English for international trade: China enters the WTO

JIXIAN PANG*, XING ZHOU** and ZHENG FU***

ABSTRACT: After 15 years’ negotiation, China officially became a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) on November 10, 2001 in Doha, Qatar, at the fourth ministerial meeting of the WTO. China’s accession to the WTO will inevitably influence every sphere of society, especially in such sectors as international trade and education. This paper reports on a survey into the impact of China’s entry into the WTO on business professionals and college English instruction. In the survey, 400 people in 126 business and trading companies from five cities in Zhejiang province, the People’s Republic of China, were polled on issues related to the learning and teaching of English with reference to China’s entry into the WTO. The results of this survey are discussed with reference to college English instruction and the in-service training of business professionals in export-related fields.

INTRODUCTION

On November 10, 2001, after 15 years of effort, China finally succeeded in gaining entry to the World Trade Organization (WTO), becoming one of the 143 members of this international organization. It seems evident that the country’s entry into the WTO will make a tremendous impact on all spheres of society, including such sectors as international trade and education. One reason for this is that the WTO is viewed by many in China not only as an economic organization, but as an organization which signifies openness, competitiveness and innovativeness in the business, legal, and other sectors of the PRC’s developing economy. Apart from the many beneficial and possibly painful effects that entry into the WTO may entail, China’s entry into this international organization brings with it the promise of social and economic progress towards rule-based international standards and integration into the global economy.

In the sections of this paper that follow, we begin by providing a brief description of the general development of business and trade in China in recent years, and the role of English as a foreign language in the country. We then proceed to report on a survey on the perceived impact of China’s accession to the WTO on business professionals and college English instruction in tertiary institutions. This survey investigation was conducted during March 2001 among professionals working in international trading corporations, investment companies, banks and joint ventures in five cities in Zhejiang Province, a coastal province at the forefront of reform and opening to the outside world. The paper also attempts to discuss the implications of WTO entry for changes in the learning and teaching of college English, and the strategies which may be adopted to tackle these incoming changes.

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GENERAL DEVELOPMENT OF BUSINESS AND TRADE IN CHINA
AND THE ROLES OF ENGLISH

There is no denying that the implementation of the country’s Open Door Policy over the past two decades has been accompanied by a prolonged economic boom that has raised the living standards of millions of Chinese people. It has also transformed China into the global economic and trading power it is today.

A few statistics may suffice to indicate the rapid development of the nation’s economy and international trade. China now ranks seventh in the world with regard to total economic quantity, and ninth in volume of foreign trade (Shi, 2000:8). For the past decade, China has been the world’s second largest recipient of foreign direct investment after the United States. Up until September 2001, investors from over 180 countries and regions had set up as many as 380,000 foreign-funded companies, with a contractual value of US$726.1 billion and actual investment of US$380.8 billion (Li, 2001). According to a recent survey of the top 500 foreign-funded businesses between 1999 and 2000 in China (Beijing Review 2001: 28), the total investment of these businesses topped US$67.65 billion, with an average scale of US$135 million. The investment of 141 businesses exceeded US$100 million and that of 313 enterprises surpassed US$30 million. The volume of export proceeds collected by the 500 businesses approached US$25.2 billion, with an average volume of US$50.39 million. This amount accounted for 28.43 percent of total export value of foreign-funded enterprises and 12.93 percent of the national total in China for the period. The first ten of the top 500 foreign-funded businesses in China of that period in terms of sales volume are: (1) Shanghai Volkswagen Automotive Co. Ltd., (2) Motorola (Tianjin) Electronics Ltd., (3) Guangdong Mobile Communications Co. Ltd., (4) FAW-Volkswagen Automotive Co. Ltd., (5) Konka Group Co. Ltd., (6) Beijing Nokia Mobile Communications Co. Ltd., (7) Zhejiang Mobile Communications Co. Ltd., (8) TCL Household Appliances (Huizhou) Co. Ltd., (9) Guangdong Nuclear Power Joint Venture Co. Ltd., and (10) Shanghai Bell Ltd.

In the next decade, it is predicted that the country’s economy will maintain an annual growth rate of 7 percent, and the accumulated value of imported products will exceed US$2.5 trillion (Shi, 2000: 8). The rapid development of international trade will certainly provide ample opportunities for countries in the Asian-Pacific region and the rest of the world to conduct business and trade cooperation with China. Thus, the nation’s accession to the WTO will increase not only China’s prosperity but also its interdependence with the rest of the world.

Within this general context of the country’s increasingly active involvement in the process of economic globalization and international cooperation, it comes as no surprise that English has assumed a position of unprecedented importance in Chinese education.2 When addressing a 1996 conference in Beijing on English instruction in China, Mr. Li Lanqing, Vice Premier of the State Council, asserted that the urgent improvement of English proficiency of Chinese people in general was not merely an educational issue per se but an issue associated with the modernization of the country.5 In colleges and universities in China, English is a compulsory course which all students are required to follow for two years. The national College English Test (CET Band 4 and CET Band 6), which began in 1987 to assess the implementation of the College English Syllabus and to promote English language learning, is one of the most important tests nationwide with candidates now reaching 6 million annually (source: The CET National Committee).4 The certificate of
CET4/6 has attained such a high social value that it is now believed to be a passport to better-paid employment in business trading firms or joint-venture companies in China’s increasingly competitive job market. In fact, English is considered so important that a great majority of universities in the country pursue the policy of ‘no CET4/6 certificate, no graduation diploma’ so as to push their students to improve their English proficiency.

In order to cater to the needs of English for people in society at large, another national English test called the China Public English Test System (PETS) was introduced in 1999. The PETS test is administered by the National Educational Examinations Authority (NEEA) under the Ministry of Education in China. The test, which includes the four skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing and is ‘communicative’ in nature, is gaining popularity with an increasing number of business institutions, banks and other organizations using the PETS certificate as a valid official measure of English proficiency of their employees. A Business English Certificate (BEC) test was also introduced in 1993 by the NEEA in cooperation with the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES) of the UK. In 2000, 30 thousand people sat for the test (NEEA, 2001).

The above description of the status of English in a general sociological perspective may help to provide a glimpse of the importance of English in the nation’s endeavor to participate in the process of economic globalization. We may say that for most Chinese people, English is now learnt not for the prestige of knowing a foreign language or appreciating the cultural heritage of Anglo-American societies, but for patriotic and utilitarian reasons, and for national modernization as well as personal advancement and material gain. Having noted this, we now examine the teaching of ‘Business English’ in Chinese tertiary institutions and beyond, again taking Zhejiang Province as an example.

THE TEACHING OF BUSINESS ENGLISH IN ZHEJIANG PROVINCE

In the field of ‘English for Specific Purposes’ (ESP), it is generally acknowledged that one of the main changes since the late 1980s has been the rapid growth of ‘English for Business Purposes’ (EBP) (Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998: 2). Dudley-Evans and St. John classify EBP into ‘English for General Business Purposes’ (EGBP) and ‘English for Specific Business Purposes’ (ESBP), with the former courses catering for those ‘pre-experience’ learners or those at the very early stages of their career, and the latter courses for ‘job-experienced’ learners (1998: 55–6). This classification will be used for our discussion of the teaching of Business English in Zhejiang Province.

Generally speaking, EBP courses are offered in two sectors: institutions of tertiary education, and business companies. At the level of universities and colleges, EGBP courses are offered to two types of students: those from such specialist departments or schools as economy and international trade, finance, accounting, and international law; and those majoring in traditional English language and literature. Popular courses include General Business English, Business English Correspondence, English for Finance, Legal English. Some readily-available coursebooks are used together with materials selected and compiled by teachers. The following are some of the most common coursebooks used:


Recent years have witnessed some innovations in curriculum design. For example, in the School of Foreign Language Studies, Zhejiang University, one of the most prestigious universities in China and the biggest in the province, a BA program in traditional English Language and Literature has been restructured to include a component of economy and international trade. In Zhejiang University of Technology, a ‘3+2’ program at the undergraduate level is offered. In this program, students study in their own specialist departments like mechanical engineering, chemical engineering, and computer technology for three years, and are then selected to specialize in international trade for the next two years. In the latter two-year component, courses which are ESBP in nature come in together with content-based courses in which English coursebooks in relevant specialist subjects are used. To our knowledge, innovations like this are not uncommon nationwide. Graduates from such programs enjoy a competitive edge in the job market, a point which was frequently mentioned in our group interview with business company managers. For example, one manager from the Zhejiang Orient Holdings Co. Ltd. remarked that ‘graduates from programs like the “3+2” program are popular because they have the required specialist knowledge as well as a good command of English.’

While EGBP and ESBP both apply in universities and colleges, ESBP is understandably dominant at the level of business companies’ in-service training. English departments from various universities are often asked to run short and cost-effective ESBP courses sponsored by international trading firms, joint-venture companies or financial institutions. These courses may be run in-company or off-site on the trainers’ premises. Because of the specificity of major subjects, teachers often feel obliged to carry out a needs analysis of the learners so as to ensure the success of the course. Teachers often have to compile teaching materials themselves because of the specific nature of the course concerned. In summary, it might be said that the teaching of business English is gaining ground in the general field of ELT in China, and has drawn increasing attention from teachers and students, university and company officials. However, as Dudley-Evans and St. John rightly point out, the interdisciplinary nature of EBP is both a stimulating and challenging demand for teachers (1998: 60). It is probably safe to say that the teaching of Business English in China is still at the stage of an intuition- or experience-led academic activity. More research seems
necessary to investigate the nature of business English and the corresponding teaching pedagogy in the Chinese context.

What are the roles of English in the domains of economy and international trade as the professionals in these sectors perceive? What impact will the nation’s accession to the WTO make on college English instruction at the tertiary level? With these questions, we now turn to the next section which focuses on the specifics of a research study attempting to investigate these issues.

SURVEY OF CHINESE BUSINESS PROFESSIONALS ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE NEEDS FOR WTO ENTRY

The study was conducted in March, 2001 among business professionals in the five cities of Hangzhou, Ningbo, Wenzhou, Taizhou and Shaoxing in Zhejiang Province. Zhejiang was chosen because, being a coastal province, it is well developed economically, especially in respect of foreign trade. In 2001, for example, the imports and exports of the province totaled US$328 hundred million, an increase of 17 percent over the same period in 2000, ranking fourth in the whole nation. In foreign investment, the province boasts 114 projects with sole-foreign capital each exceeding US$10 million. Now the province has trading relations with more than 200 countries and regions, including the European Union, the United States, Japan and Hong Kong (source: Department of Economy and International Trade, Zhejiang Provincial Government, 2001). The study was carried out in the sectors of economy and international trade because the departments in these sectors are believed to be among the first to be influenced by the nation’s accession to the WTO.

Aims and procedure

The study aims to answer two broad sets of questions:

1. How is English used in these professionals’ current jobs? Does their command of English meet their job requirements?

2. What is their prediction of changes and needs which may arise with China’s entry into the WTO? What is their perception of implications these changes may entail?

Two similar self-reporting questionnaires were used, one was required to be filled in by the personnel of administrative departments like personnel or human resources offices, the other by business professionals employed in the above-mentioned trading or financial institutions. Four hundred business professionals in 126 organizations were surveyed. In order to ensure the quality and the return rate of the data, the personnel officers in these companies were asked to distribute and collect the questionnaires for the business professionals. Out of 400 professionals 360 responded with a return rate of 90 percent. All 126 questionnaires for the administrative departments were returned. A follow-up group interview was also conducted in which eight executive managers from eight international trading companies in the province were invited to participate.7

The results of the questionnaires were subjected to statistical tests of reliability and significance using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). Below, we discuss the findings of the study in terms of the three main areas of investigation surveyed by the questionnaires, i.e. the use and importance of English, the self-evaluation of English proficiency, and the need for English after China’s accession to the WTO.
The use and importance of English

Two questionnaires administered respectively to the personnel officers and business employees show a similar result in terms of their perception of the use and importance of English and therefore a conflated result is reported. The respondents were asked to evaluate the statements concerning the issues on a four-point scale. (For use of English skills: 1 = no use, 4 = frequent use; for importance of English: 1 = not important, 4 = extremely important.)

Table 1. Use and importance of English (mean)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Translating</th>
<th>Listening and speaking</th>
<th>Reading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>2.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As is shown from Figure 1, reading, and listening and speaking are considered to be the most important skills among the four, the average mean being 3.3 and 3.34 respectively. However, it seems that English is at present still not frequently used in the respondents’ current jobs, and even with the most frequently used skills of reading, and listening and speaking, the average mean is 2.63 and 2.09 respectively. The later group interviews helped to explain this insufficient use of the language. According to the executive managers who attended the interview, a majority of Chinese international trading firms are now mainly engaged in doing import and export business with only two parties involved, their counterparts often being overseas Chinese, so understandably they often use Cantonese or Putonghua (Mandarin) in their oral communication. Although English is used in written communication in which faxes, e-mails, contracts and forms are the major media, work of this kind is often allocated to a few professionals with high English proficiency in the company, and for most business professionals their use of English is mostly limited to
filling in forms with figures or words and phrases. However, many managers in the later interview repeatedly emphasized that with China’s entry into the WTO this situation will have to change. The following statements by two managers were echoed by others present in the interview:

With China’s entry into the WTO, the traditional concept of import and export businesses as we now have with two parties involved will change. We will set up multinational corporations and do international trade in the true sense of the words. Under the circumstances, we have to use English, or to be more exact, international English, more often. (Male manager, aged 38, Zhejiang Machinery and Equipment Import and Export Corporation. Translated verbatim from Chinese.)

With the advent of the Internet and E-commerce, it seems evident that secretarial support will decrease and business professionals will have to compose their own correspondence, for example. Just like driving the car, now the company has a driver to drive the car for us. But in the future I think we’ll have to drive the car for ourselves. And also we’ll have to be able to use English to carry out business negotiations and to attend business meetings. English is now a true international language and to be able to use English effectively is a prerequisite for successful business managers. (Male manager, aged 48, Zhejiang Orient Holdings Co. Ltd. Translated verbatim from Chinese.)

With regard to the areas of the use of English, the results of the two questionnaires recorded in Table 2 and Figure 2 differ considerably in such variables as the reading of specialist literature, communication with foreign counterparts, and personal promotion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Areas of use of English</th>
<th>Personnel officers</th>
<th>Employees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A: Communication with foreign counterparts</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B: Specialist literature reading</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C: Surfing the net</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D: Personal promotion</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E: Others</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Figure 2. Areas of use of English](image)
For employees, specialist literature reading figures prominently with more than 50 percent of them opting for it, which indicates reading remains a very important means of obtaining needed information. For personnel officers, on the other hand, communication with business counterparts, use of the Internet to obtain information and personal promotion are most important. We may conclude from this disparity of opinions that while employees place great emphasis on their own professional development, personnel officers seem to pay more attention to their employees’ job requirements and personal promotion. Presumably, this state of affairs may change with the global intensification of international trade.

*The self-evaluation of English proficiency*

The survey also asked personnel officers and employees to rate their own English proficiency, on a clearly defined four-level scale, from ‘Very good’ to ‘Very poor’. Our study shows that more than 60 percent of the respondents are holders of at least one English proficiency test certificate like CET4/6, PETS, BEC, IELTS, TOEFL. The results of the evaluation of English proficiency by both personnel officers and employees correspond to each other with English at a satisfactory level ranging from 51 percent to 60 percent (see Table 3 and Figure 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very good</th>
<th>Satisfactory</th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>Very poor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personnel officers</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employees</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Figure 3. Self-evaluation of English proficiency](image_url)

In terms of skills most needed for improvement, both personnel officers and employees in general rate the skill of listening and speaking as the weakest, the figures being 69.2 percent and 75.2 percent respectively (see Table 4 and Figure 4), therefore, there is an urgent call for improvement. For some, writing is also a skill needing improvement. From our interview with some respondents, we learned that the expectations of the respondents
concerning the skills for improvement are different: those with relatively high proficiency want to improve their abilities to write and translate, whereas for those with weak language proficiency, the skill of listening and speaking takes a high priority.

Table 4. Skills most needed for improvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Personnel officers</th>
<th>Employees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listening and speaking</td>
<td>69.2%</td>
<td>75.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translation</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4. Skills most needed for improvement

As for the modes of training, we can see from Table 5 that a great majority of respondents opted for studying at home either by taking short courses or by opting for training in their spare time. Interestingly, those with a good command of English wished to

Table 5. Modes of training

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modes of training</th>
<th>Respondents (in percentages)</th>
<th>English proficiency (mean score)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Studying abroad</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
<td>3.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking short courses in colleges and universities at home</td>
<td>34.8%</td>
<td>2.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having private tuition from English speakers</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>3.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training in spare time</td>
<td>41.6%</td>
<td>2.60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
have a more authentic and challenging language environment by choosing study abroad or learning with a native English speaker. In contrast, those with a low proficiency (according to their own self-rating) hoped to improve their English by taking evening classes or correspondence courses in spare time. Our interview with the executive managers revealed that since most international trading companies are understaffed, in-service language training will most likely take the form of short courses at universities and colleges.

Need for English after China’s accession to the WTO

Both Table 6 and Figure 6 summarize the respondents’ views concerning the perceived needs for English after China’s entry into the WTO. There clearly exist some differences in perception between employees and personnel officers. The results are quite similar to those for respondents’ perceptions of the use of English discussed above. Similar explanations could be used to account for the phenomenon. However, in this connection, we might venture to point out that this result seems to support Grin’s view (2001: 65–7) that there is a general lack of awareness, especially among company employees, of the economic value of

Table 6. Perceived needs for English after China’s accession to the WTO

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Personnel officers</th>
<th>Employees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A: Receiving foreign counterparts</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B: Obtaining specialist knowledge</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C: Daily communication</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D: Business communication</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E: E-commerce</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F: Traveling abroad on business</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G: Traveling abroad for pleasure</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6. Needs for English after China’s accession to the WTO
English in doing their business. This underestimation of the value of the language is also reflected in the group interview when one of the managers said:

In a company there ought to be some people who are proficient in English. So we often ask those who are good in English to do the work which needs English. (Male manager, aged 50, Zhejiang Cereals, Oils and Foodstuffs Import and Export Corporation. Translated verbatim from Chinese.)

The current practice of doing business with insufficient use of English may also be responsible for this underestimation.

In the follow-up group interview, company managers also aired their individual views on the issue of English needs after China’s accession to the WTO. These quotes below are typical:

After China enters the WTO, international communication will definitely increase. English is the language of business. We use English to conduct our business with our counterparts from Japan, South Korea, Vietnam and Germany, for example. So it’s really international English not that of native speakers from Britain and the United States. International English to us is really about effective communication for successful business and that’s all. (Male manager, aged 48, Zhejiang Orient Holdings Co. Ltd. Translated verbatim from Chinese.)

If there are any new needs after China’s entry into the WTO, I think the needs are largely job-related. To be a qualified company manager or a successful businessman, English is a necessary tool. With the wide use of portable computers and the Internet, we need to communicate with our counterparts by ourselves but not rely on other people like secretaries. It’s more efficient and economical. Like using a car, we should be able to drive by ourselves but not employ a driver to drive for us. (Male manager, aged 35, Zhejiang Xinye Corporation. Translated verbatim from Chinese.)

The weakness of the present college English instruction, in my opinion, is the graduates’ poor ability to use English to communicate. Even for those who have a high CET or TOEFL score or who are English major students, they are weak in speaking and writing. This is a major failure in college English instruction. (Male manager, aged 45, Zhejiang Native Produce and Animal Byproducts Import and Export Corporation. Translated verbatim from Chinese.)

Some people have already mentioned that we are using international English, that means English is no longer the possession, as it were, of Great Britain or the United States. I think, to be successful in business, proficiency in English language per se is not enough. You know, language is only a carrier. We most need graduates who are not only proficient in English but have a wide store of specialist and cross-cultural knowledge and communication skills. So we like graduates, for example, from economy- or trade-oriented English programs in Zhejiang University, or ‘3 + 2’ programs from Zhejiang University of Technology. (Male manager, aged 48, Zhejiang Orient Holdings Co. Ltd. Translated verbatim from Chinese.)

The most successful business professionals in our domain are those who are young, you know, people in their 20s and early 30s are among the most successful, innovative, hard-working and good at communication. Business is not just business. In order to be successful in business, you have to try to shorten the cultural or emotional distance between seller and buyer. So a knowledge of cross-cultural communication is extremely important. English is very important but it would be better if a graduate is able to speak another foreign language. (Male manager, aged 38, Zhejiang Textiles Import and Export Corporation. Translated verbatim from Chinese.)

As for the new needs, one more need apart from a couple of others people now just mentioned is personal needs. I think. People learn English with the hope that some day they could go traveling
abroad for pleasure. Also they could use English to read news or things which interest them on the net. (Male manager, aged 45, Zhejiang Chemicals Import and Export Corporation. Translated verbatim from Chinese.)

PEDAGOGIC IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The social environment without doubt exerts a huge impact on second language acquisition. Spolsky (1989: 131–3) sees the impact of the social environment from two perspectives. On the one hand, it affects learners’ attitudes towards the language being learned, its speakers and the learning situation that are hypothesized to directly influence their motivation; on the other hand, it determines the social provision of language learning situation and opportunities of various kinds. This impact has already been strongly felt since the implementation of the country’s policy of reform and opening-up. China’s WTO membership will intensify the nation’s involvement in the process of economic globalization and international communication. If the actual need for English in the past for many people, including college students and government officials, was ‘deferred’ or was only of value for passing various tests, then China’s WTO membership will presumably strengthen the social and environmental support by making the need for English more pragmatically and immediately felt.

With the change of the wider sociological environment, we believe that people’s needs for English will also change. This is especially the case with business professionals. While needs in the past were essentially related to English as a school subject or a test for professional promotion, the needs which arise will be more practically use-oriented. These emergent needs as shown in our study may include career needs, cross-cultural and interpersonal communication needs, and personal needs.

Career needs would be the most central needs for business professionals. Economic forces are often singled out as one of the chief reasons explaining the spread of English, and English has become the international language of business. More and more business professionals have to use English to conduct multilateral trade. English is used as a medium for a clearly utilitarian need, i.e. to do market research, to engage in business negotiations, to communicate specialist knowledge to trade partners, to sign contracts, and so on. The Englishes used are truly ‘world Englishes’ in that most English-medium communication in business is between non-native speaker and non-native speaker, not necessarily with native speakers from America, or Canada or Britain.

The rise of cross-cultural and inter-personal communication needs is attributed to the fact that communication in the international context will not be limited to communication at the career level. With the increasing international integration of the production, exchange and consumption of goods and services, for which globalization often stands, and with the wide use of the Internet, people from different countries with diverse cultural backgrounds will conduct business transactions with each other as well as communicate on topics of common concern. In the traditional English for academic purposes, L2 learners have to learn the target language and are also encouraged to adopt the Anglo-American culture. This is clearly not the case in EBP: it would be absurd for a Chinese businessman to adopt a British cultural attitude to do business with his counterpart from Japan or Germany. So a knowledge of cross-cultural communication and an awareness of world Englishes seem to be of great importance. At the level of personal needs, people learn English to satisfy their needs of traveling abroad for pleasure or of learning about foreign
cultures. This has now become a reality for an increasing number of mainland Chinese. All these needs will enhance learners’ motivation and, accordingly, their affective factors in learning English will definitely rise.

In pedagogic terms, we propose the following three directions for improvement and change in college English instruction. Firstly, we think it necessary to increase the content of specialist and cultural elements in English instruction. According to the national College English Syllabus (2000), college students are required to take optional courses after they finish CET4/6. These courses range from various ESP courses like specialist literature readings relevant to students’ areas of specialization, ‘English for Mass Media’, ‘English for Technical Communication’, to English Literature, second foreign languages like German, Japanese, Russian, etc. However, few people would dispute the fact that these post-CET4/6 courses are in most cases still the Cinderella in universities in China. College English Test Band 4/6 have received so much attention that if there is any need of English at all for students, they would point to the need of passing the test in order to graduate or compete for a better job.

It is time for this state of affairs to change! We must seriously consider the fact that English will be or is already taught in some more developed cities from primary schools. Will college English which is general English in nature still be able to sustain or maintain students’ interest and motivation after they have learnt it for some nine years? This issue is beginning to be brought to the fore as some students, upon entering the university, already possess a CET4 certificate.

The questionnaire survey and the follow-up interview reported in this paper also point to the importance of content-based courses. Communication is a two-way process if it is to be successful, and communication in the world of business is not limited to business only, it involves a wide range of knowledge. In an age of global village, we need to learn from others but we also need to make our cultural heritage and traditions known to the outside world. To train our students to become both proficient and culturally literate in the international language of English in a global setting is one important approach for universities to adopt to produce well-rounded educated persons (see Cheng, and Yin and Chen, this issue).

So with this change of affairs in education together with the change of sociological environment and learners’ needs which China’s WTO membership inevitably entails, we advocate that university authorities as well as college English teachers should make an effort to speed the process of enabling the Cinderella of those post-CET4/6 courses to become a princess. We believe that a shift of weight on general English to ESP courses at the tertiary level is an inevitable trend in college English instruction. A change of focus from General English to courses with specialist content will presumably place a new demand on college English teachers who are 40,000-strong nationwide (National College Foreign Language Supervisory Committee, 2001). They should not be overjoyed at a seemingly favorable situation where English teachers at present are still in great demand. Instead they should place more emphasis on their own academic self-renewal in order to adapt themselves to the currents of change in the present Chinese EFL world!

Secondly, the issue of language input and output in our current teaching practice deserves a reconsideration. The role of input is of critical importance in second language acquisition (Krashen, 1982, 1985). Given the status of English as a foreign language in China where students rarely use or encounter English outside educational contexts, it seems extremely necessary to improve the language input in at least two respects. First, try
to create a better language environment. This can be done, for example, by organizing after-class English activities like annual English festivals, English corners, or by establishing self-access language centers. Second, for the coursebook, which is a main source of input in college English, we suggest it be composed of two parts: one part in book form which would be relatively stable, while the other part would be dynamic in that texts could be changed or replaced with texts which are more up-to-date and relevant to students’ interest and the topics in the staple part of the book. This idea is also applicable to input in other language skills. Modern technology can be harnessed to our aid in this area. For example, use of Internet resources and web courses seem to be particularly suited for that purpose. We believe relevance and authenticity will lead to learners’ interest, and interest in turn will result in a strong motivation to learn a foreign language well.

In recent years, the role of output in language acquisition has been rightly recognized. The output hypothesis put forward by Swain (1985: 235) claims that output enhances the comprehension and acquisition of input. It should be noted that although input has received relatively sufficient attention in EFL circles in China, output is neglected to a certain degree. This neglect probably accounts for a general lack of proficiency in learners’ productive skills like speaking and writing. At this juncture, we emphasize accuracy as well as fluency of English. It must be recognized that at the tertiary level, when English has already been learnt for about six to even nine years, we should not be content with developing our students’ skills in short, interactional exchanges. Learners at that level should, instead, be able to extemporize on a given topic to a group of listeners, for example. This ability to give an uninterrupted oral or written presentation needs to be trained and practiced.

Last but not least, it seems of high value to increase interaction between universities and businesses to improve English instruction. In a time of rapid change, the concept and practice of ‘life-long learning’ has attracted an increasing amount of attention among government officials, educators, business professionals, to mention only a few. The need for English in a school domain in a monolingual and monocultural society like China is, to a greater or lesser degree, ‘deferred’ within the educational system. However, this situation changes as soon as learners enter employment. If there is a work-related need, this deferred need in colleges will be transformed into an immediate need. In this respect, universities have an important role to play, as is shown in our study, in joining enterprises and companies in their efforts to train or retrain their employees.

CONCLUSION

The investigation into the impact of China’s accession to the WTO on business professionals and college English reported here provides us with food for both thought and action. In the present world of rapid development, especially with China’s accession to the WTO, changes in the field of EFL are inevitable. Only when we are sensitive to the changes in situation and in learners’ needs can we remain successful in a field like EFL in China where so much time, money and efforts are being invested.

NOTES

1. The study reported here is supported by a research grant from the Zhejiang Province Ninth Five-Year Plan for Philosophy and Social Sciences (NO.M95J07). We would like to acknowledge a particular debt to the Personnel Office, Department of Economy and International Trade of Zhejiang Provincial Government for their generous help in this study. We would also like to express our thanks to Professor Yao Yingmei from the
Institute of Population Studies, Zhejiang University, for her expertise in the statistical analysis of the data in the study. Finally we want to thank the anonymous reviewers and Dr Kingsley Bolton whose comments and suggestions were extremely valuable in improving an earlier draft of this article.

2. The attitudes towards the teaching of English are often closely linked to the political climate within China. After the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949, Russian was the major foreign language taught in schools and universities. Then around the 1960s, the teaching of Russian largely ceased because of the worsening relationship with the former Soviet Union. Thousands of Chinese Russian teachers had to switch to the teaching of English. During the ten-year turmoil of the Cultural Revolution starting from 1966, English teaching was minimal and was virtually limited to learning translated quotations from Mao Zedong in schools. With the ending of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, a new era of modernization and opening to the outside world was ushered in under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, and there has appeared a mania in people from government officials to ordinary workers and students for learning English with the hope of better employment opportunities, personal advancement, job mobility and a better future.

3. Vice Premier Li Lanqing made this remark when he was addressing a Forum on Foreign Language Teaching organized by the Ministry of Education in 1996, Beijing.

4. The College English Test (CET4/6) was initiated by the Department of Higher Education under the Ministry of Education in 1985, and was formally begun in 1987. It was reported that up till 1997, 1,850,000 people had passed CET4 while 430,000 people passed CET6. The passing rate has increased from 36.6% to 66.27% nationwide. The test is administered twice every year, generally in June (summer) and January (winter).

5. The China Public English Test System (PETS) is a product derived from a project with funding from the British government and the Chinese government. It obtains technical support from the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES). The test consists of five levels with PETS Level 5 at the top.

6. While innovations like this are common in recent years in BA programs in traditional English Language and Literature in Chinese universities and colleges, views as to the legitimacy of the changes differ greatly. Some scholars see changes like this as educational utilitarianism. They think that the establishment of specialized courses of a utilitarian nature affects students’ studies of English. Others argue that students should learn things in order to apply them, in other words, changes in curriculum should cater to the needs of the country’s economic construction. Our position is that as English major students they should lay a solid foundation in basic language skills. But after the foundation stage, they should be encouraged to take courses not only in language-related courses but also in other areas of specialization. They should have more freedom of choice in deciding which courses to take.


8. The following is a translated version of our descriptions in Chinese: ‘Very good – Has fully operational command of the language’; ‘Satisfactory – Has generally effective command of the language with occasional inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings’; ‘Poor – Has frequent problems in understanding and expression, and is not able to use complex language’; ‘Very poor – Has essentially no ability to use the language beyond possibly a few isolated words in familiar situations.’

9. The later three acronyms refer to Business English Certificate (BEC), International English Language Test System (IELTS) and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), the first two being administered by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES), UK, and the last one by English Testing Service, New Jersey, USA.

10. For the sake of clarity, we use both tables and figures for the same pieces of data except for Table 5. In order to avoid possible confusion, for Table 6 we also number the accompanying figure, Figure 6.

11. We use ‘college English instruction’ here to refer to English courses for non-English major students in Chinese universities and colleges. These courses are designed in accordance with the national College English Syllabus.

12. The newly revised national curriculum for school English was issued by the Ministry of Education in September, 2001 for trial implementation. According to this new curriculum, English should be taught from Grade 3 onward in primary schools. High school graduates are required to have a vocabulary size of 3,000–3,200 words before they enter tertiary education. The vocabulary size for the present CET4 is 4,200 and for CET6 is 5,500 words respectively.

REFERENCES


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