

英语教学求索

# How To Improve Your English

唐 宓 著



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社 址:云南省昆明市翠湖北路 2 号云南大学英华园内  
邮 编:650091  
电 话:0871-5033244  
网 址:<http://www.ynup.com>  
E-mail: [market@ynup.com](mailto:market@ynup.com)

# ABSTRACT

This dissertation is the result of the analysis of a series of problems faced by science and technology students in China on account of their inability to understand oral English.

The dissertation is divided into five chapters:

Chapter One is an introduction of the background conditions to the teaching of listening in China.

Chapter Two, in order to highlight the importance of listening and, most importantly, to find a better way of teaching it, presents a survey of students' and teachers' responses to questionnaires on listening in order that we might seek an objective rather than a subjective solution to the problems.

Chapter Three reviews the theoretical knowledge of listening comprehension, considering the characteristics of listening and the features of spoken language, which help us to tackle the problems of textbook design and classroom instruction.

Chapter Four deals with the primary concern of the dissertation, that is, the evaluation of a set of listening text-

books currently used in the EST field in China.

Chapter Five, in conclusion, offers some suggestions as to how to use the listening textbook i. e. to deal with the tasks and conduct classroom activity.

This study aims at finding an optimum method for giving students lessons in listening, and a better way of teaching vis-a-vis textbook design and classroom administration.

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# **CHAPTER ONE: BACKGROUND DETAILS RELEVANT TO THE TEACHING OF LISTENING TO SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY STUDENTS IN CHINA**

## ***1. GENERAL SITUATION***

English is the most important foreign language being learned in China. In schools, students must take English as a compulsory course and come with some grounding in English for higher education. Students who have passed the rigid and highly competitive matriculation examinations after five or six years' English study at the basic level in secondary school are exposed to another two to four years, further English study for their specialized fields. Their objectives in learning English are set out in the newly issued Teaching Syllabus from the Educational Committee in correspondence with the new aim of the social needs. This lays out precisely the aims and objectives of English courses, the linguistic re-

quirements for school pupils and college students, the time allocation and teaching methodology.

Because of the political and economic reforms which have brought the country face to face and wide open to the outside world, there is an immediate need for English. English learning has become a mania for the whole nation. Television courses, radio lessons, part-time courses and night schools have offered an almost unlimited variety of educational opportunities for people to further their education or to meet their different needs.

Besides, the entire English teaching effort in China is being directed to a more comprehensive objective-all four skills, plus translation and culture with increasing importance being attached to the communication skills. "The Communicative Approach might be a way out for China's ELT reforms even though its first toehold in China in 1970's was greeted with a lack of enthusiasm-apatetic, because experienced teachers of English would rather think that there could be no panacea in ELT" (Guozhang Xu 1985: 50) .

The goal of ELT in China is only to equip students with communicative competence. Teachers have realized that English cannot be taught to students as mere knowledge which involves memorizing the rules of grammar and accumulation of new words but as a skill for communication.

These are the new attitudes and changes that have taken

place in a decade or so. The climate for learning English is positive and favourable. The demand for English is becoming higher and higher. English learners' aim is to master the four skills. However, the problems which arise due to the English teaching reforms have become even more acute. English teaching is also under great constraints.

First of all, there are situational constraints. Students are studying English in an environment where Chinese is the first language and where English is a language reserved for contact with foreigners. They don't have much chance to develop their communicative ability outside the classroom except by limited means such as TV, radio programmes or a few films. Even though there have been some improvements in the wake of the 'open-door' policy, foreign language learning is achieved principally by means of formal teaching.

Secondly, English is taught by a contingent of indigenuous Chinese teachers who were trained in institutes with only a few native speakers of English on the staff. Only a privileged minority of teachers have the opportunity of studying in an English speaking country.

Thirdly, the present situation is that once learners have entered the university, they can be sure that they will be allocated jobs upon graduation, irrespective of their performance in the institution. They have no motivation or interest in learning the language at school.

Fourthly, China is a big country with diverse geographical conditions, it is faced with large groups of different learners with different levels in English, and thus it is difficult for a programme to be implemented uniformly throughout the country. Some universities are so well-off that they can equip themselves with satellite relay stations, but some cannot even afford good quality tape-recorders; some students in key universities can be very successful in the unified tests, such as EPT (English Proficiency Test), but others especially those in local universities have difficulty in passing the achievement tests. Therefore, the educational administrators face a great task of working out a programme appropriate for learners in all schools.

Practical difficulties, therefore, exist in many of the following ways.

The first difficulty stems from the confusion of objectives and aims, even though the objectives are clear-reading first and then the other three skills. The strategy of developing students' ability to process the information from reading books and then to develop their ability to listen, speak and write results in many teachers devoting nearly all of their time and energy to "Intensive Reading". They focus on grammar and vocabulary, on linguistic phenomena rather than on reading a "spoonfeeding" or teacher-centred technique. Many teachers of English merely read the text aloud, a deep-rooted tra-

ditional Chinese mode of teaching. As the proverb goes "Learn 300 Tang poems by heart, and one becomes a poet." The learners can only deal with one or two pages of reading within an hour.

As for the aim, very often there is little knowledge of what the students will do when they complete their undergraduate studies. Even though, teachers can stimulate students' motivation in learning by assuring them that they will inevitably use English after graduation, the students cannot see the immediate use of English or the practical value of learning the language for their future work. Practical measures have to be taken for a significant change to take place.

The second difficulty manifests itself in the scarcity of suitable textbooks. The textbooks are designed to be innovative integrating the communicative components——listening, speaking and writing but they can hardly reconcile the ingredients of a new methodology with the old mode of textbook design. The reading tasks are more devoted to grammar than comprehension. Exercises are only vaguely designated as "listening", "speaking" and "writing" with insufficient tasks and questions to specifically require students to develop their ability to use the language. Most teachers fall back on the traditional way of teaching and the Communicative Approach exists only on paper.

The third difficulty is the lack of teachers of English in general and of highly qualified ones in particular. The requirement of a new mode of teaching with new textbooks has made the situation even more severe. Being a competent teacher means more than just presenting the pre-prepared language and activity available in the textbook to students. It means that the teacher's own language proficiency is of primary importance—the prerequisite for their profession. Their skill in teaching (the ability to resort to different techniques to aid students in learning) is also essential. Unfortunately, the majority of teachers have yet to improve their command of English and their expertise in teaching.

As a consequence, the grammar-translation method still predominates in most educational institutions. Even though attempts have been made to implement communicative principles of language teaching in some places, quite a lot of teachers still believe that rote memorization of grammatical rules and patterns of usage will lead to proper and correct English. They have been conditioned by the Chinese context and take the current practice for granted and are therefore unable or unwilling to distinguish between the strengths and weaknesses of possible teaching methods. It will probably take a long time for the traditional ways to be changed.

## ***2. A SURVEY OF EST IN CHINA***

In China teaching English to science and technology

(EST) students has been considered the least interesting and yet the most difficult and controversial area in the field of TEFL. Any English teacher who has ever taught EST students cannot but have had a perplexing experience with regard to students' levels and their needs and as to what to teach those learners in order to achieve the aims required by the Teaching Syllabus.

Even though there are rigid requirements for entrance to universities, the requirement for English is flexible. Students with even the minimum score of 10 in English can find a place in a local university or a school after the students with higher marks have been selected for key schools administered by the Educational Committee. Students upon admission to the institutions should have a basic knowledge of English grammar with acceptable English pronunciation and intonation and a basic English vocabulary ranging from 1, 500 to 2, 000 words. On the average, students should have no difficulty in reading simple English texts. Their level of English, however, presents a problem for their further English study.

As Chinese learners of English have learned English for so many years by way of explaining every single bit of the text and analyzing the grammar points, they cannot construct proper sentences nor are they able to understand a piece of spoken language or utter an appropriate sentence in a com-

municative situation. As for reading, they can only process one or two pages an hour through being constantly blocked by unfamiliar vocabulary and new features of grammar and, more adversely, being accustomed to the word-for-word explanation and translation method. Students should be taught about the application of grammar rules in the proper and appropriate context, but they only know some dead rules of grammar without too much awareness of how to use them in the right place. They are not competent in the four levels of the language study.

The needs of this large group of English learners are shaped by and consistent with the social needs. They are learning English for a utilitarian purpose “as an auxiliary to academic or professional skills” (Mackay and Mountford 1978: 21), whatever their specific areas of interests. However obscure and vague their aim seems to be, they will be working in different scientific fields which involve much use of English. Living in this modern and information-filled society they have to approach advanced science and technology either through the medium of foreign publications or through interpersonal or international contacts with foreign experts in the fields. In fact, their needs for English are expanding on a wider and wider front. Scientists and technicians need a much better command of English in terms of the four skills.



According to the Teaching Syllabus, students are required to achieve three different objectives in learning English: first to develop their reading ability, second, to attain a certain degree of listening and translation ability, and third, elementary writing and speaking ability.

Taking all these factors into consideration, what should be taught to these special learners of English is the most bewildering problem faced by the teachers. Should students be taught General English? Or should they be taught the special English of their specialized fields?

To reach them, General English, however, would inevitably mean that students relearned materials of which they already had some knowledge, while teaching them English for special purposes would prevent students from digesting the text on account of a surfeit of new vocabulary and complicated grammatical structures.

It was not until 1985 when the New Syllabus was promulgated that a new experiment was introduced, that is, teaching General English with an emphasis on reading materials in English for science and technology. It is generally acknowledged that this approach might provide a way out of the impasse. The teaching of a common core register is emphasized, but at the same time specific features of EST are included. This refers to the vocabulary items common to most specialized fields, grammatical structures typical of EST,