

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This section will discuss certain theories, studies and materials which are relevant to this present study under two subheadings: (1) theoretical background; (2) review of related literature.

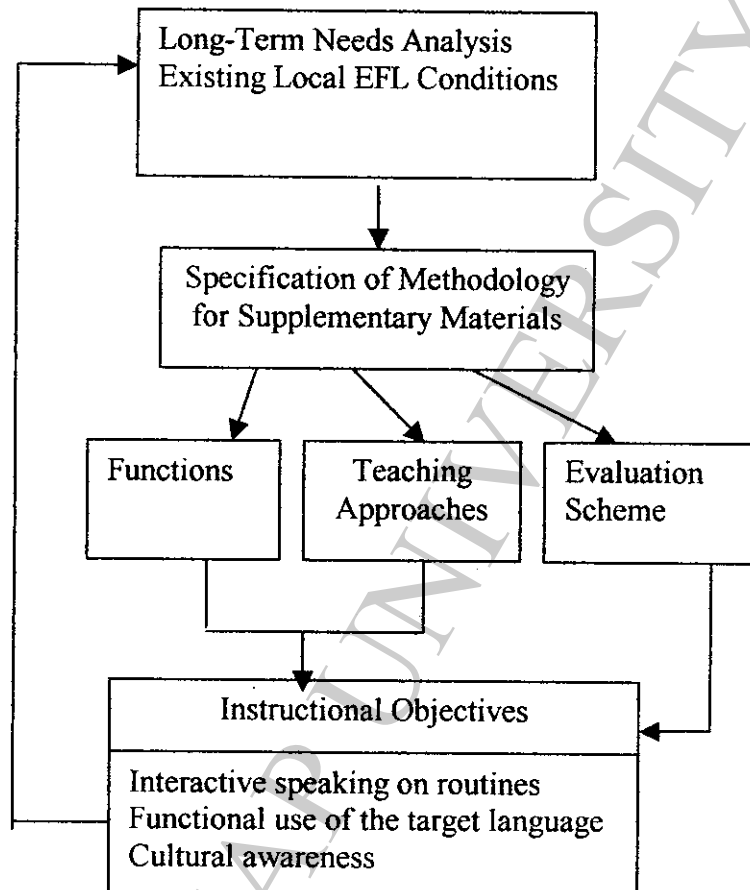
2.1 Theoretical Background

This proposed supplementary speaking syllabus/material has been conceptualized on some significant language learning theories and principles: Meaningful Learning Theory under the domain of Cognitive Principles, Language-Culture Connection Theory under the domain of Humanistic Affective Theories and Functional Approach. In these theories, learners' needs, interests and preferences and the use of the target language in real-life communication and cultural contexts were the focus (see figure 1, p. 11).

Figure 1 shows that the students' long-term needs and the local English learning and teaching conditions (e.g. English speaking opportunities, time allotment of English classes and the size of a class at Guizhou University of Technology, etc.) help determine the functions and teaching approaches of the supplementary material. The interplay of the functions and teaching approaches contributes to the proposed

instructional objectives of the supplementary material. In turn, the instructional objectives provide direction towards fulfilling the learners' long-term needs. Finally, the evaluation scheme recommended will check whether the proposed objectives have been achieved.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of this Study



2.2 Review of Related Literature

This section will discuss certain related studies and materials relevant to the present study.

2.2.1 Role of English in Chinese Education

In the late 1970s, China started to reach out to the world through frequent cultural, social, economic and political exchanges with foreign countries. For example, between 1978 and 1984, over 12,000 government sponsored students were sent to the United States of America (Upton, 1987).

Although English is neither the national language, nor the official language (Mandarin is the only official language in China), it is given a special status because of socio-economic reasons. English is viewed as an access to modern scientific and technological advances, and as a vehicle in promoting commerce and understanding between China and the rest of the world. And perhaps, an even more important reason is that English plays a crucial role in the process of modernization. For the majority of learners in China, English provides an access to academic or professional advancement.

The indisputable importance of English in China can be exemplified by at least two events. One, is that even during the chaotic Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), English was taught in schools. The other, is the pride that the whole nation took in when they watched their President Jiang Ze Min speaking English fluently to his American counterpart, President Bill Clinton, during his state visit to China in

1998. China's political, economic and social needs have brought forth an enthusiasm for learning English among Chinese people.

As a result, English is seen as an essential tool in changing and developing the core of China's economic system. The teaching of English is shaped by these perceptions, which means that much emphasis is placed on a rapidly growing need to train technological specialists to read foreign texts and documents (Ran 1998). In the words of Booz: "Learning English is seen as the touchstone for getting ahead. It presents modernization" (1981, 812).

The Ministry of Education stipulates English as a compulsory course from junior high school and continues throughout senior high school and the tertiary level, and as one of the required subjects on national college and graduate school entrance examinations. Students who enter the tertiary level are supposed to have the command of the basic structure, tenses and pronunciation, to have a vocabulary of 1,500 words, and be able to read simplified materials and to talk about daily life. As for speaking skills, students are expected to "conduct conversations on daily and political life, expressing ideas appropriately" (Cowan, et al. 1979, 467). On the average, Chinese students will have studied English as a core course for six years by the time they enter college or university.

2.2.2 English Teaching Materials for Chinese High School Students

In order to provide a better background information on the needs of the respondents of this research, a description of the content of the English learning materials for high school students in China is presented below:

The first seven lessons of Volume 1 focus on teaching the English articles while simultaneously introducing the WH question: *What's this?* And the answer: *It's a/an _____* for vocabulary teaching purposes. There are pictures of new lexical items taught in this manner. Sound-symbol correspondents are taught through drills. Lesson 8 through 15 is organized around *WH*-and *Yes/No* questions, *There*-insertion and Subject-verb agreement with the verb *be*. Lesson 16 introduces time concepts and Lesson 17 treats the location proposition *beside, in front of, under* and *in* within *there*-insertion sentences. Sentence stress is indicated by underlining, rises and falls in pitch by arrows, which apparently proceeded by the words, e.g.

Comrade Yang is our teacher.

Are those trucks?

The format of Volume 2 is slightly different from all high schools and tertiary level EFL materials compiled by Chinese authors. Each unit begins with a section entitled *Drills*, which consists of two or three dialogues of a question-answer type. A short passage with a heading is then followed by a section entitled *New Words and Expressions*, which provides Chinese glosses and phonemic transcriptions in phonetic brackets and vocabulary items in the previous two sections. A selection of *Everyday Life Expression* or *Classroom Expressions* is then followed by exercises intended to give practice on spelling and/or pronunciation. Next section entitled *Grammar* describes in Chinese the grammatical teaching points for this unit. Finally, a set of *Exercises* practices the grammar taught in this unit and reviews previously presented material... Usually, these exercises are presented as filling in the blanks with prepositions, or adding a given tense morpheme to a set of transformational drills (e.g. changing the sentences into their negative forms, using classifying words in sentences according to their part of speech category with the help of a table.) (Cowan, et al. 1979, 470).

Cowan, et al. gave an instructive and useful evaluation of such a material that could guide this present research: "The lessons in the unified textbooks are organized around restricted grammatical points, the language is strictly controlled with regard to syntax. This results in unnatural and artificial English, and the lack of meaningful communication" (1979, 471).

2.2.3 Influence of Cultural Values on Learning and Teaching

Chinese culture and values are greatly influenced by Confucianism. Flowerdew and Miller (in Jordan 1997, 96) contrasted Confucian values with Western values in terms of learning and teaching in table 1.

Table 1. Contrast of Confucian Values and Western Values

| Confucian | Western |
|---|---|
| Respect for authority of lecturer | Lecturer valued as a guide and facilitator |
| Lecturers should not be questioned | Lecturer is open to challenge |
| Student motivated by family and pressure to excel | Student motivated by desire for individual development |
| Positive value placed on effacement and silence | Positive value placed on self-expression of ideas |
| Emphasis on group orientation to learning | Emphasis on individual development and creativity in learning |

(Adopted from Flowerdew and Miller 1995)

Table 1 above shows the different roles that teachers assume and the different attitudes toward learning and teaching in the Eastern (Confucian) and Western contexts. Those differences manifest themselves in teaching and learning methods, and classroom behavior.

2.2.3.1 Teaching Methods in the China Context

In regards to teaching methods, Grammar Translation is widely used in language teaching and learning; the techniques are repetition, drills, correction and translation (Cowan, et al. 1979; Maley 1986; McKay 1994; Ran 1998). As Maley said: "Even now the most widely accepted view of learning in China is that it is memory-based. The teacher or textbook has the knowledge. In order to acquire it, it is sufficient for the students to commit it to memory"(1986, 104).

For example, the Chinese attitude toward learning has been summarized by Brick, thus:

Learning involves mastering a body of knowledge, a body of knowledge that is presented by a teacher in chunks small enough to be relatively easily digested. Both teachers and learners are concerned with the end product of learning, that is, they expect that the learner will, at an appropriate time, be able to reproduce the knowledge in the same form as it was presented to him by his teacher (1991, 154).

In this light, in China, learning is nothing more than the process of accurate imitation and reproduction of what has been taught.

Meanwhile, Harvey's teaching experience at Tianjin University, one of China's most prestigious comprehensive universities, exemplifies what Brick summarized. Harvey found among his students that:

...there was considerable amount of careful, painstaking translation of text; a great tendency to memorize dialogues, whether this was required or not; a great interest in grammatical analysis... and the prospect of even informal 'tests' threw everyone into a panic (1985, 185).

Ran provided quite a good picture of how English classes were taught in China, thus:

English classes are taught in Chinese, with little active use of English; vocabulary is listed as isolated words; long elaborate explanations of the intricacies of grammar are given; grammar provides the rules for putting words together, and instruction often focus on the linguistic forms; much attention is given to translating disconnected sentences from Chinese into English or the other way around; little or no attention is given to pronunciation (1998, 35).

There is no doubt that Grammar Translation, which is heavily structure-based, does not enhance a student's communicative ability in the target language. The target

language is “remembered with distaste by thousands of school learners, for whom a foreign language meant a tedious experience of memorizing endless lists of unusable grammar rules and vocabulary and attempting to produce perfect translations of stilted or literary prose” (Richards and Rodgers 1986, 4).

2.2.3.2 .Classroom Behaviors in China

As table 1 (see p. 15) shows, in the West, expressing one’s ideas freely in class is encouraged, whereas in China, silence is regarded as a sign of modesty and harmony, and is highly valued. In the end, however, silence, keeps students from speaking or participating in speaking classes. Hui explained:

... China has a Confucian culture, which seeks compromise between people. When it is applied to language learning, it is obvious that students are reluctant to air their views loudly for fear of losing face or offending others... In addition, there are some Chinese sayings, which discourage oral communication in class. The following are some examples: Silence is gold; it is only the noisy bird that is easily shot dead; a real man should be good at thinking, but weak at speaking; don’t speak unless spoken to; keep your mouth shut but your eyes open; keep silent unless you can burst upon the scene like a bombshell (1997, 38).

Since language learning needs oral practice, too much attention on grammatical analysis in learning rather than oral communication, and too much emphasis on silence and the fear of losing face in class will keep students from communicating in the target language. It is not surprising that Chinese students who have studied English for at least six years cannot communicate well.

After discussing teaching methods and the cultural influences in China’s EFL classrooms, a survey of the existing EFL materials and a needs analysis will be discussed in the subsequent section.

2.2.4 Guidelines for Analyzing EFL Materials

For analyzing EFL materials, Dubin and Olstain proposed the following six guidelines (1990). The first guideline concerns the expertise of the material writers or developers. As Dubin and Olstain asked: “By whom and where were the materials developed: [Were they done] by a team of material developers who are familiar with this particular educational system and student population” (p. 29)?

The second guideline is about compatibility of the materials with the syllabus. “Compatibility should be evidenced for all the points specified within the syllabus. Similarly, the procedures, techniques, and presentation of items must be in harmony with the specifications given in the syllabus” (p. 29).

The third guideline is with respect to alternatives, which involves examining “learner-tasks, learning styles, presentation techniques, expected outcomes, etc” (p. 26). Furthermore, Dubin and Olstain believe:

Ideal materials should present teachers and learners with a jumping-off place, a stimulus for the learning process at each point. Effective materials should enable experienced teachers and autonomous learners to develop their own alternatives, according to their needs and personal preferences (p. 30).

The fourth guideline deals with the integration of the four skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing): “Which language skills do the materials cover? Are they presented separately or are they well integrated” (p. 30)?

The fifth guideline is regarding the authenticity of texts. Dubin and Olstain explained:

If a textbook contains only re-written, watered-down stories that were adapted for the particular text, students using that material may never

have the opportunity of encountering authentic text. Furthermore, variety of text types might be very significant in exposing students to the types of texts they will most probably encounter beyond and outside the course (p. 30).

The last guideline surveys the attitudes that teachers and learners have towards the materials because “it is necessary to gather subjective information in order to gain additional insights into how teachable or learnable the materials really are” (p. 30).

2.2.5 Needs Analysis

The unified text and the method, which stresses memorization and translation, are devoid of practical opportunities for facilitating the development of students’ communicative competence (Cowan, et al. 1979). Meanwhile, Ellis commented that controlled practice “... appears to have little long-term effect on the accuracy with which new structures are performed and has little effect on fluency” (1990, 192).

In China’s case, not only the teaching method, but also materials should be designed to engage Chinese EFL learners in meaningful communication. A needs analysis “should be the starting point for devising syllabuses, courses, materials and the kind of teaching and learning that takes place. This has been recognized for some time” (Jordan 1997, 22).

2.2.5.1 Some Definitions of Needs Analysis

As to when learners should be encouraged to participate in oral communication, Brown and Yule suggest:

... students be encouraged to talk from a very early stage since, from a linguistic point of view, the level demanded of them is much less stringent than that of written language. The problems in the spoken language are going to be much more concerned with on-line production, and with the question of how to find meaningful opportunities for individual students to practice using a rather minimal knowledge of the foreign language in a flexible and inventive manner, than with linguistic complexity (1984, 9).

A needs analysis provides a solution to the problems concerning production and opportunities for meaningful production in the spoken language. Richards et al (in Jordan 1997, 20) defined it as “the process of determining the needs for which a learner or group of learners requires a language and arranging the needs according to priorities...[it] makes use of both subjective and objective information.”

Objective information about learners or “necessities” of learners called by Hutchinson and Waters means “what the learners want to know in order to function effectively in the target situation” (in Jordan 1997, 25), while subjective information equates with “the specification of methodology” (Nunan 1988, 44). In other words, “the specification of methodology” means how learners want to learn the target language and it is also concerned with learning preferences, teaching methods, time duration and other related information.

2.2.6 Conceptual Considerations of Material Design

Learners may need a basic knowledge of the lexical and grammatical forms of the language in order to communicate (Brown 1994). However, the acquisition of vocabulary, grammar rules, discourse rules and other linguistic forms in the target

language can be learnt through adopting the Meaningful Learning Principle, Functional Approach and the Language-Culture Connection Theory.

The Meaningful Learning Principle, involves text-related tasks, integrates function with structure and leads to long-term retention (James 1890; Miller 1956; Anderson and Ausubel 1965; Smith 1975). Classroom implications of the Meaningful Learning Principle, stated by Brown, are to “capitalize on the power of meaningful learning by appealing to students’ interests, academic goals, and career goals. Whenever a new topic or concept is introduced, attempt to anchor it in students’ existing knowledge and background so that it gets associated with something they already know” (1994, 18).

The Functional Approach to language has become popular in developing communicative textbooks and materials in foreign languages since communication “is not merely an event, something that happens; it is functional, purposive, and designed to bring about some effect—some change... on the environment of hearers and speakers” (Brown 1994, 232). The approach affords learners functional and pragmatic communication. A function-based syllabus provides the necessary components of language in terms of learner needs with situations devised to illustrate grammar or linguistic forms (Halliday 1973; Van Ek and Alexander 1975; Wilkins 1976). For example, Van Ek and Alexander (1975) recommended a list of almost 70 functions to be taught in English such as “greeting, parting, inviting, accepting; complimenting, congratulating, flattering, seducing, charming, bragging; interrupting, requesting; evading, lying, shifting blame, changing the subject” (Brown 1994, 234).

Brown adds that a function-based syllabus can give “an organization of language content by functional categories... [and] a means of developing structural categories within a general consideration of the functions of language” (1994, 248).

However, even the functional use of the target language does not happen in a vacuum. It is embedded in the culture; it is part of the package of the target language. Language and culture are intertwined. Learning a language therefore entails learning part of the culture of the target language. The Language-Culture Connection Theory gives implications for classroom teaching by raising the culture awareness of the students through activities or materials on cross-cultural differences and other socio-linguistic aspects of the target language (Brown 1994).

On the whole, the Meaningful Learning Theory, Functional Approach and the Language-Culture Connection Theory serve the goal of real-life communication in the target language and the target culture; furthermore, they appeal to the learners' needs and preferences.