaking skills through conversations and interactivity. The use of a textbook or course book is seen as an obstacle to learning. The philosophy of this teaching approach seems to run counter to Chinese students’ learning conceptualization about the importance of textbooks and learning resources.

The most important teacher’s role prescribed in Chinese educational philosophy is the teacher’s teaching performance in knowledge transmission through the use of textbooks. Teachers, as well as textbooks, are viewed as the main sources of knowledge (Brick, 1991). In the Chinese epistemological view, knowledge is believed to reside in the teacher-expert and authority-textbook. Teachers use textbooks as a source to prepare lessons, organise classroom activities, systematically transmit the knowledge, and assess students’ learning outcomes. For students, textbooks are an inseparable part of their learning. The teacher’s main task is to transfer knowledge from textbooks to students through expert pedagogical skills. The teacher’s authority is established on his/her profound knowledge of the subject matter and his/her techniques in the delivery of it. The student’s primary learning task is, therefore, to master the knowledge that the teacher presents from the textbook, which is expected to be explicated by the teacher in a logical, systematic and interlocked way. Foreign EFL/ESL teachers refusing to use textbooks, handouts, or guidelines in their teaching seriously violates the perceived role concepts and role expectations.

Teaching without any handouts or texts give students a sense of insecurity and anxiety, denies the students the opportunity to use a visual picture of linguistic and lexical forms, and thus constrains their linguistic internalisation. Chinese emphasis on the use of textbooks and visual processing (rather than verbal skills) in learning may be associated with Chinese orthography (Mandarin), in which form and meaning are closely related and readers’ comprehension relies heavily on visual spatial information in the printed texts
(Chen, 1996). According to Hoosain (1986), Chinese students’ visual discrimination and spatial conceptualisation is better than their verbal ability. The participation discourse, without any or enough visual backup, puts Chinese students at a disadvantage and results in confusion and anxiety (Rao, 2001).

In addition, Chinese students tend to adopt an analytic and reflective approach in learning English (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). This approach emphasises reflection, precision, concretisation, sequence, and in-depth and logical analyses and dissection of the course materials. They want to explore every aspect of the language, searching for perfection, and they are intolerant of ambiguity and uncertainty (Ngwainmbi, 2004; Rao, 2001). Such learning approach is often perceived by foreign teachers as rote learning and memorisation. The participation discourse that encourages students' tolerance of ambiguity becomes incompatible with this approach. The cultural compatibility lies in the Chinese students’ deep learning approach and foreign teachers’ surface teaching approach which requires students to have surface and partial understandings.

Another extreme case of teaching I observed in some New Zealand language schools is the over-use of the commercialised grammar-focused course books that Littlejohn (2001) called “McCoursebook.” The one-size-fits-all philosophy is manifested in the course design and course content. Many of the course books are so structured that grammatical forms become the focus of instruction and other aspects of the language are often ignored. As I observed, the students who had already learned present, past, present continuous, and present perfect tenses had to recycle similar grammatical items over and over from Stage One to Stage Five. All the learning activities were focused on drilling of grammatical rules. The so-called task-based activities are but drilling of grammatical rules. Such teaching surely failed to help develop students’ communicative competence.

7.9 Wrapping up

It can be seen from the above discussion that the participation discourse used predominantly by foreign teachers is more counterproductive than helpful, and is culturally incompatible with Chinese culture of learning, with respect to its purposes to develop Chinese students’ oral skills, learning autonomy and creativity. Foreign teachers’ excessive use of group work in the classrooms may have resulted from their narrow understanding, or misunderstanding, or abusing of the communicative approach or post communicative approach which emphasises communicative competence, learner-centeredness, learning needs, learning process, pedagogical procedures, linguistic forms, meanings, and real-world tasks (Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001; Long, 2000; Savignon, 2002). Ironically, the activities claiming to target students’ learning needs and learner centeredness become obstacles to meet Chinese students’ needs. Unacknowledged by students, the participation discourse becomes an imposition, and therefore there is hypocrisy in the teachers’ exercise of the learner-centred approach. It becomes a teacher-centred approach in the end in which students’ voices and interests are rarely considered.

Group work alone cannot help learners to attend to the linguistic aspects, such as grammar, lexis, phonology, semantics, syntax, and discourse that are essential for language acquisition (Swan, 2005). Over-emphasis on the participation discourse is likely to ignore

---

6 In New Zealand language schools, beginner’s English is taught at Stage 1 and advanced English at Stage 5.
the importance of students’ internalisation of L2 rules and structures, which is the priority of language learning (Pica, 1995). The discourse relegates learning about the language system to a secondary place and ignores the fact that “the feeling of progression and systematicity are key psychological concepts for learners” (McCarthy, 2005). The notion of learner participation, Holliday (1997) argues, “constitutes an ethnocentric technical discourse of power which is potentially destructive” (p. 209). There is no hard evidence to prove that “learner participation is crucial for successful L2 acquisition” (Ellis, 1991, p. 45). It is not surprising to see that many students trained in this way still cannot utter a smooth sentence and cannot communicate with native speakers in very simple English in spite of their two or three years of study in language schools. Foreign teachers attempting to develop students’ communicative competence through the participation discourse alone fail to take into account the cultural implications embedded in their pedagogical procedures and thus fail to communicate to Chinese students.

8. Crossing the border

The above discussion has highlighted some important issues faced by foreign EFL/ESL teachers teaching Chinese students. These issues obviously have become communication barriers for foreign teachers to effectively communicate with Chinese students. A central argument is that to effectively communicate with Chinese students, foreign EFL/ESL teachers need to develop language awareness, pedagogical skills and cultural competence in order to remove communication barriers and bridge the teacher-student cultural rift.

Language awareness is a top priority for being a language teacher. Being native speaker does not guarantee that one knows the language and can teach it. A teacher’s linguistic skills, grammatical and lexical knowledge, and ability to analyse the language and its operating system are more important than oral skills. Language itself is the special product that the teacher sells to the students, without which teaching becomes meaningless. Teachers without any teaching qualifications and language awareness may not contribute positively to the ELT profession and cannot communicate effectively with students.

The second top priority for being an EFL/ESL teacher is pedagogical skills. A qualified teacher must have a wide range of teaching methods and options to cater to the needs of students at different levels and from different cultural backgrounds. The one-size-fits-all McPedagogy that sees teaching methods originating from a particular cultural context as universally applicable would only prevent practitioners from being innovative and responsive in new contexts by “caging” their minds in fixity.

The third priority for being an EFL/ESL teacher is cultural awareness and intercultural communication skills. The classroom communicators — teachers and students — communicate with each other, using their own sets of culturally shaped role expectations, classroom protocols, and meaning-making systems. Language teaching involves not only linguistic codes, but also intercultural and interpersonal communications (Liddicoat, Crozet, & Lo Bianco, 1999). Therefore, cultural awareness, which is described as “a big chapter” in cultural adaptation (Rinvolucrè, 2005), becomes critically important for EFL/ESL teachers to communicate with students.

Communication in EFL/ESL classrooms is not an easy matter. It involves many social, political, cultural, psychological issues, which seriously influence each participant’s
patterns of communication. There always exists a boundary between EFL/ESL teachers and their students, which may cause miscommunication, misperceptions, misunderstandings, and communication breakdowns. Effective communication therefore requires all participants to cross each other’s cultural borders and to understand and embrace rather than reject each other’s cultural values.

Giroux (1992) has identified “border pedagogy” as a pedagogic device to bridge the cultural gap between teachers and students. Border pedagogy serves to mediate teachers’ personal theories and the educational philosophies of the local culture in a process in which teachers and students become border crossers in order to understand and transcend “otherness” and to further expand their visions by extending their own borderlines.

Of particular significance in Giroux’s concept of border pedagogy is the recognition and legitimisation of what each participant has brought into the communication arena. Border crossing will allow teachers and students to enter zones of cultural differences rather than remain in the realm of subjectivities. Teachers and students should adopt new attitudes to reach out to each other and to enter each other’s “territory”, and ultimately to find a shared interface or solidarity “geared to maximising points of interaction” (Simone, 1989, p. 191), and to “constructing a common background” (Mercer, 1990, p. 68) to facilitate effective communication.

McLaren (1994) suggests that teachers and students should “create a politics of alliance building, of dreaming together, of solidarity” (p. 213) via border crossing which brings “the laws of cultural representation face to face with their founding assumptions, contradictions, and paradoxes” (p. 214). Border pedagogy purports to create “a dialogue of cultures” through which participants can “gain intersubjectivity” (Savignon & Sysoyev, 2002, p. 511) and to build a cultural synergy in which “both sides will gain and neither will lose, culturally” (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996, p. 202). In other words, their cultural horizons are widened rather than just replacing one set of values with another.

In the process of border crossing, teachers play a primary role in reaching out to students and taking a further step to understand the students’ culture, beliefs, learning conceptualisations, role concepts and expectations. McLaughlin (1995) emphasises that it is “professionally irresponsible” (p. 112) to assume that only students had to adapt and accommodate while academics insist on maintaining their positions. Border pedagogy will allow teachers to take a reflective approach in their teaching, to avoid rigidity, ritualised teaching behaviours, and pedagogically “iron-caged” mindsets, to critically evaluate and interpret the teaching principles behind their own methodologies, teaching procedures, and course materials, to equip them with skills to deal with complex issues in language teaching, and to effectively communicate with students.

Conclusion

This paper, based on an intercultural communication model, has discussed and analysed the multidimensional factors influencing the communication process and outcomes, with a particular focus on foreign EFL/ESL teachers, Chinese students, pedagogical methods, cultural values, beliefs, role concepts and expectations. It pointed out that many of the problems arose from the participation of some unqualified foreign EFL/ESL teachers in the ELT profession whose teaching was far from being satisfactory, from cultural differences with regards to learning, and from some teachers’ excessive use or abuse of the discourse
of participation — the tenet of the communicative approach promulgated by foreign EFL/ESL teachers. The discourse of participation, pushed to the extreme, failed to meet Chinese students’ learning needs and expectations. To resolve these issues, it was proposed that foreign EFL/ESL teachers develop language awareness, cultural competence, and pedagogical skills to allow them to cross borders to reach out to Chinese students and to communicate effectively with them in EFL/ESL classroom contexts.

References


Little, D. (1999). Learner autonomy is more than a Western cultural construct. In S. Cotterall & D. Crabbe (Eds.). *Learner autonomy in language learning: defining the field and effecting change* (pp. 11-18). Frankfurt am Main: Lang.


Section C : Role of Culture ...


http://www.excitecity.com/china/chat/military/messages/52655.html

http://www.stevenyoung.co.nz/chinesevoice/participation/youngdec03.htm

http://tortoise.oise.utoronto.ca/~studentconference/abstracts_paper_054.html