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## **MOBILE TECHNOLOGY AND THE CREATION OF AN ARTIFICIAL ENGLISH-LANGUAGE ENVIRONMENT OUTSIDE THE CHINESE CLASSROOM**

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### **Abstract**

*Despite the growing number of rich people in China and the ever-increasing exposure of the Chinese to the West, especially to English-speaking cultures, English proficiency is still elusive. One of the obvious reasons for this is the lack of a natural environment for speaking the language. In China, the official language is Mandarin with a number of dialects and/or different Chinese languages as first language. This paper proposes an artificial English-language environment wherein students learning English as a Foreign Language or English as a Second Language can enjoy using English to an extent that it actually becomes a fun habit for them to speak it. This is possible with the use of mobile technology, something which the young (and even the not-so-young) cannot seem to live without. In any given university classroom, 100% of the students use smartphones with an active internet connection. The English teacher can maximize the functionality of this device in creating an artificial English-language environment for the students, not only inside but outside the classroom as well.*

## **Keywords**

Artificial English-Language Environment, Blog, China, Mobile Technology, Speaking Homework

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## **1. Introduction**

The Chinese economy may be slowing down, but as recent as February 2016, it is reported that China now has the largest population of billionaires (Frank, 2016), and has a growing number of middle class families being able to send their children abroad. In 2014, 459, 800 Chinese students left the country to study abroad (Project Atlas), and of the top 10 popular destinations, four are English-speaking countries: the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada, respectively (Chen, 2011). For the young Chinese, Western culture – particularly American culture – is “cool” and being able to speak good English is an indicator of being so. Yet despite the case, English proficiency is still elusive even in Chinese universities.

This paper looks into one of the major factors for the lack of English proficiency among Chinese students, despite the fact that both the government and parents themselves invest millions, if not billions of yuan, to get students to improve their level of English. That major factor is the lack of a natural English-language environment for the students. Hence, this paper proposes an alternative for the current situation in the form of an artificial English-language environment with the aid of the most popular gadget among the young Chinese – the smartphone.

## **2. The Lack of English-Language Environment in China**

Chinese students, in general, from years of studying for the College Entrance Examination are quite diligent in learning just about everything, including English grammar. They do quite well in identifying errors in grammar, but always make the same mistakes in writing or speaking. They may be very good students in the classroom, but they may not be able to communicate fluently or even just satisfactorily with their foreign teacher, for example. Chamot (1987) suggests that there is a significant difference between language that is used outside the classroom from the one used inside the classroom. Hence a sociable student who may be quite comfortable speaking English with a foreigner outside the



classroom on topics that both of them can relate to, may not find it as easy speaking English inside the classroom about topics she is not interested in or has little knowledge about.

### **2.1 Classroom Situation**

In reality, Chinese students have very little opportunity to use English in their daily life. In an English class, they may have a chance to do so but even that is not 100% guaranteed. Perhaps in a 90-minute class, a student would have a chance to speak for less than a minute. As soon as students leave the classroom, they speak Mandarin with their friends, Chinese teachers, roommates and perhaps even with foreign teachers who speak Mandarin. There is simply not enough room or time for speaking, i.e. improving, their level of English once they leave the classroom.

If an English class is taught by a Chinese teacher, most Chinese teachers would switch from English to Chinese or vice-versa or even teach the class solely in Chinese.

### **2.2 Mass Media and Social Media Platforms**

Though American movies and TV programs are quite popular among the young Chinese and are actually quite useful in learning a more natural- and not textbook-sounding English, these films and TV programs almost always have Chinese subtitles that are sometimes ridden with translation mistakes. Instead of watching and listening, and hopefully getting used to the sound and picking up or “acquiring” new expressions or vocabulary, students read subtitles and simply use mass media for entertainment.

The majority of mass media in China are still in Mandarin – radio, TV, film – even magazines and newspapers.

The same is true for social media platforms. Because Facebook and Twitter are blocked in China, students use the Chinese-based Weibo and We chat, which are not as popular in English-speaking countries and therefore limit their interactions with people only to those who can read Chinese and further making the posting of English texts not only unnecessary but also seemingly pretentious .

### **2.3 Learning Mandarin and English at the Same Time**

Although Mandarin is the official language and is spoken all over China, it is not usually the first language of those who were born outside of Beijing. Even Beijing locals may speak Beijing dialect, not Mandarin.



There are reportedly over 400 varieties of the Chinese language which is not surprising given the vastness of the country. This means then that students whose first language is not Mandarin, are learning or trying to learn two second languages at the same time – Mandarin and English. Indeed, from primary school through university, they have to pass Chinese language exams. The difference in their learning of the two languages lies in their purpose for learning the language. In learning Mandarin, the students are “naturalistic” learners, defined as “someone who learns the language at the same time as learning to communicate in it” (Ellis, 2007). In learning English, however, the students are merely “English as a Foreign Language” (EFL) learners. The irony here, then, is though English has a limited communicative use among Chinese students, including English majors, and does not serve any purpose for them outside the classroom, the general aim of Chinese English majors is native-like fluency. (This is a difficult undertaking given the current situation in the country, but it would be an interesting subject to pursue.)

#### **2.4 The Role of the EFL Teacher**

Although English learning in China falls under the EFL category, teachers cannot simply ignore students’ personal goals. One can argue that the teacher can guide students in realizing that for as long as they stay in China, they do not need to have a very high English proficiency. However, that is quite different from students’ perceived reality which is: It is a very competitive world outside the university, and they need to have an advantage over those with a different major but may know a little English. Their goal is to attain an English proficiency that is comparatively higher than those who are non-English majors.

Elliot L. Judd (1984) in his article, “Language Policy, Curriculum Development, and TESOL Instruction: A Search for Compatibility” suggests that in an EFL setting, “Whatever teaching method is employed and whatever manner is used to organize materials, topics should be chosen for immediate student interest without the need to focus on long-range, long-term goals.”

Perhaps it is possible to choose a topic and a method that is of interest to the students and with a long-range, long term goal in mind. The question is how to make it interesting to the students. The answer lies in the one thing that every Chinese millennial university student cannot do without: the smartphone.



### **3. The Prevalence of Mobile Technology in China**

As of 2014, there were supposedly around 500 million smartphone users in China, and that number is expected to grow to over 700 million in 2018 (Curtis, 2014). One can safely guess that a big number of these users are university students since most of them live away from home and, therefore, need to stay in contact with their parents. Furthermore, most communication with professors and administrators are done through a social media platform which they can easily access on their phones.

In this author's five classes with an average of 30 students per class, every student had a smartphone. These students profess they cannot spend a day without using their phones: they play games on their phones; they shop on their phones; they chat (voice or video) with their parents on their phones; they keep their notes on their phones (hardly anybody writes down notes); they study materials downloaded on their phones. The list seems endless.

#### **3.1 Smartphones for Shopping**

Even though malls still make huge profits in the country, online shops are growing more competitive year after year. Everyday hundreds of thousands of packages are delivered to the campus. Students buy products from the most basic, like toothbrush, to high-tech products, like laptops, online. Because they can only stay in their dorms at certain hours during the day, they cannot use their desktops or laptops to shop when they are actually free. Or even when they are in their dorms, they would rather stay in bed and shop rather than sit in front of the computer and shop. Smartphones are the preferred tool for shopping, not only because they can do it practically anywhere, but also because most items are cheaper if bought through a smartphone app.

#### **3.2 Smartphones for Keeping in Touch**

We chat is perhaps the most popular messaging app in China. It allows the user not only to make voice or video calls, but also to send text and voice messages, videos and photos, even money. One reason for its popularity is the user does not pay for sending messages or making calls for as long as the device is connected to the internet. With We chat, users can also upload texts, videos or audio files to their Moments (similar to Facebook's Timeline) and have their friends "like" them or leave comments.



Another popular social media platform, Weibo (Tencent or Sina), which is similar to Twitter, allows users to share photos, videos and text with a 140-character limit. Other users can re-post (re-tweet) the post and type their 140-character text.

### **3.3 Smartphones for Studying**

The idea of allowing students to use their smartphones in class has been a subject for debate for a few years now. One side may say smartphones distract students from classroom instruction; however, the other side can argue that smartphones actually assist students in classroom instruction as they can surf the internet for information that may help them understand the lesson; they can check their dictionaries for definitions and pronunciation. Students even take pictures of what is presented to them on PowerPoint instead of taking down notes. Again, this can be seen as discouraging students from learning how to take notes, but can also be seen as time-saving technique as it allows the students to listen or interact with the teacher more, rather than taking notes.

Outside the classroom, students take advantage of English-learning apps that help them with pronunciation, grammar correction, listening, and reading skills. However, when this author asked her students of 30 students if they ever used their phones to watch or listen to themselves speak English, everyone replied in the negative.

They have not as yet realized the potential of their smartphones as their partner in improving their English-speaking abilities.

## **4. The Speaking Homework: Creating an Artificial English-Language Environment with the Aid of Smartphones**

Barry Taylor, in his article “Teaching ESL: Incorporating a Communicative, Student-Centered Component,” maintains that “second language acquisition depends upon the extent to which learners are exposed to and involved in genuine communication in the target language” (p. 47). Exposure to and involvement in genuine English-language communication can be accomplished quite easily inside the classroom, albeit at a very limited time especially with 30-35 students per class. In China, however, this is an almost impossible task to accomplish outside the classroom.

Inside the classroom students can have authentic communication with their English teachers when the latter gives them information, and they (the students) react or ask



questions regarding the information. Outside the classroom, however, there is hardly any opportunity for students to engage in a real English-language communication because it is not the first language or even just an official language of the country. Hence, the need for an artificial English-language environment.

In a study conducted by Zhou and Zhang (2013), Chinese students rank “playing games” as the most preferable teaching/learning method. The earnest language teacher may or may not consider “playing games” as the most preferable teaching method, but one can always find a way to make work seem like play, especially if it involves the students’ favorite toy: the smartphone.

The teacher can assign a speaking homework that will require students to use their smartphone camera to take a video of themselves communicating in English regarding any topic they choose, under the condition that it is not a scripted conversation, and then uploading the video to the class blog and inviting people to comment or “like” their videos.

#### **4.1 Creating a Class Blog**

The teacher can create a blog account on Sina or Tencent. Both sites are only in Chinese, but the teacher can have a student assist him/her in opening an account and make the necessary adjustments in the setting as to make himself/herself the moderator of the class blog.

Students should have limited access to the blog: only to upload their videos and give feedback on their classmates’ videos. They should not be able to make any modifications in the blog itself. They should also be discouraged from reacting or replying to any feedback given on their own videos. All feedback should be in English.

#### **4.2 Brainstorming for Topics to Discuss**

In class the teacher can facilitate brainstorming for topics that students would like to discuss with their classmates/friends. It would be helpful to come up with a list that the students can choose from. Here, the teacher has to guide the students in narrowing the topic such that it can be discussed in under 15 minutes. Furthermore, the teacher should be clear as to what topics are off-limits. From this author’s experience of giving the students a free hand in choosing a topic, the students seemed to think they had to discuss a serious, intellectual topic so that in the end, they did not seem to enjoy what they were doing. It was very much like work to them. The teacher can, then, make it clear to the students that they can choose a

topic that they either feel strongly about, or they truly enjoy talking about. This may be as boring (to the teacher, anyway) as the students' favorite South Korean soap opera, or as challenging as the latest news.

### **4.3 Assigning Groups**

The class can be assigned into small groups. As almost all of the students in one class live in the same building, with either 4 or 6 students being roommates, this makes it easier for the teacher to assign them into groups. Working with roommates allows the students to feel more comfortable in communicating, especially as they usually know more about each other than they do their other classmates. Scheduling is also easier with roommates.

### **4.4 Group Discussion outside the Classroom**

The group can then decide on a time and place to hold the discussion. They can do it in their dorm room, in the classroom, in a coffee shop or at the park – practically anywhere where video and audio can be both clear.

Again, the teacher has to emphasize that this is not going to be a scripted conversation. The students can prepare by reading about the topic, but they should not be reciting anything but rather expressing their thoughts and reacting to what is being said by the other members of the group. Spontaneity is key.

The teacher has to stress that points can be deducted for any sign of memorized lines.

The group can choose a discussion leader to guide the flow of the discussion.

#### **4.4.1 Inviting a Foreigner to Join in the Conversation**

Students can make this activity more challenging by inviting a foreigner or foreigners to participate in the discussion. They have to inform the guest(s) that it is going to be recorded activity.

#### **4.4.2 Inviting a Chinese Person/s to Join in the Conversation and Translating the Conversation**

An even more challenging method is inviting a Chinese person who does not speak English, participate in the discussion and the members can take turns translating and also reacting to what is being said in English.

#### **4.4.3 Using a Smartphone Camera to Record Authentic English-language Communication**

This activity can be easily video-recorded using a smartphone camera. Students can use a selfie-stick or ask a non-member to take a video for them.

One can say that for this activity, a video camera or an ordinary digital camera can work just as well. However, among university students, these two gadgets are merely expensive and inconvenient tools. After taking a video with these tools, one has to connect either to a computer and then upload the file. But with a smartphone camera, one can take a video and with a few clicks, one can upload it to one's blog.

#### **4.4.4 Uploading the Video to the Class Blog**

Once finished, the video can then be uploaded to the class blog. The teacher should set a deadline for this video to be uploaded. The teacher should not allow late uploads as they may not prove fair to students who upload their videos earlier than the others and have their method or ideas replicated by other groups. In fact, the teacher should give incentive for originality and creativity.

#### **4.4.5 Getting Feedback Online**

Getting feedback online from random users can be rewarding or unnerving. The teacher should get a consensus on whether to make the blog public or limit the viewers to students' friends. The teacher can act as the moderator and prohibit feedback that may not be appropriate from being viewed. The students should not be allowed to reply to feedback online as this can lead to a unnecessarily protracted bickering if the feedback is not as positive as they may have hoped.

#### **4.4.6 Getting Feedback in the Classroom**

In the classroom, however, students can answer to feedback they get online. The teacher can also give his/her own feedback in class, and here again, is an opportunity for a genuine English-language communication.

### **5. Conclusion**

For second language acquisition to be successful, a learner has to be exposed to and involved in genuine English-language communication. English learners in China, especially

English majors, do not have a natural English-language environment that will allow them frequent use of the language in an authentic English communication situation. The language teacher can assist the students in creating an artificial English-language environment by giving them homework that allows them not only to use the language in a natural communication situation, but also to enjoy doing so. As majority of Chinese university students, like most young people in the rest of the world, cannot part with their smartphones even for a day, the teacher can use this tool to make learning seem like “playing games,” something that they rank as the most preferable method for learning.

Hopefully with this enjoyment will come the habit of speaking English with first, their roommates, then their classmates and teachers and, then English-speaking strangers or future employers or employees?

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