

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The development and modernization of China is closely tied to political issues. According to Hertling (1996), Pride and Liu RuShan (1988), the role and status of foreign language has waxed and waned with the political tides and it is inevitable as China's relations with the outside world becomes strengthened or threatened. One of the issues that has been a concern is the learning and using of foreign languages, especially English. It is this issue that will impact the culture of China in years to come.

China abandoned the idea of the Cultural Revolution following the death Mao Zedong and it then embarked upon a new course of development and modernization under the leadership of Den Xiaoping (Baum, 1994). During his era, the open door policy was constituted and the use of foreign language once again became practical and so learning was once again revitalized. As soon as China opened its doors to allow its citizens to travel overseas both for education, trade and politics, many business sectors in China also began to realize the importance of using English for communication purposes. It appears that English served the Chinese very well as it provided better opportunities for those who have mastery of the language and in terms of establishing China as a global market; it appeared that China would need all the English speakers it has to sell and promote the country. In this regard, China's local products could be exported further on an international scale as there would be an increase in foreign exchange and its people would be able to reap its benefits in the long run.

Due to all these prospects, the demand for English language skills became intensified. There was a tremendous appeal for acquiring the use of English from the public and

government agencies also began to see the need particularly when China acquired the right to host the Olympic games in 2008. This interest also spiralled to include others in the customs department, trade sections not to mention various other sectors of tourism. Of the initiatives taken, schools in China took the first step by increasing classes in learning English, and this was subsequently followed by colleges and universities who then began to use English as a language of instruction for certain subjects on science and technology. The increase in popularity on the use of English for communication further prompted people in major cities and urban areas including those in Hong Kong and South East Asia to develop a demand for the use of the language. The South China Morning Post (20/10/2001) reports that “the impact is great as the people view English as a foreign language that is essential for modernization”.

Consequently, the use of oral English became a common trend in many schools and in certain government departments. With that demand, business English prospered so much that “the demand for business English courses has also increased in recent years mainly due to increase in trade with the rest of the world” (Huang, Zhenhua 2002). Despite this, currently, English does not have an official status in China. More than that, it is an irony that despite the demand for oral English in schools, colleges, universities and various government sectors, there is no community of English speakers in China who would use the language among themselves (Nielsen, 2003). This is due to a number of reasons which will be discussed later. Although this is the case, it is beginning to gain recognition as English is currently being used extensively in science and technology, the media, business, tourism, formal and informal education systems as well as other agencies.

Presently, there are about 200 to 300 million users of English in China (Zhao, Yang and Campbell, 1995). That being the case, one question that arises in the mind of any researcher is what is the level of proficiency of these users? In the research conducted by Zhao, Yang and Campbell (1995), one indicator was used to assess the proficiency of the speakers and they used the level of the education attained. In other words, the higher the education acquired, the better their English proficiency. On the other hand, Li Xiaojun (1996) suggests that the level of education could not be seen as a true indicator of English proficiency as there are many school learners, who despite years of study, have either little or no command of spoken English. One observation that has emerged from the situation is that users of English in China are unable to communicate effectively in real life situations despite having a lot of knowledge of the language itself. Bearing this in mind, this research is designed especially to investigate and focus on the communication strategies of students from China with the hope of identifying the communication problems faced by Chinese speakers in real life situations and how they overcome these problems. In the next section, a brief overview of the role of English as a secondary language, the history of learning English in China, the status of communication in English and English teaching methodology in China will be given. The reasons for the lack of oral English proficiency will also be discussed. The discussion will also touch on the foreign language policy under the educational system and English teaching methodology in China.

1.1 Background to the study

1.1.1 The role of English as an international language

The language situation of today's world is drastically different from what had existed in the past. Through the passing of decades, English has now become popularly known as the global language as it becomes extensively used by speakers from all over the world. Thus, English is more widespread in use than any other language in the world, especially after the Second World War. It appears that English has a global standing as a greater part of the world has adopted it as an international language and it is not surprising considering that many countries in the world have also been colonised by the British government at one time.

Its use, from Shakespeare's day to its present position, has increased in demand and it appears that many people, other than the native speakers of English, have also claimed English as their own. Harrison (1973:13) noted that "the industrial revolution happened first in England; and partly because of Victorian notions of national destiny, vast territories in all parts of the world which were "acquired" by the British" started using English as their language for communication and administration". Even as the British influence declined, the use of English has not as it spreads its wings to the United States, the new colony which housed many immigrants from Great Britain in the 1600s. The use of English has become lodged into the various places where it is inherited by the people from the colonial days.

In other parts of the world, countries like Australia and New Zealand also use English and so, invariably it also became the language of all immigrants. Other countries, such as India or Nigeria inevitably also use English although their native culture has been secured

independently. It appears that English also served as the language of the government and administration. In countries that had been ruled by other colonial powers, like Spain and Portugal, English is still the principal foreign language. The number of users of English has surged even higher to encompass a probable two billion worldwide but how does one identify the criteria for an English user? In answer to that, Crystal (1985) has called for a broader view of who should be counted as “English users” and he asks if it should also include all those who actually use it, even though on a limited scale?

On the role of English, Stevens (1987) pointed out that English is a window to knowledge in the world of science and technology. Even as the telecommunications revolution got under way, English became dominant in the international media, radio and TV, magazines and newspapers. Consequently, using English seems to be crucial to modern society irrespective of other countries using English as a second language.

This thesis explores the issue of global English as it applies to China in recognition of its global importance. English language learning and teaching have been, and will continue to be, an important part of China’s reform and modernisation. China is also an ethnically and linguistically diverse country with 55 minority nationalities and over 80 languages. English in China is multifaceted where it has destructive, pluralistic and irrelevant elements. English is now used more in China and it has also attained a higher status in China than at any time in the past and this has raised some concerns. However, English cannot replace the Chinese language because of the historical culture of China. In fact, English is taken by the majority as a language of international use which can enable the country to accumulate more recognition from the world. Thus, it is being promoted as the language of communication extensively in order to accomplish a better understanding among all

countries for world peace.

1.1.2 The history of learning English in China

Throughout Chinese history, English has been viewed in a number of ways and it has also experienced several changes in its role and status. As stated, there have been long standing concerns about the cultural impact of learning English for Chinese people, on the one hand, and yet the desire to learn English to gain access to the knowledge and opportunities it provides is also urgent, on the other. Adamson (2002) manages to outline this situation:

The relationship between the English language and Chinese politics and society has historically been conflicting. At different times, English has been associated in China with military aggressors, barbarians, and virulent anti-Communists. But English is also a principal language of trade partners, academics, technical experts, advisors, tourists and popular culture. At worst, the language has been perceived as a threat to national integrity. At best, it has been seen as a conduit for strengthening China's position in the world community. These tensions have manifested in policy swings that have far-reaching impacts, most notably for the educational system.

(Adamson, 2002:231)

Against the backdrop of major events in China's history, the presence of English in China and the role of English Language Teaching and Learning (ELT) can be traced from its origins to the present day. Cortazzi and Jin Lixian (1996a:61) remind us aptly, "There are certain reservations to be made regarding generalizations about ELT in China". They added that in the Chinese context, it is almost impossible to describe the scale of ELT which is extensive for circumstances are also changing constantly. At present China is a huge and rapidly developing country that has an enormous population of over 1.2 billion (Cortuzzi and Jin lixian,1996). The problem thus lies in the selection of the most appropriate method

and framework to identify the status of ELT in present China.

1.1.3 The Foreign Language Policy in China

“English is inextricably linked to globalisation and also the American lifestyle, which some see as neo-imperialism or hyper-imperialism, or merely empire (Hardt & Negri, 2000) and it is also linked to Europeanization” (Phillipson 2004). According to Pennycook (1995, 2001), “Linguistic imperialism can occur when English becomes a gatekeeper to education, employment, business opportunities and popular culture, particularly where indigenous languages are marginalised”. It is thus difficult to say that the spread of English is beneficial to China although in many cases the language has been appropriated and changed to suit the different cultures. Cooke (1988) uses the metaphor of the Trojan horse to describe the way that English may be welcomed initially in a country but subsequently discarded as it begins to create concerns once it dominates the native languages and the prevalent cultures experienced by the users ” (Ljungdahl, 2002).

According to George Steiner (1975: 469), “English acts as the vulgate of American power and Anglo-American technology”. English secured its status as a global language in the 20th century, and furthermore, it has also acted as a force of facilitating globalization (Dendrinos, 2002; Phillipson, 2001). In addition, economic, political and cultural domination by the single super-power, the United States of America has also made sure that the English language which is used to encode its various cultural practices is sustained.

Language policies help to determine what language is or are not important, and in China, foreign language learning and teaching are in fact closely tied to the political issues faced

by China. Hertling (1996:A49), Pride and Liu Ru-shan (1988:42) and Ross (1993:42) have summed up the relationship between foreign language learning and the political climate in China as something which is inseparable. Support for foreign language training is high when sustained participation in the global community is deemed to commensurate with China's political and economic interests and low when it is perceived as threatening to internal political and cultural integrity. Therefore, steps are being planned by the government's education board to implement the learning of English to all schools with careful consideration.

1.1.4 The status of communication in English in China

As soon as the National College Entrance Examination ended on June 9, 2006, a local newspaper in Hubei Province's Wuhan city invited five foreigners, including three native English speakers to take the English section of the exam. None of them completed the test, and their average mark was disappointing, with 79 out of a possible 100. Chinese students fared better in terms of the marks obtained for they often accomplish high marks and due to this, it seems as if Chinese students have a better grasp of the English language than even native speakers. In essence this is partly true because a Chinese student may score highly in an English test, but he/she is usually unable to hold a simple conversation with a native speaker. The situation may seem awkward but it is quite a common sight in China. For years, Chinese schools have neglected the oral aspect of training in their English teaching package. English learners in China often spend too much time memorizing every single word and analyzing every single sentence which happens to be their normal practice. As a result, many Chinese students know almost everything about grammar, but they can hardly

express themselves in simple English, orally. What they have learned is not "living" English, but "deaf-and-mute" English which means the students only know how to read and write in English but they are unable to express themselves in real life situations when needed, unlike the situation in Malaysia. This lack is mainly due to a lack of encouragement to practise oral speaking frequently in the classes. Another reason for this is that in most English tests, including the most influential China English Test (CET) 4 and CET 6 exams, more than half of the questions are multiple choices where problems given to students deal mainly with vocabulary and grammatical analysis of sentences. Oral comprehension, on the other hand, covers only a small proportion of the important exams, which does not help to improve conversation skills.

To prepare for the various examinations, students must read a lot of guidance material and do countless guidance exercises. Though they get high marks in various English examinations, even higher than native speakers, they are at a loss when talking to foreigners. Even if they can speak a little, their expressions are not idiomatic and are often "Chinglish," or are simply incomprehensible, not fluent at all and this is a setback for them for the listeners whom they address in English will not be able to understand them.

Li Yang (who is a famous English teacher in China since 1985) is currently prompting the notion of using English to talk and his way was through "Crazy English". Li pointed out those Chinese learners are shy when speaking in English for fear of losing their face (embarrassment) when they make a mistake. Li claims that this is typical with the Chinese culture particularly in regards to saving face. He further adds that students should practise speaking English in a loud voice, and even shout an English sentence in a crazy, exciting

and high-pitched voice, alone or together with others. Li's now famous slogan, "I love losing face" has become the new but unusual way for young students to think about studying English without fear of losing face. He encourages English learners not to be afraid of making grammatical mistakes, and to disregard any mocking laughter. He asserts that they need to be brave and even be a bit cheeky to create a pleasant atmosphere while speaking English.

Some Chinese professors and linguists have criticized Li Yang for going to extremes. They state that grammar is vital for Chinese students learning English and they also question how a student can speak fluent English if he/she does not know the grammar. If a student keeps speaking grammatically incorrect sentences, he/she will gradually get into bad habits and take it for granted that there is nothing unusual. Later, should he/she need to change; it would be difficult to establish a point for argument.

The diverse views given are true but not comprehensive what must be borne in mind is that grammar is important, even for native speakers. An English learner must have a clear idea of present and past tenses, active and passive voices, singular and plural numbers. Otherwise, it can easily confuse beginners who are learning English. The key question is the way to acquire grammar, whether by memorising all the grammar in the book or by learning grammar through listening and speaking.

1.1.5 English Teaching Methodology in China

Perhaps people are not aware that many Chinese teachers used to teach English in China by the "chalk and talk" method and some may even be continuing with it until today. Such a method is known as Grammar Translation Method (GTM) (Kim, 1982) and it does not focus on the oral/ aural skills. Instead, it is a method that aims at helping learners to acquire the necessary requirement of reading skills, grammar rules and to some extent, literary appreciation. Most English classes in China are conducted by the GTM method with explanation of the rules of grammar, functions and concepts given by teachers. Consequently, the GTM lacks focus on speaking and listening skills which are now identified as being crucial for communication in English. As remarked by Richards and Rogers (1986), this method causes students to be frustrated and loose interest in learning English due to the time being wasted on memorising a great number of rules. The oral/aural skills also seem to occur due to inadequate interactions between teachers and students. As a result, English became an antique tool that is merely utilised for the purpose of appreciation, instead of as a tool for communication and exchanging ideas.

Another method used in China is the audio-lingual approach which is based on the behaviourist theory of learning that places emphasis on forming habit and practising grammatical structures in isolation (Lightbown, 1993:73). This method gives learners more exposure to oral/ aural practice by training the learner to produce the required response automatically with the appropriate stimulus. Well-equipped language laboratories have been set up in nearly every Chinese university, even in primary and middle schools to enhance the teaching and learning of English in the classroom. With this effort, Chinese students are getting closer to mastering the foreign tongue or the correct pronunciation. However in the school's view, learners need to build up their language proficiency

gradually by practising only the correct usage. Students are not encouraged to speak freely for fear that they would make errors which could become habitual. Indeed, some students are actually puzzled by the language aspect to the extent that they do not know whether the sentences which they have uttered are correct or incorrect. All they have been instructed to do is to repeat them, in a parrot-like fashion which is not natural for learners who truly want to use the language for communication purposes.

These two approaches, GTM and audio-lingual method have been adopted with a high degree of accuracy and linguistic knowledge, it seems. On the other hand, such instruction methods do not seem to be in line with the development of fluency in communicative abilities mainly because the students are not given sufficient opportunity to develop communication skills in using the language. Consequently, a majority of students find that it is to their advantage after taking English as one of their subject for six years. Whenever the teaching of English as a foreign language is mentioned, traditional methods featuring boring and painstaking methods on learning of grammar rules and vocabulary come to mind. Based on this scenario, the Ministry of Education then took the move to reform the China English Test (CET) 4 and 6 exams. Future tests will now emphasize on aural comprehension, fast reading comprehension and creative English writing. Following the test reform, teaching principles and methods in Chinese schools will also be adjusted in line with the government's decision for changes. Students will now no longer learn grammar and bookish English alone for they will also be advised to pay special attention to listening and speaking, to the use of idiomatic English, and to the language's application in social discourse, all of which are considered appropriate steps to acquiring more spoken English skills.

1.2 Statement of the problem

"China has become the largest market for English teaching in the world," as viewed by Robert Diyanni, an official with the College Board of United States who said this while attending the 2002 International Education Cooperation Week which opened on Sept. 25. He added that one common observation in China is that students are generally weak in their communicative abilities due to a lack of environment which allows for oral communication. They have sufficient knowledge about the subject, but hardly any opportunity to use it in real life situation. A frequent question being asked by students in High School and University is how to improve their oral English. Thus, at present, the main problem faced by learners of English in China is their inability to communicate proficiently in English.

This study focuses on how Chinese students, who are second language learners of English, manage to communicate in English when they do not have a good command of the target language. It is common for Chinese students to face problems in communication and to adopt various communication strategies during communicative tasks to overcome the problems. The reason for this is due to the following circumstances:

- (1) Even though English is a key course for students in China, they seldom use the language outside the classroom. This could be due to their inadequate confidence in using the language in real life situations.

- (2) English and Chinese are two very different types of language. They belong to two different language families (the Indo-European and Sino-Tibetan) and thus, many structural differences exist between them (Chang, 2001: 310). English is also a peculiar language that does not have a uniform system whether in pronouncing or spelling. Thus, learners might be expressing inappropriate expressions when they are required to speak such as using what they had learnt from books which are unnatural.

- (3) A large number of Chinese students are not equipped with coping skills or the right strategies to apply when faced with difficulties in using English. This will undoubtedly result in them either abandoning their attempt to continue with the conversation or resorting to silence.

According to the indication given by Cohen (1990), and O'Malley & Chamot (1990), strategies for language learning and language use have been quite well known among foreign language learners and it is also a growing interest in the areas of foreign language teaching and learning. Due to that extended interest, it is apt to investigate Chinese learners' actual performance in communicating using English in order to identify the deficit areas of language skills which can then be turned into a recommendation for creating better teaching materials to improve communication skills in English.

1.3 Objective of the study

This study aims at identifying the communication problems of Chinese students studying in Malaysia while using English as a target language. In addition it hopes to identify the kinds of communicative skills used by these students in fulfilling certain communicative tasks and how frequently are some of these communicative strategies employed.

1.4 Research Questions:

With the main objectives identified above, the following are the three research questions which this study hopes to be able to address.

1. What are the communication problems encountered by Chinese students from China studying in Malaysia?
2. What are the types of communicative strategies used by these students to cope with the problems faced?
3. What are the communicative strategies which are preferred by these students?

1.5 Significance of the study

The findings in this research will allow educators to have an insight into understanding the kinds of problems faced by Chinese learners of English in using the language to fulfil some daily or needed communicative tasks. The findings of this study will be able to shed light into some of the more commonly used communication strategies used by these learners and this can help teachers and educators to develop a better teaching method to train students up to be better equipped with strategies that can enable them to interact with more confidence in English even though they may lack the necessary vocabulary or expressions needed.

It must be noted that research on second language communication strategies in China is still at its infancy. Many questions related to communication strategies are still unanswered. It is hoped that the findings of this study will give some new knowledge in this area. The

communication strategies that have been identified can give some insights into how they have aided the five pairs to have successful communications. Thus, it is expected that this study will have some pedagogical implications to the teaching and learning of English in China for there is a serious need to enhance the communicative competence of Chinese students. In addition, it is also time to re-evaluate this method of foreign language teaching in China.

1.6 Scope and limitation

Although the study highlights the problems faced by Chinese students studying in Malaysia in communication and the communication strategies employed by them, it must be understood that there is a limitation in terms of the number of students used as sample since only five pairs of students were used.

Another limitation in this research is that the findings were not distinguished in terms of their background in terms of their state of origin, how much exposure they had to English, the different teaching and learning methods of English that they have experienced and so forth. The reason for the lack of focus on these aspects is that the researcher was more concerned with the problems faced by the students and communicative strategies employed to overcome these problems immaterial of their background.

1.7 Summary

This chapter dealt with the current issues related to the teaching and learning of English in China as well as the problems faced in communicating in English by Chinese students who are studying in Malaysia. It started with a preview of the development of the teaching and learning of English in China. Next, there is a discussion on the role of English as an international language with focus on its role in China specifically. This was followed by a brief history of the learning of English in China and the foreign language policy in China. What these discussions proved was that English learning was viewed as a necessary evil. The diverse implication of learning English which is seen as a form of threat to the national culture and language as well as a tool for development in the modern era was discussed.

The chapter then went on to give a discussion on the status of communication in English in China. Here emphasis was drawn to the fact that although Chinese students were proficient in the language especially in grammar, they were very far behind in communication skills and this was attributed to the teaching methods in China. Thus, the discussion that followed which was on the English teaching methodology in China explained succinctly why Chinese students are weak in communication skills. The teaching methods employed focused on grammar and not oral skills. Among the methods elaborated on were the grammar translation method and audio lingual approach.

The subsequent sections of this chapter were on the statement of the problems, objective of study, research question, and significance of study, scope and limitations. This chapter ends on a note that, the demand for learning English is all time needed, especially for students attending high school who aim to enter into universities overseas. Even in the business

sectors in China, better opportunities are available for those who are competent in conversing in English. Candidates, who are better off with English, stand a good chance for employment either in the government or commercial organization. Thus, the study of communication strategies which is the focus of this study will definitely help Chinese students to speak English confidently to a greater extent, provided they learn how to apply communication strategies at the right time and at the right place.