



Student Experiences of English Language Training: A Comparison of Teaching in UK and Chinese Contexts

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Abstract

The UK, with its obvious advantages such as a good range of universities offering many different courses, and the opportunity to increase competence in English usage, has become one of the most popular countries for Chinese students. However, Chinese students who want to come to the universities in the UK to study have to meet the entry requirements of English language. So, both in the UK and China, various English language training centers appeared to provide similar English training courses to help international students to improve their English in order to meet the entry requirements of the universities in a short time. This research is conducted in this area to compare the English training programs between these two countries to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of these two types of programs in order to help the educators in this area to improve the effective teaching of the English training course.

Keywords: English language training, English teaching, Comparison

1. Introduction

The UK, with its obvious advantages such as a good range of universities offering many different courses, and the opportunity to increase competence in English usage, has become one of the most popular countries for Chinese students. There are a lot of world famous universities in the UK which shows the high quality of education in this country. In many fields, such as mass media, finance, and fashion design, the UK is in a leading position in the world. On the other hand, the UK is the best place for Chinese students to study English which is the most popular language around the world and one which is widely used in areas such as academia and business and commerce. Studying in the UK, students can learn knowledge, skills and English language at the same time, so, Chinese students prefer the UK as the most ideal place for their higher education.

However, Chinese students who want to come to the universities in the UK to study have to meet the entry requirements of English language. The standards are set through the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) examination and students have to be able to demonstrate their competence through this assessment procedure. The level required depends upon the course to be taken, with IELTS scores needing to be higher for those undertaking masters level degrees.

English is a compulsory subject in high schools and universities under the order of the Ministry of Education from the founding of New China in 1949, after the economic reform and opening of China in 1978 and 1979, the learning of English has become fashionable in China (He Qixin). However, the shortage of an environment which enables effective practice in English to be provided has an impact upon the pace at which students can become confident or competent. Chinese students learn English as a kind of knowledge instead of a tool. Thus, generally speaking, most of Chinese students' English is still in a lower stage.

Nowadays, in China, numerous English language training centers all over the country, either individual or affiliated with universities or other institutions of learning, are offering a great variety of English courses for people from all walks of life (He Qixin), including a plenty of English training schools which aim to help Chinese students to ensure that they can reach the required standards for academic purposes of the universities in the UK. Same to China, various English language training centers appeared in the UK and, at the same time, the universities in the UK provide similar English training courses to help international students to improve their English in order to meet the entry requirements of the universities in a short time.

This research is conducted in this area to compare the English training programs between these two countries. The purpose of this research is not to judge which English program is better than the other, but to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of these two types of programs in order to help the educators in this area to improve the effective teaching of the English training course.

2. Research Methodologies

The study is focused on the advantages and disadvantages of the language training programs between the UK and China. The purpose of this research is to describe and interpret the events of the project and to share the findings with teachers and others who may have an interest in this area. The project may be described as interpretative and is built around the collection of qualitative data. Because of the small sample size it will not be possible to generalize findings, but the information gathered would be useful to inform the tutors and students who are considering participation in an English language course. This research uses questionnaires and interviews as its main strategies. Eighteen Chinese students who have English language training experiences both in the UK and China are selected for the questionnaires and interviews. Both English and Chinese versions were provided to the students in case these students have language problems in understanding the questions. And they were told they could choose either English or Chinese to answer the questions in the questionnaire and the interview.

The strengths of using questionnaires relate to their ease of application. They are easily sent out and can provide access to both quantitative and qualitative data. Their weakness resides in the fact that it is not possible to push the respondent for further information and that it is possible for the researcher to misinterpret the information provided. (Robson, 1995) So it is important to follow up the questionnaires with interviews which would enable the research to probe and prompt for further information. The same questions were asked of all respondents, although the emphasis was different for each one. However, interviews also have their limitations, such as, particularly, the translation and interpretation from mandarin to English, and the transcription and analysis process can be time demanding and requires the careful production of coding procedures.

The documents, such as teaching materials, practice materials, tapes and so on, which related to the English language training program in the UK and China were examined to get the view of teaching and learning in the programs.

In order to conduct this study a number of ethical factors were taken in to account. The purpose of the study was explained to all students who were sent a questionnaire. The students selected for interview were informed about the purpose of the interview and asked if they were willing to be interviewed. The data collection process did not begin until this informed consent had been obtained. All the students were surveyed and interviewed remain anonymous. No students are named in this report and all have been provided with an opportunity to examine this work prior to submission.

3. Findings

The questionnaire was designed to ask for the basic data in the research. According to the data from the questionnaires, in the 18 students who were given questionnaires, 14 students (78 per cent) had taken English training courses for 3 months or more than 3 months when they were in China and 16 students (89 per cent) had taken English training courses in the UK for 3 months or more than 3 months, which means most of the students who were selected to be given the questionnaires had spend quite long time in the English training courses and they should have quite enough experiences of being trained in English training courses both in the UK and China. Thus, they were able to know the English training courses well and provide convincing information which made the data I got from questionnaires more valid.

From the analysis of the questionnaires, in the 18 students who were given questionnaires, 12 students (67 per cent) had attended the English training courses in order to meet the entry requirement of English universities when they were in China. As the results, 11 students (61 per cent) thought the training courses helped them reach their aims or provided a great help for the IELTS test. Totally, 12 of the 18 students (67 per cent) thought the English training courses they had taken in China were 'good' or 'very good'.

On the other hand, in the 18 students who were given questionnaires, 13 students (72 per cent) expected to meet the entry requirement of English universities by attending the English training courses in the UK. Different with the results before, only 7 students (39 per cent) felt the English training courses helped them with their aims of improving their IELTS scores. However, it did not mean that the English training courses in the UK were worse than the training courses in China. Although many students who attended the training courses with the aims of meeting the entry requirement of English universities thought the courses didn't help them reach their traditional aims, they felt they gained a lot in others aspects. 7 students (39 per cent) chose 'to prepare for academic courses in an English university' as their first choice. These students believed the training courses in the UK helped them know a lot about the teaching and learning style in the UK, on the other hand, they thought their listening and speaking were improved during the training period, both of which help them with academic studying in an English university afterwards. Totally, 13 of the 18 students (72 per cent) gave 'good' or 'very good' to the English training courses they had taken in the UK.

The interviewees were asked to explore the advantages and disadvantages of the English training courses both in the UK and China. According to the data from the interviews, the comments were put into four main categories: the advantages of learning English in the Chinese system; the disadvantages of learning English in the Chinese system; the

advantages of learning English in the English system; the disadvantages of learning English in the English system.

3.1 Advantages of learning English in the Chinese system

As Chinese students who were learning English as a second language, some of the students thought it was much easier for them to learn a foreign language with the help of their native language. Especially for learners in the lower level, the explanations and analysis in Chinese would help them understand the problems more efficiently:

I prefer learning English in China because I can talk with my teachers freely and ask for their help with my weak points. But, it is hard for me to do the same thing to the teachers in the training courses in the UK because my English is not good enough to explain my problems to the teachers.

Some of interviewees felt the Chinese teachers' teaching was easier to be accepted by Chinese students because all the Chinese teachers had their own experiences of learning English as a second language. So the Chinese teachers should be very clear about the problems which most of Chinese students would meet in their learning. Moreover, the teachers who were teaching English training courses in China had quite lot experiences of teaching Chinese students. They knew Chinese students' learning style and the situations students were facing in learning a second language. Thus, the teachers could combine their own experiences of English learning and teaching together to provide the effective teaching for the students:

The teachers were professional and good experienced. They knew the problems we would meet when we between English and Chinese. They often focused on explaining the hard points and common mistakes to us when they were teaching. They always reminded us about tense, articles and plural forms, which our Chinese students often felt confused when we made a sentence. When I paid more attention on these points, I made less and less mistakes.

The interviewees had different ideas about the teaching style which only focuses on examination skills in English training courses in China. Some of the students thought this kind of practice only brought students too much pressure by training students doing a plenty of exercises with exam skills, which were useless for students to improve their English abilities. However, some of the students gave high marks to the training courses because they thought such a practice method was good for them to improve their IELTS scores in a very short time. Since the interviewees attended the English training courses for meeting the entry requirement of English universities, they preferred the training courses which could help them with their aim of improving IELTS scores:

After I took the English training course which focused on IELTS test in China, I had known much about IELTS. My speed of answering IELTS paper had improved so much. Although the training course improved my exam skills more than my English ability, it was really helpful for me because I had to meet the entry requirement of English universities within several months. With the exam skills I had got in training course, my IELTS score improved about 1.5 point in three months.

3.2 Disadvantages of learning English in the Chinese system

Jenkins (2002) has argued that English is spoken in every part of the world, both among speakers within a particular country who share a first language, and across speakers from different countries. So native speaker accents are not necessarily the most intelligible or appropriate accents when a non-native speaker is communicating with another non-native speaker. However, as I know, the goal of pronunciation teaching has been to enable students to acquire an accent that is as close as possible to that of a native speaker up to now in China. According to the interviews, most interviewees believed that pronunciation was the most facilitative to communication. They were eager to speak like native speakers with traditional accents. So, when they met teachers who had pronunciation problems in English training courses which were hard to avoid in China, they would not be satisfied with the courses and felt disappointed to the courses in China:

Of course it was a problem. One of my English teachers' pronunciations was not good which influenced me more or less though I only attended her courses for two months. It is hard for me to communicate with native speakers if I have pronunciation problems. We would not understand each other. Language is a tool for us to communicate with others. If I can't do it, so what do I learn English for?

Most of interviewees presented that, in China, the students could only be given the speech dominated education by a teacher-centred, book-centred, grammar-translation method and an emphasis on rote memory. They all agreed with the point that such a teaching style in English training courses was outdated and boring:

Now, when I have experienced various flexible teaching styles, I think the teaching style in the training course in China is too behind the time.

They only emphasized on the rote memory of grammar and vocabulary which were so boring and useless I thought. What I could do was only reading and writing even if I had done all the things teachers asked me to do. I hoped I could talk with native speakers, but my listening and speaking were so poor.

Some of interviewees thought the teaching method of focusing on exam skills in English training courses were good for them to improve the IELTS scores in very short time. On the other hand, some of interviewees believed those students were only trained to answer various questions on exam papers with exam techniques. Students learned to analyze the question makers' thoughts instead of improve their English abilities. These students argued about the meaning of such kind of method in English training courses in China:

I don't want to spend so much money and time to do such a meaningless thing. If I attended an English training course, I should have only one aim which was to improve my English... Even if I could get higher mark in IELTS test which brought me an offer of an English university, I have no ability to finish my academic course when I study there. If I can't meet the entry requirement of English universities, the only thing I should do is to improve my English ability instead of the ability of guessing answers.

3.3 Advantages of learning English in the UK system

15 of 18 interviewees thought they had learned much more culture things than language when they studied in the English training courses in the UK which could not be gained in the training courses in China. Especially, the students thought they got ideas about teaching and learning styles in the UK training courses that could help them with their academic courses in the universities.

In the English training courses in China, the teacher's role was basically that of instructor and knowledge transmitter. In this case teachers pay more attention to generality of students and the student individuality cannot be considered very sufficiently.

Different with China, the English training courses in the UK used Student-centred approaches. The interviewees pointed out that, in this system, teachers provided more flexible teaching methods to reach every student in a group and paid more attention to the individuality of students. The students often were encouraged to participate in the learning process through small-group discussions, seminars, student-centred team projects, and student/faculty researches when they were taking the training courses:

I think the course was very good because it got me ready for my academic courses in the university... When I just came here (the UK), I suffered the totally strange class, different teaching and learning styles. After the three months training in the English training course in the UK, I was used to such kinds of teaching and learning styles, such as group discussions and team works in the classes. And I think these teaching methods made the classes more effective and interesting... This English training course prepared me well to my study afterwards.

Besides the various teaching methods mentioned above, the small sized classes and seats in circles gave Chinese students a deep impression when they attended the English training courses in the UK:

Sitting in circles is great. It is easier for me to concentrate in the classes. Every student has equal chances of learning... In the small sized classes, teachers pay more attention on each student. I can draw the teachers' attentions and get help in the classes easily.

9 of the interviewees mentioned they felt easy to communicate with the teachers in the English training courses in the UK because these teachers were very kind and more like friends to them. Much freedom and less pressure made the students enjoy the courses very much:

Nice teachers here I think. They are more like friends. We can chat with them freely. They are different with the teachers in China whom are so serious and strict to us students. I feel relax when I am taking a class.

Zhou Jie (1999) suggests that oral English learning is mainly a matter of practice but not a matter of teaching. This is to say, the use of language is more important than knowing about the usage of language. All the interviewees agreed that the English training centers in the UK had an obviously advantage of providing a perfect English environment for the English learners to use the language. When a student attended an English training course in the UK, he/she lived in an English world, in which he/she had plenty of chances to practice his/her English speaking and listening:

My listening and speaking of English had improved rapidly since I had taken the English training course in the UK. In the class, the English was the only language could be used to talk with teachers. After the class, I still had to speak English with some of my classmates, housemates and workmates. At first, it was hard for me to open my month to speak English. I felt frustrated most of the time. By and by, I found it became easier and easier for me.

In the UK, English is all around. When you watch TV, listen to the radio, even listen to the others' chatting on the bus, you practice your English listening.

3.4 Disadvantages of learning English in the UK system

17 of the 18 interviewees were identical in the views that the English teachers in the UK did not know Chinese students' learning style and could not help them exactly with their weak points of learning, though they had perfect pronunciation and English proficiency. Zhou Jie (1999) presents that, undoubtedly, a good English teacher should be a good English

speaker. Many native English speakers have proven to be successful teachers in the English training classes in China. However, this does not necessarily mean a good English speaker is a good English teacher. A qualified and sympathetic teacher must have a full understanding of his/her students' needs and interests as well. If a teacher doesn't know his/her teaching subjects (students) well, he/she is sure not to succeed in English classes. Most of the interviewees were acutely aware of their barriers in learning English in the UK were the differences of teaching and learning styles between the UK and China:

I am a girl who has been educated in the traditional Chinese system for about twenty years. It was hard for me to cope with the teaching and learning styles in the UK. During my English training course, I felt the class had no system and the content of the class were so disordered. I could learn nothing from the course and I could not get help from the teachers though I talked with them for several times. They were very nice teachers, they were kind and patient, but they didn't get my point exactly.

The teachers in the training course had no idea about what I wanted. They had no experience of learning English as a second language and they didn't know what the problems we were facing in English learning, so they didn't know how to help us.

Snell (1999) points out that, in China, most students are taught to listen and not to question a teacher in class, and Chinese students have little experience in in-class interaction with the teacher, such as questioning or commenting or giving feedback. So, when an English teacher in the UK deals with some passive Chinese students in the class, they will find a problem: the students are unresponsive and avoid interaction with the teacher.

6 interviewees mentioned that the English teachers in the UK were not satisfied with the performances of Chinese students in the class because Chinese students didn't show their interests and attention by asking and answering questions. On the other hand, the Chinese students were unhappy with such comments:

I am usually taught to be quiet and respectfully listen to the teacher and not to question the teacher in China. I am just not well prepared for such kind of interaction which is expected by the teachers here (the UK). I know it is hard for the teachers to deal with such a passive student as well. But I hope they can understand I am trying my best.

4. Conclusion

This research has been conducted to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of the English training system both in the UK and China in order to help the educators in this area to improve the effective teaching of the English training course. Although the research is small scale and the findings are therefore limited, nevertheless it offers some insight which is useful for the educators who want to improve the English training course in both of countries. Bassey (1995) has discussed the concept of fuzzy generalization in which the findings from studies such as this cannot be widely generalised, but from which it will be possible to make some suppositions. These could be tested through further research and therefore this research may be seen as hypothesis generating rather than conclusive.

According to the results of the research, the students preferred the teachers in the UK who talked with students just like friends. An equal and friendly communication in the class can make the students feel less pressure and enjoy the learning. In addition, with both their own experiences of learning English as a second language, Chinese English teachers are familiar with the Chinese students' learning habits and the problems they meet when they are between two languages. In this case, Chinese English teachers can focus the lesson on emphasizing these problems and help the students with the weak points they are facing in their English learning.

In the research, some of the students feel bored about the speech dominated education by teacher-centered, book-centered and grammar-centered. So using the student-centred teaching methods, such as group discussion, team project and group seminars and so on, to make the lessons more flexible and enjoyable is essential. Based on the culture and concepts of education in China, encouraging the students to make more interactions in the class is more important. As the first step, teachers would begin with encouraging the students to answer the questions voluntarily in the class.

Some of the students complained that the teachers in China focused on grammar and vocabulary too much and paid less attention on listening and speaking practice. As China is a non-English-speaking country, the students who are learning English in China have no good environment and many chances to practice their English listening and speaking now and then. Teachers would suggest the students to practice listening by listening to the English broadcast and watching English movies and TV programmes, and speaking by making conversation with other English learners or native speakers.

As for the grammar and vocabulary, both of them are very important in English learning. The focus on these items is necessary. Teachers just need to teach them with more effective practice methods. Although the grammar-centred method is out of favour, students accustomed to this method may still derive benefit from it. For example, Chinese students generally show great interest in language structures and linguistic details when they are learning a language. "We would like to know what happens, because if we understand the system, we can use English more effectively"

(Harvey 1985). Therefore, in teaching English to Chinese students, appropriate grammar analysis is essential, especially for beginners. However, instead of teaching grammar traditionally and drilling grammar patterns, relating the teaching of grammar and pattern drills to meaning and use should be a better way.

At last, sitting in circles is a very good method to draw the students' concentration in the class, but it is more workable in small sized classes. In China, although some English training schools have made the class size smaller, in most of the English training centers, especially the very popular ones, the big class is still the norm. It is hard for a teacher to control the number of the students. Anyway, as a teacher, one would try the best to pay more attention to every student and help them as much as they could.

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