ELT TODAY
THE EXPERIENCE OF HKU AND RELEVANCE FOR CHINA

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1 Introduction

As we begin the 21st century several themes in English Language Teaching ELT have come to the forefront. Some of these have particular relevance for teaching English at tertiary level by virtue of the fact that university students are young adults expected to use English in a modern global context upon graduation albeit to different degrees. In designing the English curricula for students at tertiary level their eventual occupational needs must of course be borne in mind hence English for Specific or Professional Purposes ESP or EPP is still a central tenet for English at tertiary level. But increasingly the emphasis has been more on how to learn than on what aspects or genres of the language to teach. And the "how to learn" has gone beyond enhancing communicative interaction in the classroom and recognizing the interdependence of knowledge and discourse to developing effective learner strategies or promoting learner independence and lifelong learning as pedagogy and philosophy. Current discussions of effective language learning have also to take into account the formation of learner identity at once individual and sociocultural. How these ideas have affected the design of the English programme at the University of Hong Kong HKU and whether similar ideas could be usefully incorporated into ELT at tertiary level in China is the focus of this paper.

The paper consists of three parts. First I shall review briefly the recent trends in ELT with particular relevance for higher education. Secondly I shall explain how some of these concepts have been applied to the design of the English courses for non-English major students at the University of Hong Kong HKU with some remarks on similar curricula in other universities in Hong Kong. The final part of the paper is a discussion of whether similar developments are in any way useful for ELT in China.

2 Current themes in ELT today

Linguistics and language teaching have come a long way in the last half century. The 1950s saw the birth of psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics. The 1960s gave us Noam Chomsky's revolutionary ideas about the nature of linguistic competence. In the early 1970s everyone was talking about Dell Hymes' communicative competence and needs analysis. In the late 1970s error analysis as a window into the learner's mental processing precipitated the development of second language acquisition as a field. By the 1980s Michael Halliday's functional grammar made discourse analysis relevant for second language learning. In the 1990s learner strategies were the order of the day.

In this new century what are the ideas that curricular designers are expected to take into account and apply to their teaching? It is taken for granted that teaching has to be learner-centred that the goal of language learning is communicative competence.
that the various ways to go about achieving this goal will involve exposing learners to natural and not stilted language that learners must be given the opportunity to practice what they learn that the classroom has to recreate as far as possible natural interactive opportunities increasingly too teachers are expected not only to have good competence in the target language and an understanding of the target culture but also to know about learning as well as to constantly update themselves in information technology and the use of multimedia so as to apply such technology in materials development classroom teaching and assessment Nunan Lam 1998

More than ever it is recognized that for learning to succeed not only must teachers have the professional qualities mentioned above but students must also be responsible learners. The best learners are those who take responsibility for their own learning and who are able to organize their own learning autonomously. In fact the ideology of learner centredness has developed through learner independence and learner autonomy Benson 2003 and learner identity Norton Toohey 2002. Nowadays the best learners are those who are aware of their development as learners themselves in parallel the best teachers are those who are aware of their own professional development and can develop their own teacher identities

All the trends I have mentioned thus far apply to language learning at all levels. Specific to English at tertiary level in foreign language settings are two ideas that there is an inextricable relationship between knowledge of a discipline and the language in that discipline Barron Bruce Nunan 2002 and that learners must be taught learning skills for life so that they can continue learning even after graduation.

ELT at tertiary level in Hong Kong

I shall now try to illustrate how some of the current ideas in ELT have been applied to the development of the English curriculum at tertiary level in Hong Kong. Like on the China mainland ELT at tertiary level in Hong Kong have two strands the programme for English majors and that for non-English major students. What every university finds most problematic is how to enhance the English competence of the non-English major students the majority of the student population. That is the focus of this paper

Background of students

The present educational system in Hong Kong consists of 6 years of primary education 5 years of secondary school 2 years of pre-university and 3 years of university for most degrees and 4 or 5 years for some degrees. Within the next few years there is likely to be reform in secondary and university education in Hong Kong. The structure is most likely to be adopted will be 3 years of junior secondary school 3 years of senior secondary school and 4 years of university like on the China mainland

At present about 25% of the 400 secondary schools in Hong Kong teach in English. Though it is not necessary for students to be taught everything in English before they can attain high proficiency in the language using English as the medium of instruction for other subjects is likely to expose them to the necessary vocabulary and interactive language for pursuing university studies in the discipline of their choice later. To enter university students have to pass a territory-wide English examination at the end of 2 years of pre-university

English for non-English majors at the University of Hong Kong

The University of Hong Kong is an English medium university. All subjects except those in Chinese studies and the teaching of languages other than English are taught in English. At least that is the official policy though it has been reported that occasionally some tutorials are conducted in both Chinese and English

Course organization The English programme for non-English majors at HKU 2002 developed from a remedial English programme through a generic English for Academic Communication or English Study Skills programme to the present Discipline-specific course. At one time only students with low proficiency had to attend English classes. But now all students are required by their faculty to take two credit-bearing English courses. The only exceptions are medical students for whom the courses are not credit-bearing and architecture students who are required to take only one course with the second course being optional. Usually both courses are offered in the first year but for some faculties the second course is offered in the second year. Each course is offered at 2 hours a week for a semester of 15 weeks long inclusive of a 1-week break and some revision time at the end of the semester. Most classes
now have 18 to 20 students in each class.

Discipline-specific courses Because courses are specific to the discipline of the students, just for the undergraduates, the English Centre offers a total of 42 courses with titles such as Speaking skills for architecture students, Professional English for arts students, Clinical oral English for dental students, Professional and technical written communication for engineers, English skills for legal studies, English for problem-based learning in medicine, Professional writing for social work students, and many others. These discipline-specific courses are largely based on the knowledge area of the students major and are designed to offer them the opportunity to develop communicative skills such as discussion strategies, oral presentation skills or writing skills for academic essays or professional reports. The rationale for focusing on such skills in the knowledge area of the students discipline is that the contact time available for teaching the students is too short to expect vast improvements in general proficiency and being exposed to Discipline-specific English will speed up their learning to handle English communication in their chosen discipline. Being able to do so is motivating to students. The focus in all courses is learning to learn, English being almost incidental to this process.

Web learning and project work In addition to class contact, several courses also have a strong web-based component such as on oral presentation skills, writing techniques or vocabulary enhancement. Students at HKU are in general very open to using Information Technology for learning because the university encourages this by helping every first-year student to buy an IBM laptop at a discounted rate by special arrangement with IBM. Another common strategy to extend learning time beyond the classroom is to involve students in project work taking them into the real world. Arts students, for example, have to find job placements for themselves for one day in their Career Exposure Day project so as to make it meaningful for them to write up their resumes, application letters and so forth.

Course development These discipline-specific courses and course websites take a tremendous amount of time to develop and involve needs analysis, finding suitable source materials in the discipline area of the students, identifying the viable skills to teach, teachers reading up on the topic area, writing the materials, teaching them, evaluating the feedback from both teachers and students, and rewriting. The most difficult part of such materials development is for the English teachers to learn enough about the discipline or at least a topic area within the discipline to be able to engage the students in genuine academic exchange in the classroom and assignments.

In my 30 years of teaching from kindergarten to PhD level of both English as a skill and of applied linguistics, the curriculum I felt most unsure about when helping in its development was the English enhancement for law curriculum. We were fortunate to have as the key developer a colleague with degrees both in language and in law as well as a very supportive professor from the Faculty of Law to act as a resource person. But I had to read up and understand a good amount of materials in legal studies such as cases, ordinances and law textbooks before I felt confident enough to teach the law students Legal English.

Examples of the course development process for some courses developed at HKU can be found in Shi, Corcos, Storey (2001), Bruce, 2002 and Barron (2003).

Meeting individual needs While we focus on Discipline-specific English skills in our core curriculum, we are aware that some students are still quite weak in their general proficiency, especially in some disciplines, and offer courses outside of the regular curriculum to help these students. In the Summer Institute offered in June after the examinations for the second semester, some more generic courses are offered for students to study on a voluntary basis. Some learning areas covered by the courses in the Summer Institute are pronunciation, grammar, speaking, listening, writing a good essay, English through songs, English through movies, finding your voice in poetry and so forth. In addition to courses, students are also encouraged to take advantage of the learning opportunities available at the Language Resource Centre and the Virtual English Centre, to improve on individual areas of weakness in their English. Some recent resources we have produced for students with independent learning are the webs to help them create their own portfolios or test themselves on modules to prepare them for the International English Language Testing System. All these self-learning resources are in line with the pedagogical orientation towards learner independence.

Evaluation by English teachers at HKU

Because HKU is an English-medium university and because we teach Discipline-specific English, visitors to the English classroom will find students...
discussing issues in their discipline. Law students discuss legal problems both in their law tutorials as well as their English lessons. Social work students discuss cases of their clients both in their social work tutorials and their English classes. What then is the difference between classes held by subject specialists (law professors and social work professors) and the English teachers? The difference is that in the English classes students are more focused on the language and argumentative structures for their discipline while in the classes with the teachers in their own discipline they are focused on acquiring knowledge of the discipline itself. The actual circumstances are of course more complex as knowledge and discourse are not easy to tease apart. Nor should they be. Specific English lessons offered by English teachers in the ESP tradition and Teaching the Discipline using English as a medium of instruction by subject specialists in the English Across the Curriculum tradition are two versions of content-based instruction. Wesche and Skehan 2002. In both modes students learn the target language along with acquiring content in a subject area albeit to different degrees.

How do the English teachers at HKU feel about English medium education for their students? While teachers at the English Centre at HKU all subscribe to the philosophy of English for Specific Purposes by and large they are well aware that the English programme for non-English major students in the context of HKU as an English medium university is not without its problems. The following views were collected from 13 teachers teaching non-English major students at HKU. Seven of them originally came from overseas and six from Hong Kong. Eight of them had taught for more than ten years at a university with English as the medium of instruction and five of them had taught for less than ten years in such a setting at the time they provided such information anonymously. They were asked three questions:

1. What are the three greatest advantages of using English as a medium of instruction at a university where most students have another language as their first language?

2. What are the three greatest obstacles of using English as a medium of instruction in such a setting?

3. If it were entirely up to you what kind of English programme would you like to give HKU students?

Advantages. According to English teachers at HKU the greatest advantages for students to be taught in English at a university where most of them have another language as their first language are easier access to knowledge, better job prospects, more international opportunities and more practice towards improvement. First, access includes direct access to up-to-date resources in English in their specialist subjects. Knowledge from other countries primarily via written texts, thoughts, concepts and cultures not readily available otherwise and information available only in English. Many technical terms are also in English. Secondly, being taught in English also opens up more job opportunities to students because most jobs require the use of a lot of English being taught in English will "look good" on students resumes. Thirdly, international opportunities that English medium instruction opens students up to include ability to connect with the international academic community, greater access to further studies overseas, enjoying the reputation of studying in an "international" university communicating with foreigners more easily, greater readiness for global communication for work or pleasure. Finally, using English as the medium of instruction gives more depth and breadth of exposure not otherwise available outside the classroom in a foreign language setting and provides the opportunity to learn English through social interaction. Writing in a second language also has the advantage of disciplining the better students to write better. Student meetings held in English are also less likely to go off track.

Obstacles. The greatest obstacles of using English as a medium of instruction in a foreign language setting are students' proficiency. Students failing to understand the content, teachers' proficiency and the artificiality of the communication. First, students may lack the vocabulary, the reading speed, the organizational skills in writing or the knowledge of idiomatic language to fully engage themselves intellectually. They may also differ in levels of proficiency. Some students highly competent in their discipline but not competent in English may feel marginalized. This may lead to resentment. Secondly, if students spend too much time translating they may fail to develop the depth of knowledge in their discipline. Some students end up developing a high tolerance for incomprehension and others get so discouraged that they will not engage in intellectual debate or discussion. If they read more slowly or misread, they may lose interest. Thirdly, teachers may not have the sufficient competence or the level of
technique needed to use English in discipline-specific context. Finally, students may find speaking in English too artificial and may not feel as good rapport with the teacher and classmates. There may also be difficulty in persuading some students to speak in English. Not all students will be as motivated or inclined to do so.

Reform: If it were entirely up to them, none of the English teachers at HKU responding to the questions listed above would choose to teach only General English or Generic English for Academic Purposes. They all prefer either Discipline-Specific English, Workplace English or a combination of General English and/or English for Academic Purposes. Discipline-Specific English and Workplace English. The prevailing vote is for a flexible programme with these components varying for the discipline and according to the needs of the students. In terms of class time they prefer either to offer what they now do—2 hours per week for 2 semesters or more hours than in the current programme with 4 hours per week for 2 semesters being most popular or a flexible number of hours depending on students' need. The most interesting answer is: "As many hours as funding allows!" Another teacher also points out that we should not think of more hours for English lessons because "the other 96% of the curriculum holds the solution." That is to say if teachers of law, science, social work and so forth teach in English and put a premium on students' competence in English, then the students studying these subjects will have more exposure in English and more motivation to improve their English. Another suggestion for increasing class contact hours is to offer professional classes. There is also great variation in views concerning the ratio of class hours to self-access hours. One colleague is of the opinion that in situations where resources are limited and there is a high degree of motivation, 1 hour in class can lead to 10 hours of learning outside class. The views of colleagues on class size are fairly similar with most of them citing 15 or 16 as the optimal number and capping it at 20 while a few mention lower numbers like 10 or 12 in each class.

To summarize, English teachers at HKU are not entirely satisfied with their existing programme. Though they favour the general emphasis on Discipline-Specific English, they know too well some of its limitations. If it were up to them, they would like to offer more components in the English programme for non-English majors with more contact hours as well as more self-learning hours.

English for non-English majors at other universities in Hong Kong

Programmes at other universities in Hong Kong appear to have incorporated components similar to those at HKU, though to different degrees. Most of them have a core component ranging from Generic English for Academic Communication to Discipline-Specific English and/or English for Professional Purposes. Most of them also offer some choice either in the core programme or in the electives. All of them also have an independent learning component and use some information technology in delivering different components of the programme. Some offer an introduction to courses in summer Study Abroad programmes in countries like America or the United Kingdom where English is natively spoken. Others have English activities based in the dormitories.

But there are some interesting differences from the HKU programme. While English courses are compulsory at HKU for every student, the Chinese University of Hong Kong 2002 does not require every student to take their Compulsory Faculty Language Enhancement Programme (FLEP) — courses with titles such as Grammar for university students, Introduction to academic writing, English through current affairs and issues and Communication for business studies. In 2001, only all first-year students of the Department of Philosophy, those of the Faculty of Engineering who have obtained Grade C or below and those of other faculties who have obtained Grade D or E in HKALE (Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination). Use of English, AS Advanced Supplementary Level, are required to take FLEP English courses" in Hong Kong Baptist University 2002. In addition to their Unit or Unit English for Academic Purposes course of 42 hours and 84 hours respectively, students with Grade E or lower in the HKALE Use of English paper are required to pass an English Proficiency Course as well, which is not the case at HKU. The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology HKUST 2002 offers English courses beyond the first year for all its three schools while the programme at HKU consists of courses mostly in the first year and sometimes in the second year. The programme for Engineering students at HKUST is most impressive in its time coverage with a compulsory 56-hour course each year from Year 1 to Year 3 or a total of 168 hours. Lingnan University also offers more contact hours—4 hours per week—to each student than
HKU does 2 hours for the same duration of 2 semesters. For descriptions of the programmes of other institutions see City University of Hong Kong 2002 Hong Kong Polytechnic University 2002 and Hong Kong Institute of Education 2002.

These differences are pointed out merely to illustrate that there can be flexibility in course focus and course organization. By no means am I suggesting that one programme is more solid because it involves more class hours than another or ; conversely that another programme is more efficient if it involves fewer class hours. Every university has a different type of student population with variation in the proficiency of learners upon entry in student numbers in the number of schools or faculties to be served in the support provided by dormitories in funding and so forth. Each university has to work out its own ELT destiny so to speak.

4 Relevance for China

What relevance do the developments in Hong Kong have for ELT on the China mainland? China being so vast any observations or recommendations even if useful are unlikely to be applicable all over the country. The following suggestions are more a collection of views gathered from discussions with colleagues on the China mainland and seasoned with the awareness that the programmes in Hong Kong also need constant rethinking.

Class hours. Most non-English major students on the mainland now enjoy the benefit of 4 hours of English instruction per week for 4 semesters in total in their first two years. This translates to about 300 class hours. Having more class hours seems to be what is desirable even in Hong Kong or it would therefore seem unwise to reduce this number of hours on the China mainland. If funding and timetabling allow an increase is actually desirable.

Prior to university. When designing the length of the programme at university level on the China mainland it is useful to bear in mind the difference in the amount of learning hours prior to entry to university in the two systems. In Hong Kong the amount of learning hours in secondary school is 17 to 21 which is not much more than that on the mainland 14 to 15 but the percentages of English learning hours at the primary level are vastly different 17 to 21 in Hong Kong as compared to 5 in the China mainland.

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<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Level of education</th>
<th>Percentage of total curriculum time</th>
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<td></td>
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<td>Hong Kong (%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chinese language</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>25 to 30</td>
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<td>Junior secondary</td>
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<td>English language</td>
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As suggested by Curriculum Development Council 2001 and usually followed by schools. No recommendations for senior secondary school.

Estimated from information provided by heads of language programmes in 9 schools in China.

Primary school curriculum. For students at university level to cope with English material in their disciplines they have to begin learning English before entry to university. It appears that it is the primary school English curriculum in particular that most needs reform on the China mainland. Devoting only 2 to 3 lessons in a total curriculum of 30 lessons or so each week from about Primary 3 is not motivating for students because progress is too slow to retain their interest. Teachers have also mentioned to me that parents are requesting for primary schools to start teaching English earlier. Junior secondary schools in China spending more than 30% of their total curriculum time on Chinese may also want to consider adjusting the time spent on Chinese to free some class time for teaching English. This is because if students have not yet attained a certain level of general English proficiency before they enter university it will be difficult for teachers and students to work at it at university level. The “like a dragon” concept for a connected English curriculum from primary to university is well worth reviving.

Flexible programme and self-access learning. No
matter how much is done at the school level, students are bound to differ in general proficiency upon entry to university. While it is good to have a common core program for all students in a particular discipline, it is probably wise to include an elective component meeting the more individual needs of students. Self-access learning is most suited to this indeterminacy.

Information technology and web support. Although it takes a lot of time and energy to prepare the web support component of courses, eventually it pays off. China being so vast and institutions being so cooperative, it is possible for different institutions to work together to a template and share modules for the same template using web technology. Perhaps that is already being done. Big computer and software companies may also be able to fund some of the infrastructure such as discounted machines for staff and students and wireless connections.

Maintaining good practices in China. While it is useful to think of reform, it is also important to recognize certain good practices in China so as to maintain them. Learners in China seem to have developed some good traditions for learning outside class. The English Corner, usually established on university campuses, where students can go to every Friday night to practice speaking English with other learners, is one such good learning tradition. Another useful practice is the dormitory arrangement. English major students that I interviewed during my field work for a project on language learning in China also reported that because 6 to 8 students with the same major could live in the same dormitory room, they could also practise speaking English with each other with good results. This again is a good tradition though I do wonder if not English-major students can benefit from living with English-major students in the same dormitory room. Campus radio students being eager to listen to news in English or English songs—all these activities already being done on the China mainland are good practices worth maintaining.

Another feature that is admirable is the inclusion of literature in language learning. Teaching in the ESP tradition does not exclude encouraging students to read novels or short stories, perhaps even poetry. For example, narrative structures and language lend themselves to report writing and case studies as in social work, law or even medicine to name but a few. At the same time, the latest syllabus for English majors in China or for double interdisciplinary degrees is very encouraging in that it incorporates the learning of a particular discipline into English studies. That is very much in line with the philosophy of knowledge being inseparable from the language used to discuss it.

ESP for China. Reform in the syllabus for non-English majors is about to come to a conclusion in the fall of 2003, the time of finalizing this paper. Such reform is likely to work in tandem with the trend towards offering about 30% of the university curriculum in English. In preparation for such reform, some universities are already exploring the possibility of offering ESP courses like in Hong Kong. Other universities are experimenting with having subject specialists teach their disciplines in English. Both modes of operation are intended to enhance students' ability to handle material in their discipline in English as China becomes increasingly open to global interaction. As the Hong Kong experience has shown, there are both advantages and obstacles in such operations and each university on the China mainland has to work out its own ELT destiny, just as each university in Hong Kong has done so. The more flexible the new College English syllabus is, the easier it will be for institutions in China to take into account their students' needs in developing their English programs.

Professional development for teachers. Regardless of which mode of operation is decided upon by an institution—ESP courses offered by English teachers or having subject specialists teach in English or a combination of both modes—as in Hong Kong—the teachers will need further training. Teachers I have spoken to on the China mainland at every educational level have expressed to me the desire to have further training opportunities such as study trips abroad, more books for their students and more teacher training books. Some English teachers have very little support, particularly those in primary school and those in the interior. One school I visited in Guangxi had only 1 teacher teaching all the primary grades in English. Another secondary school in Gansu has 60 to 70 students in each class. Even at the university level, having 100 students in a class is not unheard of though having 40 or 60 seems more common. In the interior, there is also the problem of some of the better teachers moving to the coastal areas where there are better job prospects. It is not enough that teachers should be trained. They have also to be given higher salaries to retain them in locations not economically desirable to live and work in otherwise. China being so vast, this is not to be achieved in the short term. Where external conditions cannot improve quickly, the emphasis should be placed on improving existing conditions.
teachers can only draw upon internal resources to motivate themselves. Many teachers are willing to work hard in China at every educational level if they can track the development of their own teacher identity, their learning goals, and their capacity to become different teachers better teachers even on a day-to-day basis. They may have greater job satisfaction. But they need to be trained to do so. Just as learners have to be trained to be aware of their own learning.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, I have only managed to touch briefly upon some of the current trends in ELT and illustrate how course developments in Hong Kong have incorporated some of these ideas. I have also tried to offer some suggestions for the future of ELT in China. While there are some aspects that need changes, there are also some good practices that should be retained.

In the midst of all these deliberations, I have only one final observation to make. Learners of English are not only exposed to a new language. They also have to somehow come to terms with the differences between the culture and ideology of their native language and that of English as a global language. I am not afraid that we will lose our young people. I am not afraid that they will no longer be Chinese if they achieve competence in English. I have been learning English for almost 50 years since my mother started teaching me the alphabet at home when I was just over two years old. I am still very very Chinese. For us to remain Chinese while learning English, we must know what we want to believe in. Globalization has negative effects on local identity only if we allow ourselves to get lost. If we do not allow ourselves to get lost, global contact can lead to a better society. During my research on English Language Teaching in China, I was reading a biography on Zhou Enlai and the memoirs of Henry Kissinger. The mutual regard these two great statesmen had for each other is so obvious and positively touching. It is possible for Chinese people to be on good terms with foreigners as equals. Competence in English makes it easier for us to do so.

As we begin this century, China is taking its rightful place in the world as a peaceable nation economically significant, politically stable and in every way more open and less inscrutable than before. A new age has come. Not only must we learn to deal with the West in English. The West must also learn to deal with us. So we must know who we are and be able to articulate our individual, social and national identity even in English. It is unlikely that many foreigners will achieve enough competence in Chinese in the short term to communicate with us in Chinese because there are just too many of us for them to communicate with. Because China has the greatest number of potential learners of English in the world, the national effort to learn English is most momentous but also most exciting.

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