A New Model in English Language Teaching in China: The Case of Shantou University*

Liu Jun
University of Arizona, USA

Xiao Liangrong
Shantou University

Abstract

College English teachers in China are often confronted with a number of challenges, such as the large class size, limited contact hours, limited linguistic input and output, test-oriented teaching and learning methods, and the lack of professional development opportunities, to name a few. As a result, many university students have gained rich linguistic knowledge and yet are poor in communicative competence. This paper reports a longitudinal, 8-year-long study of an English Enhancement Program in a southeast provincial university which follows a new model of college English teaching at the tertiary level in China. This model is supported by the expanded theoretical framework of communicative competence as both its goal and means, one that encompasses linguistic, pragmatic, discourse, strategic, and intercultural competences. This paper further discusses four implementation domains with concrete innovative strategies that sustain the innovation of the program, namely, 1) innovation in academic design and instruction, 2) a placement and assessment system, 3) faculty support and development, and 4) organizational development capacity.

Key words: communicative competence; English Enhancement Program; ELT reform

Although English is a compulsory course at the tertiary level in China, the general situation of English language teaching (ELT) is not satisfactory. Most students who have studied English for many years are still unable to communicate in the target language competently. In addition, large-sized classes, mixed proficiency levels of students, and

* This study of the English Enhancement Program was supported by the Li Kashing Foundation.
variations in motivation are not uncommon in institutions of higher education in China. In class there is very little interaction between teachers and students, as well as very little among students. Outdated teaching notions are still prevalent, resulting in why “Mute English (or “Dumb English”), though the term is somewhat exaggerated, is still a prevalent phenomenon among Chinese college students, non-English major students in particular. To a great extent, examination-oriented instruction may account for this phenomenon. In order to address this situation for the sake of aligning the university with international standards, helping its students use English as a tool to explore Western culture and expanding its students’ horizons by teaching and encouraging critical thinking, Shantou University (STU) launched an ELT reform program—the English Enhancement Program (EEP) in May 2002.

As an integral part of the EEP at STU, the English Language Center (ELC) was established in the following year with a mission dedicated to teaching excellence and providing a supportive language learning environment, in which students can develop their communicative competence and critical thinking strategies through both curricular and co-curricular activities in a vibrant, creative and intellectual community. The ELC’s mission is focused on increasing the competitive value of the university students’ English proficiency to an international level while simultaneously creating a model that directly contributes to both the English teaching and learning reforms throughout China. The ELC strives for a high-level of communicative competence (i.e., grammatical, pragmatic, discourse, and strategic competences) as the ultimate goal for all their students (Liu, 2007), achieved by teaching innovation that is informed by research in developing students’ critical thinking strategies, while stressing learner autonomy.

1. The Implementation of the ELC Program

In establishing the ELC, we have implemented a series of reforms based on the suggestions made by the team commissioned from the National Writing Project at the University of California, Berkeley, in 2002. Four major areas were identified by the commissioned team as needing distinct improvement: instruction, the examination system, faculty support, and organizational development. The ELC program was developed to address these issues, focusing on creating a new ELT model within the expanded framework of the communicative competence that includes linguistic, pragmatic, discourse, strategic, and intercultural competences. Under this theoretical framework, we have focused on four distinct but interrelated implementation domains. First of all, we have focused on innovation in academic design and instruction. Second, we have put together a placement and assessment system for all incoming students. Third, we provide a variety of modes of ongoing faculty support such as research opportunities, professional activities and ongoing workshops. Last but not least, we have provided facilities and encouraged numerous student-run activities to stimulate language learners to become language users.

We have developed innovative strategies within each domain. For instance, in the domain of “Innovation in academic design and instruction”, we emphasize integrated-skill
orientation, learner-centered instruction, task-based instruction, collaborative teaching, theme-based instruction, and cultivation of critical thinking. Within the “Placement and assessment system” domain, we have designed and implemented initial placement, level-specific assessment, task-based English Speaking Tests, and pre-test and post-test design. In the area of “Faculty support and development”, we have arranged numerous activities and workshops in professional development, and we strongly support faculty research by providing funding and resources for conference presentations and research projects. Last, but not least, in the domain of “Organizational and development capacity”, we have designed and implemented many elective courses, particularly, ESP courses. We focus on the cultivation of learner autonomy by providing an extension of classroom instruction with additional facilities, empowering our students to initiate, lead, and participate in a number of co-curricular activities. The new model we have launched for this longitudinal study can be represented by Chart 1.

Chart 1. A new model of ELT in Chinese higher education

In the following sections, we will provide detailed descriptions of this new ELT model coupled with research results, recognitions, and reflections.

1.1 Innovation in academic design and instruction
In establishing the ELC, we made academic design and instruction the priority. We have developed a new curriculum that accommodates all students according to their overall English proficiency and individual abilities, thus maximizing and personalizing their learning experience through specifically developed placement tests. Specifically, we have created a 7-level curriculum (i.e., ELC Preparatory, ELC Foundation, Level 1, Level 2, Level 3, Level 4, and Level 5) for undergraduates and a 3-tier curriculum (i.e., Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3) for graduate students, with skill-specific goals and objectives set at each level. In addition, we have a set class size limit (e.g., about 30 students per class for general English and 15 students per class for academic writing, persuasive speaking, and ESP courses) for the purpose of increasing classroom interaction. We have adopted an
imported textbook series (*NorthStar*, *New Interchange*, *True Colors*, *Interactions/Mosaic*, etc.), supported with our own supplementary materials that are up-to-date and pertinent to the themes covered in the textbooks.

Furthermore, we have offered specific courses (e.g., English for Art Students, English for Sports Students, Voice and Accent Training, etc.) to meet the different needs of students with different proficiency levels, in the hope of increasing their interest in learning English. Moreover, we realize the importance of creating a supportive language learning environment which is particularly beneficial to students in an EFL setting, so we have recruited many international teachers and Chinese teachers with overseas experience. Currently, out of the 50 instructors at the ELC, 23 are international teachers, and this is unique in higher education in general English teaching in China. The following principles have been incorporated in the courses and teaching materials:

1.1.1 Integrated-skill orientation
As pointed out by Richards (2006: 22), “communication is a holistic process that often calls upon the use of several language skills or modalities.” Integrating the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) in teaching is more beneficial for students in learning the target language than teaching each skill individually. Connecting skills centered around input, listening or reading, gives students meaningful content to interact and think about critically. In this orientation, the content of reading or listening materials is used for students to talk about or write about. New vocabulary or structures can be highlighted and practiced both before and after reading, and incorporated into follow-up speaking or writing activities. The multiple modes of interaction with the content give meaningful repetition, which helps students’ language retention.

1.1.2 Learner-centered instruction
Within the framework of a communicative approach, learners need opportunities and motivation to participate in classroom activities. In learner-centered instruction, learners are not only given more opportunities to try out the target language through interacting with their peers and/or teacher, but are also expected to take on more responsibilities in the learning process. Adopting a learner-centered approach actually facilitates learner autonomy because students are empowered to make choices, from which they can gain “‘ownership’ of their learning”, thus “add[ing] to their intrinsic motivation” (Brown, 1994: 80).

1.1.3 Task-based instruction
Although different researchers have different views on the definition of the term “task”, a general consensus is that task-based instruction refers to “an approach to pedagogy in which the point of departure is an inventory of things that people do with language rather than a list of grammatical items” (Nunan, 2003: 336). Through the task-based approach, students are provided with a number of communicative tasks that are closely related to certain course objectives, so that they can practice the target language in real world contexts.
1.1.4 Collaborative learning
Collaborative learning is intended not only for students to exchange viewpoints on course-related issues and themes, but also for them to practice teamwork. Through collaboration, students learn to work together, help one another, and respect each other, which truly reflects the “social nature of learning” (Richards, 2006: 25). In other words, “learning is not an individual, private activity, but a social one that depends upon interaction with others” (Richards, 2006: 25).

1.1.5 Theme-based instruction
As a model under the category of content-based language instruction, theme-based instruction is conducive to language learning because “content provides a coherent framework that can be used to link and develop all of the language skills” (Richards, 2006: 28). As indicated, themes can facilitate the linking and integration of multiple skills within a cohesive context. Oxford (2001: 2) notes that “the theme-based model integrates the language skills into the study of a theme”, and this can help the learner conceptually organize how all the skills that they are learning can be used meaningfully.

1.1.6 Cultivation of critical thinking
When it comes to language teaching, instructors are generally expected to use content information as a driving force for students to generate the language, and this can promote the simultaneous development of students’ critical thinking skills. Jacobs and Ferrell (as cited in Richards, 2006: 25) note that “language should serve as a means of developing higher-order thinking skills, also known as critical and creative thinking”. Using authentic materials which contain current and interesting topics (such as from newspapers, magazines, or online) can encourage students to critically think about topics related to them. Oxford (2001) notes that authentic materials enhance critical thinking in the language learning environment by giving learners more chances to interact with others using authentic material in a natural way and by allowing English to serve as a real means of interaction, both factors that can highly motivate a variety of students.

1.2 A placement and exam system
We have created placement tests that allow us to identify students’ abilities in various skills to appropriately place them in the courses, based on the 7-level curriculum, that best fit their skill levels. In order to evaluate students’ performance more objectively, we have focused more on formative assessment using level-wide rubrics. The assessment for ELC courses includes class participation, reflective journal writing, different genres/types of essays, quizzes, interactive oral tasks and/or a final oral presentation, and a final examination, among others.

Additionally, in order to measure the students’ performance at time of graduation, as well as their improvement in the program, we have adopted pre-tests for students before they are enrolled into the ELC program and post-tests upon their graduation to measure their performance. As such, a speaking component was incorporated into the test using the online Task-Based English Speaking Test (T-BEST), which we developed.
1.3 Faculty support and development

We consider supporting the faculty’s professional development a significant element of the ELC program. Such development enhances their own teaching methods and perspectives and provides recognition and legitimacy for the program. To guide our professional enrichment process, we have implemented a 4-part teacher performance review process including student evaluation, self-evaluation, external review, and a Director’s review. To provide opportunities for support and development, we have focused on developing the following two areas:

1.3.1 Professional Development

Professional development is an essential part of the program and critical to the successful implementation of the program. Because of the composition of the ELC faculty, we have been dedicated to building a community in which teachers from both China and abroad can work together collaboratively, collegially, and comfortably. To this end, we have implemented collaboration between international teachers and Chinese teachers, such as teaching at the same level, co-coordinating the level, as well as peer-mentoring. An example of the collaboration we encourage can be seen in the *NorthStar Student Companion Book Series*, a book series added to the collection of textbooks we use, compiled by more than 30 of our Chinese and international teachers working together through discussing topics of mutual interest and sharing experiences and expertise for about 6 months.

Due to the fact that in almost every academic year we recruit new teachers, international teachers in particular, we conduct a series of workshops/lectures for teachers, especially for novice teachers, on a regular basis. We also provide on-going professional development opportunities for the mutual exchange of ideas and thoughts, including presentations from visiting experts in the field and workshops focused on teaching methods and materials. We also hold regular faculty meetings and level meetings in order to ensure that we are meeting the standards of our curriculum, while at the same time we can take into consideration teachers’ individual ideas, preferences, and needs.

1.3.2 Faculty Research

To encourage continual development of the ELC program, we have aimed at teaching innovation that is informed by research. All the faculty members and administration staff are encouraged to become TESOL members (e-members), in order for our teachers to be informatively connected to the field. In order to keep our faculty’s knowledge in the field up to date, we have organized five international symposia and published 3 issues of the *Review of Applied Linguistics in China*. We have also applied for provincial and national grants for teaching and research. One national and two provincial research projects have been completed.

Furthermore, we encourage and subsidize our teachers to present their own research at both national and international conferences. Up to now, many teachers at the ELC have presented their papers at international conferences such as ThaiTESOL, CamTESOL, the ELF International Conference in Vienna, Austria, The Asian Conference on Education in Japan, and the CELC International Symposium in Singapore. Some of them have published their articles in journals in China or abroad.
1.4 Organizational development and capacity

The ELC keeps in mind how we can sustain our program development. In addition to continuing to improve the teaching quality of the core courses which are required at the center, we have already started to offer ESP courses such as “Advanced Legal English”, “English for Journalism Students”, “Advanced English for Business Students”, “ESP Reading and Writing Strategies for Anthropology”, “International Legal English”, and “ESP Talking about Art and Design”. Furthermore, we have offered some elective courses to students who have completed the ELC required courses, including “Academic Writing”, “Persuasive Speaking”, “Critical Speaking”, “Creative Writing”, and “Introduction to Translation”. Offering ESP courses to students is intended to pave the way for establishing English as the medium of instruction at the university in the future. Offering elective courses to students specifically aims at further enhancing students’ overall communicative competence while at the same time upgrading their skills in a certain particular area. To expand the organization and provide additional opportunities for students, we have made the following considerations and advancements:

1.4.1 Cultivation of learner autonomy

Although “learner autonomy” is a fuzzy term, especially in foreign language learning, it does not simply mean that learners learn by themselves. As Little (1994, as cited in Littlewood, 1999: 75) puts it, “learner autonomy is the product of interdependence rather than independence.” This interdependence results from students developing “a capacity and willingness to act independently and in cooperation with others, as a social, responsible person” (Dam et al., 1990: 102). Therefore, within the framework of a communicative approach, offering students more chances to interact with their peers and teachers both in the classroom and outside the classroom helps to promote learner autonomy in the end.

1.4.2 Extension of classroom instruction

In EFL contexts, insufficient comprehensible input of the target language is almost always a problem. Therefore, creating a supportive language learning environment is fundamental since our ultimate goal is to improve students’ overall communicative competence in English. Thus, we have been offering various English co-curricular activities, largely run by students and supported by our faculty, which function as extensions of classroom instruction. We believe that English co-curricular activities can not only provide students with a relaxed, natural, and authentic linguistic environment but also improve their English proficiency, especially enhancing their aural and oral English communicative skills. Furthermore, through participating in such activities, students can become more aware of cultural differences. We also believe that English co-curricular activities can be conducive to developing students’ autonomous learning ability because “autonomy develops most effectively in an interpersonal environment which supports it” (Littlewood, 1999: 75).

1.4.3 Additional facilities

An additional development is the establishment of the state-of-the-art Center for
Independent Language Learning (CILL) that provides more avenues for students’ autonomous learning, as well as various co-curricular activities and classes with an online component using Moodle software. The act of increasing recruiting efforts sustains not only the teaching but also research productivity at the ELC. Moreover, in order to guarantee and improve service quality, the ELC has fulfilled the requirements for the implementation of ISO 9001:2008, Quality Management System. Also, the ELC has implemented the Environmental Management System which is fully integrated into the structure of the organization and conforms to the requirements of ISO 14001:2004, the International Standard for Environmental Management Systems. In other words, we have documented all the procedures and details employed by the ELC.

1.4.4 Co-curricular activities
The ELC has offered three main types of English co-curricular activities to students: weekly activities, series events, and an annual event. Weekly activities include the English Lounge (accessible to students every night, designed to provide them with an all-English environment in which they can chat with their peers and teachers, read newspapers, magazines or novels, and watch movies), the English Corner (one night per week with featured programs, including fun games and casual conversation on certain topics with invited teachers and learning vocabulary and expressions in a fun way, such as debating), the Creative Expression Club (an open stage for all the students to exercise their creativity by creating and performing skits and plays), the Reading Club, Poetry Club, Music Club, and American TV Club (an activity for promoting English learning through watching TV shows while at the same time learning some daily expressions and discussing the stories with peers and/or teachers), Gender Issues (a discussion group focusing on problems and issues that women encounter both on campus and in society at large), English through Drama (a fun way of learning English and building confidence, while at the same time getting help from a voice and accent trainer to develop desired accents in more informal surroundings), the Morning Reading Club (held early in the morning, using movie dialogues to improve students’ pronunciation, intonation, expressions, and fluency), and the English Debating Society.

Series events consist of the Conversation Series (a forum for the exchange of ideas where invited guests share their expertise, experiences, viewpoints, and perspectives on various topics of interest), the Faculty Lecture Series (organized by the faculty and designed to expose students to lectures in English on various topics) and the Film Series (theme-based, engaging students in film-related discussion). The annual Intercollegiate English Festival, consisting of an Opening Ceremony featuring a musical performance, the Speech Contest, Singing Contest, and Debate Contest are all opportunities to showcase students’ talents. In addition, we organize other fun and educational activities for students, such as Cross Country Games, the Halloween Party, Christmas Caroling, and Culture Week. Moreover, the ELC Blog, a platform for students to practice their writing in English, while The Shantou Beat, an English publication, gives students the chance to work on the editorial staff (c.f. Xiao & Luo, 2009).
2. Effectiveness of the Program

The effectiveness of the program can be supported through the following three areas: 1) Research studies; 2) Recognition of the program; and 3) Recognition of STU students’ performance in competition at the national level.

2.1 Research studies

2.1.1 A post-test only study

An early needs analysis of English language learning difficulties and the accompanying attitudes of our students during the fall of 2003 revealed two areas of weakness among our students: listening comprehension and speaking skills. During the past nine years (2002-2011), the ELC has designed, initiated, and internally conducted an ongoing, aggressive, and extensive project: a pre-test/post-test study, first using the testing to establish criteria to guide the program and then continuing the project as an integral part of the ELC performance review. In June 2003, all first-year students took placement tests that measured their listening, reading, language use, and the writing skills that they had following their first academic year. Using the same testing instruments, these same students again took a series of tests, the post-test administered just prior to their graduation during the summer of 2006. Additionally, the testing process was enhanced through the implementation of an English speaking test, designed and added to the post-test in order to more completely and accurately assess the graduating STU students’ English speaking skills, which the ELC has focused on since fall 2003.

The Medical College of STU served as a comparison group for the other colleges on the main campus because it implemented an English program that was different from the ELC model in curriculum, textbooks, and teaching methods. As such, the medical students did not participate in the pre-test implemented to all the students on the main campus. However, it is important to point out that these medical students were admitted as the first-tier admission group (as opposed to other main-campus students who were admitted as the second-tier admission group) with much higher overall college entrance examination scores (higher by 30 points or more). While we regretted that we were unable to administer a pre-test to the medical students, they (2002 class) willingly participated in the post-test that was administered in 2006 to students across the board. The post-test was implemented to a total of 1,042 students on the main campus, non-medical students (n = 899) and medical students (n = 143). There were about 823 valid data sets used for analysis.

As shown in Figure 1, the average post-test score of the Medical College was 73.42. This was lower than the Journalism (80.97), Business (77.92), and Law Colleges (76.91). An ANOVA revealed significant differences among colleges, $F(1, 815) = 69.8, p < .001$. Post hoc tests showed statistical differences between the Medical College and the Liberal Arts, with the latter outperforming the former after four years of English study, $p < .001$. Nevertheless, the Medical College was markedly higher than the Art and Design College.
A New Model in English Language Teaching in China: The Case of Shantou University

(post hoc LCD, \( p < .001 \)) whose students were admitted on slightly different criteria, taking into consideration their special talents in fine arts.

![Figure 1. The mean of post-test scores of colleges at STU in June 2006](image)

Since the English Enhancement Program (EEP) places much emphasis on oral communication, it is important to observe the improvements of the students in listening and speaking skills in the two different English programs.

![Figure 2. The mean of listening comprehension scores in the post-test of colleges at STU in June 2006](image)

Figure 2 illustrates that the average listening comprehension score of the medical students was much lower than that of the Liberal Arts (post hoc LCD, \( p < .001 \)), Journalism (post hoc LCD, \( p < .05 \)), and Business Colleges (post hoc LCD, \( p < .05 \)) but significantly higher than the mean score of the Art and Design College (post hoc LCD \( p < .001 \)). With respect to listening skills, as it can be inferred, the medical students started at a comparable level to their counterparts from Journalism School and Business School in 2002 but they lagged behind these two colleges in the 2006. It can be further inferred that four years studying in the EEP greatly helped improve the listening comprehension of students in the Journalism and Business Schools.
The comparison of speaking scores in the post-test in Figure 3 shows the highly significant difference between the colleges $F(1, 815) = 37.45, p < .001$. Post hoc tests showed that six colleges (excluding the Art and Design College) significantly outperformed the Medical College, $p < .001$. Meanwhile, the Medical College significantly outperformed the Art and Design College, $p < .05$.

This result clearly demonstrates that the EEP has greatly improved the speaking ability of the majority of the student population on the main campus of STU. Figure 4 demonstrates the differential improvement of the overall oral communication skills (e.g., listening and speaking combined) evidenced in the post-test.

In combining speaking and listening scores, Figure 4 provides further evidence of the contrast between the Medical College and the other colleges that have higher mean scores than the Medical College (with the exception of the Art and Design College). Post hoc tests showed that the other six colleges significantly outperformed the Medical College in oral communication skills, $p < .001$. Meanwhile, the Medical College significantly outperformed the Art and Design College, $p < .001$. 

Figure 3. The mean of speaking scores in the post-test of colleges at STU in June 2006

Figure 4. The mean of oral communication skills scores in the post-test of colleges at STU in June 2006
2.1.2 CET scores

Although we are reluctant to benchmark our program with the national standards by using the CET scores, as CET is not the true reflection of the EEP’s goals, we, nevertheless, conducted one study for comparison with the belief that CET can provide some insights about the EEP with regard to the English levels of students in other Chinese universities. Figure 5 shows the comparison of the pass rate among STU students, the national average pass rate of non-key universities, and that of the key universities in China, synthesized from the three testing dates (January 2004, June 2004, and January 2005).

![Passing Rate Chart](image)

**Figure 5.** A comparison of students’ CET 4 passing rates by university

It is clear from Figure 5 that STU students’ pass rate was almost double that of their counterparts in other non-key universities and that they also surpassed those in key universities. A detailed analysis is represented in Figure 6.

![Passing Rate Chart](image)

**Figure 6.** A comparison of students’ CET 4 pass rates by session and university

A few patterns emerged from the breakdown comparisons as indicated above. First of all, at each of the three testing times (January 2004, June 2004, and January 2005), STU surpassed the other universities’ average pass rate. Second, STU students also exceeded the pass rate of their counterparts in key universities in January and June 2004, although in January 2005, their pass rate was lower than the national average of key universities. This
happened due to the fact that the majority of the STU students who took the exam on that date were either those who moved up from lower proficiency levels (Preparatory and Foundation) or those repeating test-takers who had failed in the previous two tests.

2.2 Recognition of the program
Because of the achievements we have made, the ELC became the winner of the Shantou University Teaching Excellence Award in 2004 and the winner of the Guangdong Province Teaching Excellence Award in 2005. Subsequently, our program was recommended for the National Award for Excellence in Teaching in 2006. Through organizing several international symposia on ELT, the ELC Program was recognized not only by experts in the field both in China and abroad but also by the media. A report written (in Chinese) by Shi Jinjun and Zhao Jidong and published in China Education Daily on May 18th, 2004, commented that the ELC Program at STU is innovative and exceptional.

2.3 Recognition of STU students’ performance
The overall English proficiency of STU students generally cannot be compared with that of students at national key universities, because their scores on the college entrance exam were lower in their English proficiency at the beginning. Because of our program, however, STU students’ English skills have benefited greatly. Being able to compete with students from key national universities and those from some famous international universities has already brought them recognition from others. Because of their great dedication and self-confidence, a few of our students have gained recognition in various national level competitions. Examples from STU are a 2nd place winner at the Tenth 21st Century “SFLEP Cup” National English Speaking Competition in 2005, a 1st place winner at the Thirteenth 21st Century “Lenovo Cup” National English Speaking Competition in 2008, and a 3rd place winner at the Fourteenth “SFLEP Cup” National English Debate Competition in 2010.

3. Discussion and Conclusion

While the theoretical framework of communicative competence has indeed made great contributions to second language acquisition as a field, we might wonder why there are still many ESL/EFL students who fail to acquire some, if not all, competencies within the communicative competence framework. We might wonder why many ESL/EFL speakers who have already acquired a high level of communicative competence still fail to communicate appropriately in many social and educational settings. We might also wonder why some ESL/EFL learners seek opportunities to communicate with people in the target language, while others do not. It seems obvious that employing communicative competence as a model is not sufficient in itself for Chinese learners of English to become communicatively competent and able to appropriately use the language. What is additionally needed is innovative academic design and dynamic and interactive teaching, so that learners will learn, while at the same time use, English to enhance their oral communication abilities and strategies. Given the diverse backgrounds of students and their differential language skills, it is of ultimate importance to implement a placement system coupled with both formative and summative assessment mechanisms. What seems more important is to provide support for faculty with regular professional development.
opportunities and allocate funding for faculty research, conference presentations, and workshops. Furthermore, it is important to encourage and support multiple student co-curricular activities to cultivate learner autonomy and critical thinking through ongoing and abundant opportunities to practice English. We need to make learners responsible for their own learning. In order to do so, learners should put effort into developing their desired level of communicative competence. What we need to help our learners develop, besides communicative competence, is culture-sensitive knowledge and mindful reflection, as well as social identity negotiation skills.

By culture-sensitive knowledge, we mean an in-depth understanding of important intercultural communication concepts that affect English language interactions. Without such knowledge, communicators cannot become aware of the implicit “ethnocentric lenses” they use to evaluate behaviors in an intercultural situation, nor can they accurately reframe their interpretation from another’s cultural standpoint. By mindful reflection, we mean the type of reflection that allows one to see both differences and similarities between others’ cultural and personal perspectives and our own, and through which new insights and an alternative set of cultural and personal experiences can be obtained. By acquiring social identity negotiation skills, skills that will allow individuals in all cultures to be competent communicators in a diverse range of interactive situations, they can constantly adjust their identities to meet their communication needs. It is the combination of this knowledge and these skills that will make communicative competence an invested outcome rather than an objective criterion.

In sum, second language learners need to develop culture-sensitive knowledge and mindful reflection, social identity negotiation skills, in addition to communicative competence. Teachers employing this expanded communicative competence model will not only benefit EFL/ESL students in acquiring communicative competences in different social and cultural settings, but will also help themselves to be open-minded and sensitive to their students’ constant negotiation between their original and new sets of cultural beliefs, values, and habits.

The longitudinal study reported here explains and analyzes what we have done over the past eight years in helping Chinese students at a tertiary level improve their overall communicative competence in English. Launching such a new model of ELT within the framework of communicative competence in higher education in China is not without challenges. Based on what the ELC has accomplished in the past eight years, there are several points worthy of notice. First and foremost, establishing a strong leadership with a global vision is one of the most crucial factors for the successful implementation of a program. Of course, there is no doubt that it takes time, dedication, and energy to build a community, and it is the team spirit that makes things progress more smoothly. Dedicated faculty and staff are the backbone for carrying out the program. Secondly, although thoughtful planning is essential, follow-up actions, such as strong and steady support from the school authorities and interdepartmental understanding and collaboration from the department heads, are equally important. Thirdly, the student population, as the beneficiary of the reform, needs to be fully aware of the importance of communicative competence in English not only for their academic studies but also for their future careers so that they can become active participants in both curricular and co-curricular activities. In addition, sustainable student leadership as we saw in the co-curricular activities in our
program is needed. Fourthly, thoughtful research design and longitudinal data collection is important in that it provides the decision-makers with ample statistical evidence of what is working or needed in the program. For the sustainable development of the program, necessary adjustments need to be made in order to cater to students’ needs. In this sense, longitudinal data collection can keep the decision-maker well informed. Last but not least, any reform program is sure to encounter resistance, especially at the very beginning, so it is important to consider whether the program is truly beneficial to students or not. To enhance students’ communicative competence in English is a long-term goal, which calls for constant evaluation and reflection.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Li Kashing Foundation for their generous support over the years. We would also like to thank Julia Hsiao, then Vice President at Shantou University, for her strong support and impeccable leadership. We are indebted to ELC teachers and many individuals who contributed to the overall success of this study. We are grateful to the research assistance of Liping Gao, Junru Yang, Ming Luo, and Robin Liu. Thanks also go to Claudia Kunschak whose continued efforts in sustaining the leadership for ELC over the past few years is much appreciated.

Note

1. Due to the fact that we have offered specific courses to art students and sports students, the course of “ELC Preparatory” has since been cancelled. Instead, we have provided art students with 3 levels—EA1, EA2, and EA3 (EA stands for English for art students), and sports students with SE (Sports English).

References


