

**The problem of low proficiency in English as a foreign language
in urban middle schools in China**

by

Yajuan Lai

**A mini-dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree**

Master of Arts

in the Department of Afrikaans at the

UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

SUPERVISOR: Vic Webb

July 2007

Acknowledgments

I would never have been able to complete my dissertation without the guidance of my supervisor, help from friends, and support from my family.

First and foremost I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Vic Webb, for his exceptional guidance, caring nature and patience, and for providing me with an excellent atmosphere for doing research. His words of encouragement, quiet urgings and careful reading through all my work will never be forgotten. He was always there to cheer me up and he stood by me through all of my circumstances.

Secondly, I would like to thank Isolde Dittrich and Anouk von Gruenewaldt. I deeply appreciate how much time they devoted to providing skilful comments and helpful advice in every phase of my dissertation.

My thanks also go to all the people who provided feedback and support at various phases of the dissertation. My research would not have been possible without their help.

I would also like to thank my parents and my elder brother. They were always supporting me and encouraging me with their best wishes.

Abstract

This research examines the low proficiency in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and the effectiveness, or rather lack thereof, of English studies in Chinese urban middle schools.

While most Chinese students learn English in middle school, very few are able to speak functional English. Even the surprisingly high marks for English tests and examinations are misleading, as these do not reflect the true ability of these students to use the English language.

Possible factors contributing to this problem are highlighted, such as the inappropriate nature of university entrance examinations, ineffective teaching and learning methods as well as the teaching material used, overcrowded classrooms, lack of meaningful exposure to English, and learner's heavy study burden.

Aspects of learning and teaching English – the skills required (such as speaking, reading and writing) as well as the various teaching methods – are discussed. Learning a language involves grammatical, textual, functional and sociolinguistic knowledge, yet Chinese English language learners appear to develop organisational competence rather than pragmatic competence. This suggests that there is a possible flaw or shortfall in the teaching methodology and pedagogy behind teaching English and questions the effectiveness of English studies currently implemented at urban Chinese middle schools.

In the light of this problem an in-depth look at language knowledge, the nature of language and proficiency levels, as well as the verbal communication process and

language acquisition is taken. Furthermore, the differences between NLA, SLA and FLA are explained with a view to theories about how human beings learn a language. This involves various teaching methods, highlighting communicative language teaching and, at the same time characteristics of effective teaching as well as the textbooks used in a Chinese context for teaching English.

The questionnaire methodology is applied in this research, and has been used to investigate and find reasons for this problem.

Finally, recommendations are put forward regarding the following aspects: adding value to the present syllabus, improving the setting of assessments, providing more teaching materials, improving the language proficiency and teaching abilities of English teachers, and letting students have more time and opportunity to be exposed to the English language.

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Chapter 1

THE PROBLEM TO BE RESEARCHED

1.1 Aim of the research

The purpose of this study is to investigate the reasons for the low proficiency in English as a foreign language (EFL) of learners in Chinese urban middle schools (Grade 7 to Grade 12), and to present proposals for resolving the problem.

1.2 Statement of the problem

As an English teacher in a middle school in China, most of the researcher's former students came to ask for help with their English studies. It led the researcher to consider the problems that occur in the process of foreign language acquisition.

English is a required course in middle schools, and is as important as Mathematics and Chinese. Nowadays, most primary schools also have English as a compulsory subject. There is normally one English class every day. The reason why English is so important is due to the fact that students' performance in the English course will to some extent determine whether they pass the final examination or not.

From the above it is clear that Chinese students are forced to learn English and to get high marks in the English examinations. Although Chinese students pay more attention to English learning nowadays, they do not acquire it effectively. To determine an average level of students' performance in English, the researcher obtained final examination results of some of her students. Since there were no oral

tests in the examinations, the following information shows only their performance in three domains of acquired skill in English: listening, reading and writing in the final examination.

Table 1: Average marks in percentages of final exams of selected classes in one middle school in Chengdu, 2003

	Listening (20%)	Reading (60%)	Writing (20%)	Total
Class 8	66.7	72.4	80.1	72.77
Class 10	65.9	71.9	79.8	72.28
Class 12	62.3	70.2	77.6	70.1

(Mark scale: 60% - pass; 70% - 79% - average; 80% - 89% - good; 90% - 100% - excellent)

These marks seem high to people in Western countries. However, in China the middle school grading system is such that the pass mark is 60% and any mark below 70% is viewed as below average. Students place a high importance on their English marks because there is serious competition between Chinese students for acceptance into tertiary institutions, and the higher their marks are, the higher their chances of being accepted by a better university.

From the above table, it can be seen that the listening ability in all three classes falls below the 70% mark, which in China is barely a pass mark. The ability to read and write is slightly better. However, in daily life, these three skills are not adequate. Most of the students cannot speak English effectively - they need to think twice before uttering even the simplest of sentences, and some of them cannot even construct a full sentence after having learnt English for several years. These students have clearly not internalized the grammatical system of the English language.

As an example, one can consider a letter from one of the researcher's former students who went to the United States of America for further study. He wrote that he kept quiet for almost a whole month after he arrived there, for he found that it was difficult for him to understand the local people, which frustrated him. The researcher was shocked by this, because he was once one of the top students in his class in China.

This case is not an exception. A large number of Chinese students have had similar experiences. They spend much on resources learning English with little satisfactory progress or results.

One of the possible reasons for the low levels of efficiency in communicating in English is that the methods used to teach English are based on techniques that require the student to only make use of his/her memory. Thus, many of the students can remember a lot of vocabulary and know the rules of the grammar very well, but they cannot speak fluently in daily life. It is also difficult for them to understand what people from English-speaking countries are saying. When they hear a sentence, they need to work out what it means and only then can they respond.

The former Deputy President of the People's Republic of China, Mr Li Lanqing, criticised the mode of English teaching in China in 2000. He alluded to the low and inefficient processes in EFL teaching methodology. Since many Chinese students of English still cannot speak or understand spoken English well after a decade of learning English, Mr Li Lanqing's criticism appears to be justified.

There must be something wrong with the approach to foreign language learning and teaching. Many educationalists and linguists have undertaken research and have suggested reforms in English teaching (Brown, 2000; Cook, 2001; and Lightbown & Spada, 1993). It is necessary to deal with the problem as soon as possible.

1.3 Possible factors in the problem

There are several possible reasons for the unsatisfactory state of learning English, such as the factors below:

1.3.1 The restricted motivation to learn English

Most Chinese students in middle school seem to learn English only to pass the entrance examinations for university with high marks. In China, English is a requirement for tertiary institution admission, and the higher the student's total marks, the better her/his chance to admission at a good university. Obtaining a degree from a good university correlates strongly with obtaining a well-paid job in China, so most middle school students aim to obtain good marks in the English entry examination. However, this does not mean that students are adequately and appropriately motivated to develop their communicative competence in English (see Brown, 2000).

1.3.2 The inappropriate nature of the entrance examinations

Another factor that contributes to the poor English standards in China is the examination content. The English examination mainly emphasises reading and writing, with far more questions assessing these skills than there are questions assessing listening skills. Also, there is no oral test in the examination. Students thus do far more preparation for reading and writing than they do for listening and speaking, with the hope of obtaining higher marks. Teachers do the same, focusing on improving students' reading and writing skills in order to help them get satisfactory marks.

1.3.3 Ineffective learning and teaching methods, with an emphasis on preparing for the exams only

The most Chinese students of English believe that high marks in English examinations are the most accurate evidence of their English proficiency level. They take all kinds of English examinations: GRE (Graduate Record Examination), TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), and CET BAND4/6 (College English Test – Band 4/6). Sometimes, applying to take a TOEFL examination is much more difficult than the examination itself.

To meet the students' needs, teachers use grammar-teaching methods to help students obtain high marks in the above-mentioned examinations. English teachers mainly use grammar-translation methods, with the emphasis on rote learning. That is, they seldom require students to read aloud and speak, only requiring them to memorise the new words and English grammar rules. In this way students' abilities to speak English cannot be developed sufficiently (Hall and Verplaetse, 2000; Howatt, 1984; Ehrman, 1998; Kumaravadivelu, 1948; Finocchiaro and Brumfit, 1983; and Weideman, 2002).

1.3.4 Inappropriate teaching materials and human resources

- i. Although there is much English reading material in China, most of it is compiled by publishing companies in China. They often design the material in Chinese ways, which makes the material different from the original text. Since students seldom have access to the original books, it is hard for them to learn English adequately through these materials.
- ii. The bulk of the English teaching is still conducted by Chinese teachers, the majority of whom have never been outside of China or talked to a native English speaker. Owing to a lack of English proficiency themselves, some Chinese teachers find it difficult to teach English

effectively.

1.3.5 Overcrowded English classrooms

In most of the middle schools in the Chinese cities, there are over 60 students in one class. In addition, there is only one English class per day. Students therefore have little opportunity to practise English.

1.3.6 The lack of meaningful exposure to English

Most learners have very few opportunities to communicate with people from English-speaking countries in everyday life. Although they are sometimes exposed to some English movies, television and radio programmes, this does not really qualify as meaningful exposure. This is one reason why the students' listening and speaking abilities cannot develop effectively (Hyltenstam, 1992).

1.3.7 The heavy burden of the students' studies

In middle schools in China, students have a heavier study burden than in many Western countries. They have eight to nine classes in one day, and after school most of them have to take evening classes and weekend classes, even though this is against the law.

Besides the extra classes, students have a lot of homework to do every day. Normally they are unable to finish their homework before midnight. According to one study done in 2005, 66.6% of primary school students and 77.1% of middle school students did not have enough time to sleep due to a heavy study burden (Xinhua News, 2005).

Given the above-mentioned factors, the researcher wants to examine their effect on the low EFL proficiency in urban middle schools in China in this study, and then the researcher wants to suggest appropriate ways for solving

the problem.

1.4 Seriousness of the problem

China is developing at a very rapid rate and consequently communication between China and Western countries continues to increase, making English indispensable in China.

Firstly, as indicated above, in all the tertiary institutions, a student needs to pass the CET (College English Test)-Band4/6 in order to obtain a degree. Furthermore, it will be difficult for a student to get a good job after graduation without the CET-Band4/6 Certificate, which is regarded as the major indication of English proficiency. Finding a well-paid job in a transnational corporation depends on a person's English proficiency. Besides a degree, English proficiency is actually considered a principal qualification. Thus, in most people's opinion, learning English is not only for those Chinese going abroad for further studies; it is also an effective means of improving a person's life in China.

Secondly, since China has joined the World Trade Organization and has also succeeded in her bid to host the Olympic Games in 2008, communication between Chinese people and people from the Western world has become very important and will require that Chinese people learn English. Many people in China, therefore, now feel that learning English is essential, in order to be part of the global village of the 21st century.

Finally, realising the significance of English, most parents have begun to invest a lot of money into their children's English studies. Even in primary school, most urban children are sent to all kinds of English classes in their spare time, which are offered by various organisations. After school, most of their time is devoted to extra English classes. Parents also spend money buying a variety of English books, trying to give

their children as much as possible exposure to English.

From the above, it is clear that everyone in China feels compelled to learn English. It is, therefore, all the more important to resolve the problem.

1.5 Research Questions

In order to find ways to resolve the problem, the following questions need to be addressed:

- Q1.** Are Chinese students adequately motivated to learn English?
- Q2.** Is the English syllabus appropriate?
- Q3.** Are the learning materials appropriate and relevant?
- Q4.** Is English teachers' language proficiency adequate?
- Q5.** Are the didactic methods used by the teachers effective?
- Q6.** Are the assessment tests in the entrance examinations appropriate?
- Q7.** How much time and opportunity do learners have to hear, read, write and speak English?

1.6 Research design and methodology

If the researcher is to propose solutions to these problems, a study of the literature on Foreign Language Acquisition and Second Language Acquisition will be essential. The researcher will undertake a literature study on the research questions listed above.

Doing primary research will also be necessary for addressing the problem. Questionnaires completed by former colleagues and students in China will be used to collect more information on the state of learning EFL in urban middle schools in China.

1.7 Structure of the dissertation

The report on the research undertaken for this study will have the following structure: In Chapter 1 the research problem is defined, after which a literature review for providing a theoretical framework is laid out in Chapter 2. The next chapter deals with the description of research methods. The presentation of collected data, analysis and interpretation of information are covered in Chapter 4, followed by a discussion of research findings, as well as a summary and recommendations in the last chapter.

Chapter 2

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The low proficiency in English as a foreign language (EFL) of learners in China has been a challenge for quite a while. In order for this problem to be resolved, it is, amongst other things, necessary to indicate clearly what is understood by the following terms: *language knowledge*, *native language acquisition (NLA)*, *second language acquisition (SLA)*, *foreign language acquisition (FLA)*, *language teaching and learning methods*, *syllabus*, *textbook*, *teacher education*, and *language proficiency assessment*. In this chapter, a step by step review of literature relevant to FLA is presented.

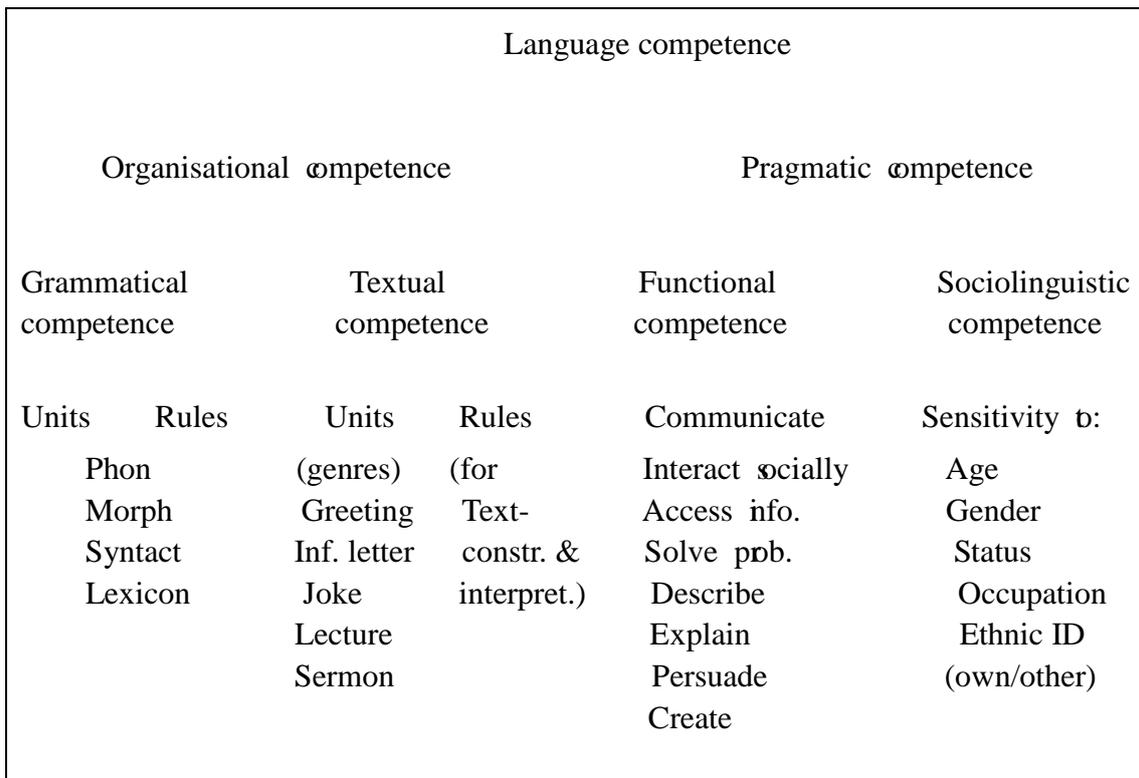
2.1 Language knowledge

In order to determine what a language teacher and learner must teach and acquire respectively, it is necessary to indicate clearly what language knowledge constitutes.

2.1.1 The nature of language

It must, first of all, be indicated what is understood by language. Webb (2004:21) defines language as a “set of organising principles, rules, conventions and units” to express and/or interpret meaning. Webb gives a general description of what the knowledge of a language constitutes in the following diagram [adapted from Brown, 1994:229 and Bachman, 1990:87]

Figure 2.1: The structure of language knowledge



The above diagram shows that language knowledge consists of the following types of competences:

- i. *Organisational competence*, which consists of two sub-types: *grammatical* and *textual competence*. In each subtype the relevant units and the rules for their construction into larger units (sentences and texts) are given.
- ii. *Pragmatic competence*, which consists of *functional* and *sociolinguistic competence*.

Bachman (1990:87) calls “*functional competence*” “*illocutionary competence*”, which refers to the competence to send and receive meanings, and comprises four types of functional competence: ideational, manipulative, heuristic and imaginative.

Webb (2004:24) points out that the main objective of SLA and FLA is to acquire communicative ability. However, this does not mean learners only need to acquire

“pragmatic competence”. To be able to communicate with others, they (obviously) also require linguistic knowledge and the skills needed to “perform the cognitive, affective and social tasks required of them.”

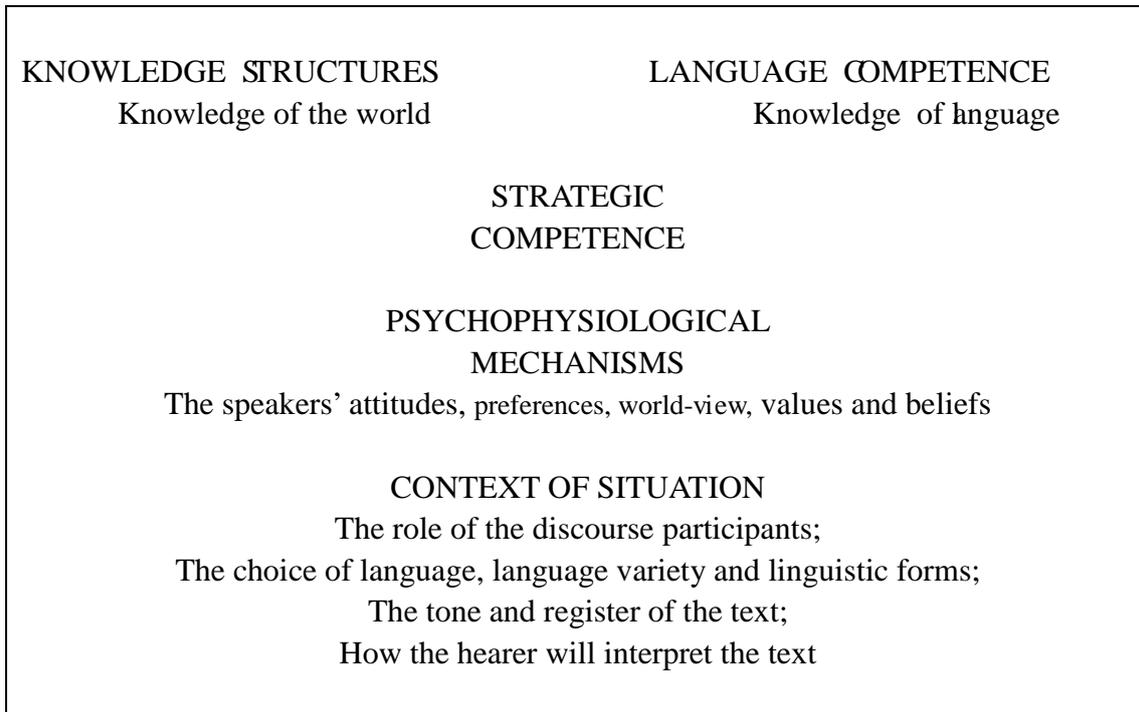
Webb (2004:24) argues that language learners therefore need to acquire the following:

- i. Grammatical knowledge: units and rules, negative formation, active and passive voice, rules for question formation and so forth
- ii. Textual knowledge and skills: acquisition of genres, elements of text construction and cohesion, with the ability to arrange thoughts into logical parts
- iii. Functional knowledge and skills to conduct conversations: to initiate, manage and end a conversation, to thank someone, express feelings and respect, to co-operate with other members of a group; ask for and or offer information, to disagree or explain ...
- iv. Sociolinguistic knowledge and skills: the ability to communicate verbally in various social contexts and appropriately apply discourse conventions, such as, forms of etiquette, forms of address that are socio-culturally suitable and at the same time using the necessary speech registers and styles.

Bachman (1990:87) adds a further element of communicative ability: *strategic competence*. On the basis of his/her knowledge structure and his/her language competence, a speaker/hearer also has the ability to choose words and phrases which enable him/her to achieve his/her communicative goal. This competence is therefore used as a “strategy” to achieve the language user’s communicative aims.

The relationship between strategic competence and language competence is represented in the following diagram:

Figure2.2: Components of communicative language ability in communicative language use (Bachman, 1990:85)



Based on the requirements of Chinese English learners, the teacher can tailor what needs to be taught in line with the different competencies. However, Chinese learners studying English in middle school have their own reasons for learning the language that differs from those of other learners worldwide.

Firstly, the main goal of Chinese learners of EFL is to acquire grammatical competence (knowledge of the rules to construct specific types of sentences), a basic vocabulary, and textual competence, such as greeting and writing a formal letter. For most of the learners, it is more difficult to develop pragmatic competence (functional and sociolinguist competence), due to the fact that they don't often verbally interact in English. Their primary needs are to be able to listen, read and write in English in order to gain entrance into a university and to pass the English proficiency tests, such as TOEFL, with high marks, and to communicate occasionally with people from English-speaking countries in public places, or communicate with colleagues from English-speaking countries in work places.

Language is not homogenous, and it has complex variations of styles, dialects and registers. However, Chinese learners of English do not need knowledge of the informal varieties of English. Foreign language learners do not have many opportunities to use these varieties and thus focus only on the formal variety.

2.1.2 Language proficiency levels

Having identified what language competence learners need and which language varieties they need to acquire, it is imperative that the language proficiency levels the learners need to attain be addressed as well.

Cummins (2002:65) distinguishes three levels of language proficiency, namely:

- i. Conversational fluency, which is the ability to carry on a conversation in familiar face-to-face situations.
- ii. Discrete language knowledge, which is the grammatical knowledge that students acquire as a result of direct instruction.
- iii. Academic language proficiency, which includes knowledge of the less frequent vocabulary of English as well as the ability to interpret and produce increasingly complex written (and oral) language.

According to the acquisition needs and aims of Chinese learners taking English as a foreign language, learners need to attain the second level of English language proficiency, while some need to achieve the first level as well. Many Chinese learners can learn discrete language skills easily, while improving their conversational fluency is still a big challenge. For most Chinese English learners, it is not necessary to attain academic language proficiency, unless they plan to go abroad to study further in English-medium tertiary institutions, where high language proficiency would be required. Obtaining discrete language skills is therefore the focus of most Chinese learners.

2.1.3 The verbal communication process

Although communicative competence is the primary purpose in SLA and FLA, the first level of language proficiency -- conversational proficiency -- is an essential element in effective communication. It is therefore necessary to know more about the verbal communication process.

Webb (2004:3) defines the verbal communication as “an interactive, co-operative act, involving the negotiation of meaning”. In the communication process, the four fundamental contexts, such as the situation, psychological context, socio-cultural context, and background knowledge, combine to co-determine the norms that the speaker/listener will follow. In turn, the norms enable the speaker to choose from the following elements while producing a text: linguistic resources, discourse resources, rhetorical resources, and paralinguistic and non-linguistic resources.

When the listener receives the text, he/she will decode the text with the help of the above-mentioned resources, according to the norms which are co-determined by the four contexts.

In the verbal communication process, linguistic and discourse resources are obviously essential for any language learners. It is therefore important for Chinese English learners to focus on this basic knowledge in English language acquisition.

2.2 The nature of language acquisition

After looking at the basics of language knowledge and describing what language knowledge learners must acquire, the next step is to understand the nature of language acquisition. The nature of NLA, SLA and FLA, the differences between NLA, SLA and FLA, and the factors affecting second and foreign language acquisitions will be

discussed below.

2.2.1 The differences between NLA, SLA and FLA

2.2.1.1 NLA is different from SLA and FLA

In this section, the differences between NLA, SLA and FLA will be distinguished.

Native language, the first language, refers to the language existing in or belonging to one by nature. The capacity to acquire the first language is innate, and the process of NLA is natural, spontaneous, without formal instruction. A second language can be defined as any language that is learned or required after the first language or mother tongue. A distinction is often made between second language acquisition and foreign language acquisition. The former is usually learned through formal instruction, but is facilitated by frequent meaningful exposure to the SL. The latter is learned only through formal instruction. In general, NLA, SLA and FLA can be distinguished in the following ways:

- i. Motivation

The motivation for NLA is inherent, instinctive, and spontaneous. It is directed by the human being's need to survive and by his/her basic demands. However, the motivation for SLA and FLA is external, at least at the beginning of the learning process.

The motivation to acquire a foreign language differs to some extent from that of a second language; the motivation may be external but there are still some small differences. Unlike second language learners, most foreign language learners are compelled to learn the required language for school or work requirements, or occasional communication with foreigners. The language is not a requirement in their daily lives, whereas second language learning plays a significant role in a person's life, as it can be used in academic, economic and social relationship domains and learners may have no other choice but to

learn it.

ii. Usage

Native language is naturally used in everyday life, whereas neither second nor foreign languages are used all the time and in all places. However, there are some distinctions between second and foreign languages. Second languages are widely used in the daily lives of learners, and the learners therefore have much more opportunity to use the language. Foreign languages are seldom used, except in the classroom, when the learners have the rare opportunity of conversing with a foreigner, or are required to use them in workplaces. Since the scope of the language usage for second and foreign languages are different, foreign language learners have less opportunity to practise, which affects the learning results.

2.2.1.2 Language Teaching of L1 is different from that of L2 and L3

The acquisition of L1 (native language) does not need formal instruction, and it is learned spontaneously. However, both L2 (second language) and L3 (foreign language) need classroom instruction. As Ellis (1985:5) points out: “SLA (second language acquisition) is used as a general term that embraces both untutored (and ‘naturalistic’) acquisition and tutored (or ‘classroom’) acquisition.” Foreign language acquisition is handled only through formal instruction. Formal instruction refers to the teacher intervening directly in the learning process, with grammatical and textual items and rules explained to the learners.

In the process of SLA and FLA, Krashen (Lightbown and Spada, 1993:82) argues that the classroom “can do much better than informal environments”, and Ellis (1985:231) points out that “learning in a classroom was helpful for ‘beginners’, who found it difficult to obtain the comprehensible input they needed in normal communication outside the classroom.”

Formal instruction can, however, have some negative effects. For example, it has an effect on accuracy of language in planned but not in unplanned production. Also, formal instruction may have a delayed effect. Its effects may become evident only some time after the instruction.

The following sections will provide more information about SLA and FLA.

2.2.2 Theories on how human beings learn languages

There are more than the following theories on how human beings learn NL, SL and FL. However, the theories discussed below are important for the discussion of how NLA is connected to SLA and FLA.

2.2.2.1 Behaviourism

Behaviourism was considered important for acquiring the NLA. According to this theory, when a particular response is reinforced, it then becomes habitual through correct repetitions and imitations. Lightbown and Spada (1993:23) point out that “language development is described as the acquisition of a set of habits”, so it can be assumed that the habits formed in NLA can positively or negatively affect SLA and FLA. In addition to these habits, acquired on the basis of NLA, additional rules of language use need to be acquired, as well.

When Chinese learners are learning English as a FL, they get used to applying the rules used in the native language to their foreign language learning. For instance, the verb “to be” only has one form in Chinese. The Chinese English learners could often make mistakes in conjugating the verb in English as it is done in Chinese: “I am...; you am...; he am...; she am...” unless new habits of language are formed: “I am..., you are..., he is..., she is...”

2.2.2.2 Cognitive theory

Cognitive theory is a relatively new theory in SLA and FLA. As Lightbown and Spada (1993:23) mention, “cognitive psychologists tend to see second language acquisition as the building up of knowledge systems that can eventually be called on automatically for speaking and understanding.” At the beginning of SLA and FLA, learners have to learn and remember the language knowledge that they are trying to acquire. Gradually, they can apply the knowledge automatically through experience and practice. Applying the knowledge then becomes automatic and subconscious.

2.2.3 Factors affecting second and foreign language learning

It is very common that in SLA and FLA some learners in the same classroom settings as others learn the new language very quickly and well, while the others study hard but make slow progress. The following individual characteristics certainly affect the results of SLA and FLA (although there are other factors that have an influence as well):

i. Personality

A number of personality characteristics such as self-esteem, empathy, talkativeness, and willingness to take risks, are generally accepted as affecting second/foreign language learning.

ii. Motivation and attitudes

An individual’s motivations and attitudes to SLA and FLA have a deep influence on the learning results. According to Lightbown and Spada (1993:40), the motivation for SLA learning is complex, defined firstly by the communicative needs and, secondly, the attitude of the learner toward the SLA or FLA.

This definition is applicable in the case of FLA as well. For example, if a

foreign language is needed in the workplace, learners are more motivated to improve their proficiency in it. Languages also have symbolic meanings, which also affect SLA and FLA: the more positive attitudes the learners have towards the target language, the more positive they will be to acquire the language. Lightbown and Spada (1993:40) indicate the importance of attitudes: “Depending on the learner’s attitudes, learning a second language can be a source of enrichment or a source of resentment.” That is to say, if the reason for learning a second or foreign language is mostly enforced from an external pressure, it will result in a lack of or minimal motivation, as well as a negative attitude. The attitudes of the Chinese to learning English, in reality, result in the same problem as above-mentioned.

iii. Learning styles

Learners have their own skills and strategies for learning second and or foreign languages. For example, some learners are willing to take risks in using a second or foreign language, that is, they are not afraid to make mistakes in public. Some learners can easily learn something after they have listened to it once or twice. Teachers should adopt various methods to help learners learn a second or foreign language. Learning results will obviously be more satisfactory if learners can use methods that are suited to themselves.

iv. The role of the first language

Knowledge of the first language obviously has an effect on SLA and FLA. Learners often prefer to use what knowledge they have of their first language to help solve the similar language or grammar problems that they come across when learning a second or foreign language. However, this is not the case all the time.

Brown (2000:94) explains the role of the first language in learning a second or a foreign language. According to his explanation “transfer is a general

term describing the carryover of previous performance or knowledge to subsequent learning.” When the knowledge of the first language, such as grammar rules, is correctly applied to a second/foreign language, positive transfer occurs. On the contrary, when the first language knowledge disrupts the use of the language being acquired, interference (negative transfer) occurs. For instance, according to the Chinese language habits, Chinese learners prefer to say: “I like, you like, we like ...”, which is correct. However, if Chinese learners say: “he like, she like” ... they are incorrect. In English, the verbs forms of the third person are used: “he likes, she likes ...”

Knowledge of the first language can help in SLA and FLA, but it can also obstruct the learning through interference. For instance, many Chinese English learners use “Chinglish” (speaking English in a Chinese way). They tend to translate Chinese into English word for word and use the grammatical structural patterns when speaking English, despite the differences between the two languages. For example, some of the researcher’s former students would say: “Somebody is opening yellow gun”, when they are trying to say, “Somebody is telling a lie”. “Somebody is opening yellow gun” in Chinese means telling a lie, which is directly translated from Chinese into English. This is an example of the first language’s negative effects on FLA.

2.3 Language teaching and learning methods

Since this study focuses on foreign language teaching and learning, it is important to take note of the history of language teaching methods.

2.3.1 A short history of teaching methods

The teaching of English as a foreign language started in the seventeenth century. The grammar translation method dominated during the nineteenth century. At the end of

the twentieth century, many reforms in SLT/FLT had taken place, and some more practical and useful approaches replaced the former approaches.

To understand the various approaches and the advantages and disadvantages of each, one should look briefly at the methodological approaches that have been adopted during the twentieth century, and the linguistic theories underlying them.

2.3.1.1 The grammar translation method

The grammar-translation method is defined by Cook (2001:201) as a traditional academic style which focuses heavily on grammar and translation. This method aims to develop grammatical competence in the students' minds. It views language learning as learning traditional grammar rules and lists of vocabulary.

This method was widely adopted in China ten years ago. Almost everyone believed that the better one's knowledge of the grammar, the better one's English is. It was believed that the essence of learning English was learning the grammar and learners thus focused on grammar learning. A lot of effort has been made during the last years to change this situation; however, the influence of the grammar-translation method is still present today. Some English teachers use only this method in their classes.

2.3.1.2 The direct method

In the early years of the twentieth century, the direct method became popular. This method focused more on aural and oral skills and rejected any use of the student's native language at any time. Many techniques and skills were developed to try to make the direct method as effective as possible.

The direct method is not very popular in China, even today. Although more and more people realise the importance of aural and oral skills of English, it is difficult for teachers to execute in the process of English teaching mainly due to the fact that English teaching in China pays more attention to reading and writing for exams. Also,

most of the Chinese English teachers' limited English proficiency cannot meet the requirements of this method. Only a few schools called "foreign language experimental schools" utilise this method, where English is viewed as the most important course and students have more English classes per day than in the other middle schools.

2.3.1.3 The reading method

Coleman (Finocchiaro and Brumfit, 1983:6) proposed that EFL teaching should focus on extensive and intensive reading, allowing school students "a more attainable and appropriate goal". This is accompanied by the teaching of grammar rules based principally on the structures found in the reading passages.

This method is popular with Chinese English teachers. Teachers in China view the results of examinations as very important, and the requirements of reading comprehension in these examinations are high. Teachers therefore prefer to use this method to develop the reading ability of students.

2.3.1.4 The situational method

The situational method is one that allows learners to practise speaking in a simulated environment. It adopts techniques such as the use of simulated actions to illustrate utterances, and pictures and other real objects to force learners to practise speaking in a simulated situation.

The shortcomings of the method are obvious. Each utterance is related to a social situation that cannot be graded. In order to allow the utterance in situations to be graded, it is necessary to falsify the situation by using vocabulary that is not generally used in real-life conversations.

This method is not popular in China, due to the above-mentioned shortcomings, and also because of the difficulty that lies in creating enough simulated situations for

learners.

2.3.1.5 The audio-lingual method

The audio-lingual method of language teaching originated in the United States of America in the 1940s, and reached its peak in the 1960s. This method stresses the importance of listening competence, and views language learning as habitual, while also focusing on the importance of spoken language. It emphasises teaching the spoken language through dialogue and exercises. The goal of the audio-lingual style is to get the students to 'behave' appropriately in common second/foreign language situations. To some extent, this method is also a practical and communication-oriented method.

Cook (2001:207) states that the audio-lingual method has been interpreted in two ways: The first is short term, where anything that the students learn is heard before it is seen. The other is long term: the students spend time practising spoken skills only, before being introduced to written skills. This method may take as little as a few weeks, or as long as a year.

A few English experimental middle schools in urban areas in China have adopted this method and have obtained some success in improving learners' speaking and listening abilities.

2.3.1.6 The functional notional approach: A forerunner of communicative language teaching (CLT)

The functional notional approach focuses on the meaning of utterances that people intend to convey in conversations, and the functions of languages when used. It primarily looks at what people want to accomplish or do through the use of speech, and it is viewed as a forerunner of the communicative language teaching method.

To know more about the functional notional method (F-N method), it is helpful to

compare the F-N method and the audio-lingual method. The differences between the two approaches are listed in the following table.

Table 2: Differences between Audio-lingual Method and F-N Method

[Source: Finocchiaro & Brumfit (1983:90-93)]

	Audio-Lingual Method	Functional-Notional Methodology
1	Focus on structure and form more than meaning	Focus more on meaning
2	Demands memorisation of structure-based dialogs	Dialogs are not normally memorized but more attention is paid to their communication functions
3	Language learning is learning structures, sound, or words	Language learning is learning to communicate
4	Drilling is a central technique	Drilling may occur, but peripherally
5	Grammatical explanation is avoided	Any device which helps the learners is accepted – varying according to their age, interest, and so forth
6	Communicative activities only come after a long process of rigid drills and exercises	Attempts to communicate may be encouraged from the very beginning
7	Reading and writing are deferred till speech is mastered	Reading and writing can start from the first day
8	Linguistic competence is the desired goal	Communicative competence is the desired goal
9	The teacher controls the learners and prevents them from doing anything that conflicts with the theory	Teachers help learners in any way that motivates them to work with the language
10	Accuracy, in terms of formal correctness, is a primary goal	Fluent and acceptable language is the primary goal
11	Students are expected to interact with the language system	Students are expected to interact with people, either in the flesh, through pair and group work, or in their writing
12	Intrinsic motivation will spring from an interest in the structure of the language	Intrinsic motivation will spring from an interest in what is being communicated in the language

From the above table, it is clear there are two major differences between these two techniques:

- i. The F-N methodology focuses more attention on communicative function than audio-lingual does.

- ii. The F-N methodology allows for greater initiative for both the teacher and student(s).

To the researcher's knowledge, most teachers in China do not use the F-N methodology.

In the 1970s there was a world-wide paradigm shift towards teaching methods that emphasised communication. Communicative teaching methodology has now become the only teaching method that many teachers embrace.

2.3.3. A brief introduction of communicative language teaching (CLT)

2.3.3.1 Theoretical background of CLT

There are at least three communicative styles that have emerged, namely, the social communicative, information communicative and task-based learning styles. Cook (2001:212) describes each technique as follows: Social communicative teaching focuses on the combined interaction of two people in a situation. Information communicative teaching focuses on the exchange of information, ideas and meanings, rather than the relationship between people. Task-based learning concentrates on "the collective solution of problems through classroom tasks with definite outcomes."

2.3.3.2 Main characteristics of CLT

Brown (1987:213) mentions several interconnected characteristics that define CLT:

- i. Classroom goals typically concentrate on *communicative competence* aspects and are not limited to grammatical or linguistic competence.
- ii. Form is not the primary framework for structuring lessons and the teaching programme. *Function* is the framework within which forms are taught.
- iii. Conveying a message is of more importance than accuracy, while *fluency* may be more significant than accuracy. Ultimately the actual exchange (such as transmission and receipt) of the intended meaning is the factor determining

communicative success.

- iv. The communicative classroom is *learner-centred* and teachers act as facilitators. In this environment learners need to use the language, productively in unrehearsed contexts.
- v. *Authentic language* learning materials are important.

In the process of CLT, under the guidance of the teacher, students are encouraged to use the authentic language knowledge they have acquired to communicate with people in unrehearsed situations. Fluency is more important than accuracy in this method.

2.3.3.3 Techniques of CLT

The CTL methodology uses clearly defined techniques. Cook (2001:213) summarises some of these techniques as below.

An information gap exercise is one of the most popular techniques. In this activity, A must try to tell or inform B of some information that B is not aware of. A can direct, instruct, explain, or do whatever is appropriate in the situation so that B may also know, understand, act, and so forth. There are at least two parties involved in this technique.

The second communicative technique is guided role-play. This activity allows students to improvise conversations on an issue. The language acquisition situations simulate true situations, for example, buying a ticket, asking for the departure and arrival times of a train, etc. This technique allows students practise playing, particularly roles in real-life situations.

The third technique is tasks: students carry out tasks in the classroom with a definite outcome. For example, students listen to a taped conversation and have to tick how many times they hear certain words; then they listen again to find out specific details; after that, they compare their answers in pairs. The teacher gives them a 'model'

conversation, and they begin to role-play the conversation. Finally, they discuss some topic generated from this conversation in groups. At each stage there is a definite outcome from the task. Students are working together to achieve the task and to share their conclusions with other students.

2.3.3.4 Problems of CLT

Despite being an attractive method, CLT still has some problems and challenges inherent in the teaching process.

First of all, CLT is often difficult for a teacher to practise whose native language is not the language he/she is teaching, and who is not very proficient in the second or foreign language. Regarding this problem, Brown (1987:213) argues that this drawback should not hinder learners from pursuing communicative goals in a teaching environment. Technology (such as. movies, TV, music and computer software) can aid teachers in the process of language training/teaching. At the same time it may be necessary to raise the level of proficiency requirements with regard to certification programmes for teaching English. Furthermore, Brown (1987:213) argues that as “educational and political institutions in various countries become more sensitive to the importance of teaching foreign languages for communicative purposes (not just for the purpose of fulfilling a ‘requirement’ or of ‘passing a test’), we may be better able, worldwide, to accomplish the goals of communicative language teaching.”

Another obvious problem is that of grammar. As Mitchell (1994:40-41) mentions:

“[i]t is clear that in some contexts, versions of the ‘communicative approach’ are producing learners who can still do little more than reproduce unanalysed global phrases, and have not yet internalised a creative language system (i.e., grammar), which will allow them to produce original utterances correctly in situations of open and

unpredictable target language use ... At present, we lack any developed understanding of the most effective and principled way to tackle grammar instruction as a component of an approach which remains communicative overall, and research and discussion will certainly focus on this question in coming years.”

Finally, since the communicative approach focuses on oral and listening skills, the skills of reading and writing may be marginalised. Although there are some hopeful new local developments, much remains to be done.

Despite the challenges CLT has, it is generally expected to develop into a real full-fledged teaching method, which will be widely used in SLA and FLA.

2.4 Syllabus

Any language teaching, especially in classrooms, involves learning materials, that is, textbooks. Since the pedagogical syllabus guides the textbook design, it is necessary to look at the syllabus before discussing learning materials, including textbooks.

The pedagogical syllabus is a general outline of some chosen words and phrases from the topics that are important to the learners and is viewed as a handbook. With the aid of such a handbook, the teacher can ensure that there is a spiral approach to sequencing of topics, functions and forms, since a single unit can be treated repeatedly, or revisited.

2.4.1 The components of a communicative syllabus

The syllabus is of great importance, for it will determine the success of the learner in acquiring the FL and the contents of the textbook. CLT demands communicative syllabuses and textbooks. According to Yalden (1987:86-87), a communicative

syllabus should contain:

- i. as detailed a consideration as possible of the *purposes* for which the learners wish to acquire the target language;
- ii. some idea of the *setting* in that they will want to use the target language (physical aspects need to be considered, as well as social setting);
- iii. the socially defined *role* the learners will assume while using the target language, as well as the roles of their interlocutors;
- iv. *communicative events* in which the learners will participate (everyday situations, vocational or professional situations, academic situations, etc.);
- v. the *language functions* involved in these events, or what the learner will need to be able to talk about (such as asking directions, requesting information);
- vi. the *notions* involved, or what the learner will need to be able to talk about;
- vii. skills involved in the ‘knitting together’ of discourse: *discourse and rhetorical skills, and paralinguistic resources and nonlinguistic resources*.
- viii. the *variety* or *varieties* of the target language that will be needed, and the levels in the spoken and written language which the learners will need to reach;
- ix. the *grammatical and the lexical content* that will be needed; and
- x. *functional knowledge* and *sociolinguistic knowledge* that will be needed.

2.4.2 Six types of communicative syllabuses

Yalden (1987:110-119) discusses six types of communicative syllabuses:

- i. Structural-functional
This is a separation of the two components of form, structure and function. Communicative function is maintained, and it is a question of adding a further component (structure) to an already existing syllabus.
- ii. Structures and functions
This type represents a structural progression in a communicative framework. The grammatical system is the core of the syllabus, and the notional,

functional, and situational specifications can be conceived of as a spiral round a basically grammatical core. Unlike the type above, structures and functions cannot be separated completely.

iii. Variable focus

The variable focus is a further conception of syllabus design, in which the emphasis shifts according to the level: from the elementary to the advanced. Structural progression as well as structural (grammatical and textual) exercises and activities dominate at the first level, and the emphasis then changes to communicative function and finally to situation or subject matter.

iv. Functional

For this type of syllabus, objectives are stated primarily in terms of communicative functions, not in terms of linguistic items or in terms of ideational content, although these components often are included and sometimes obscure the purpose of the syllabus design.

v. Fully notional

This remains the strongest possible approach to the input syllabus and is suitable for learners whose proficiency in the second language/foreign language has to be specified for very particular and essentially narrow purposes.

vi. Fully communicative

The fully communicative view of syllabus design is one in which there would be only the most minimal input syllabus. This point of view leads away from the notion of a well-developed plan of action in the form of a syllabus, to the point where it is difficult to consider it an approach to syllabus design in the usual sense at all. However, it might be possible to think of negotiated syllabuses at least for adult learners, in which the learner would have a good deal to say both about content and about learning strategies. If this were possible, self-direction would be necessary at all stages.

The communicative approaches can be used effectively for FLA. The first three

approaches particularly are widely used for FLA in China.

2.4.3 The nature of the present syllabus in China

The syllabus of *Junior English for China* is the syllabus most widely used in junior middle schools (Grade 7-10) in China. The following is a segment taken from the syllabus:

Teaching syllabus (formulated by Ministry of Education of China)

(Segment, English Version; translated by author)

i. Preface

The main purpose of an English course is to inspire and to foster students' interests, help them build up their confidence, train their good study habits and develop their learning ability, so that students can master the basic language knowledge and skills, acquire the ability of using English and prepare for the actual communication.

ii. Teaching aims and requirements

After 3 years' learning, students can acquire the needed information from the oral communication and written materials, communicate with teachers and classmates on familiar topics either in oral or written English, and describe some matter and make their own judgments. Students should be active in the English activities in and outside the classroom, and can overcome mental fears and difficulties. Students should arrange and plan their study, and develop independence and innovative abilities. Students should have a sense of cross-cultural communication, and should respect and allow room for different cultures.

- Listening
 - Understand expressions used in the classroom and respond relevantly.
 - Understand the summary of the text that teachers narrate in English.
 - Understand the English materials that are read out at the speed of 100 words per minute, are related to the students' lives.
- Speaking
 - Ask and answer questions on the content of the text.
 - Use the knowledge that students have learned in daily life, and communicate with others on familiar topics.
- Reading
 - Preview texts, and generally understand the main idea of the texts.
 - Read the learning materials whose new words don't exceed 2% of the total number of words. The reading speed should be at 40-50 words per minute.
 - Acquire needed information from the reading materials that are as difficult as the texts they are learning with the help of dictionaries.

The learner should also enjoy the reading.

- Writing
 - Write English proficiently and clearly, write lowercase, uppercase and punctuate correctly.
 - After listening three times to a dictation, write the dictation material down at a speed of 6-8 words per minute.
 - Answer the questions on the texts in written English.
 - Vocabulary
 - Spell words with the basic spelling rules.
 - Master 450 words, 100 useful expressions, and use them freely in oral and written communication.
 - Grammar
 - Grasp the changes of word formation.
 - Grasp the basic sentence patterns, and express oneself in oral and written form with the knowledge that has been learned, while trying to use correct English.
- iii. Teaching content
- ...
- iv. Some challenges in teaching
- Building up the English education view that accords with an education approach that foster abilities.
 - Embodying student-centred approaches and developing the teachers' instructional language usage.
 - Giving prominence to foster students' abilities in English.
 - Trying to use English and making use of mother tongues.
 - Using after school activities to develop students' interest in learning English.
 - Making full use of modern education resources to exploit new learning techniques.

From the above segment, it is clear that this syllabus above is generally communicative.

First of all, it includes the *purpose* of the learners acquiring the target language: to master the basic language knowledge and skills, to acquire the ability to use English, and to prepare for the actual communication. Secondly, it demands that the learners *act*. Thirdly, it contains the *communicative events* the learners will participate in: events in everyday situations, vocational or professional situations, academic situations, and so on. Fourthly, this syllabus involves *language functions* and *notions*

in these events, or what the learner will need to be able to do with or through the language. Fifthly, in order to *knit together the discourse*, this syllabus applies the methods of drilling, practising in pairs, and using listening comprehension to allow learners to grasp the language items. Finally, it contains the grammatical content and lexical content of the textbook.

In addition, the syllabus is the second type of the above-mentioned communicative syllabus: structures and functions. Factors such as notional, functional and situational specifications are related to grammar, which plays a basic role in the syllabus.

2.5 Learning materials and textbooks

In second and foreign language classrooms, teachers, learners, and textbooks are the most commonly found elements. Textbooks play a significant part in the process of teaching and learning, which can reflect the objective of the language programme, the kind of syllabus being used, the skills being taught, the content the students will study, and the assumptions about teaching and learning that the course embodies.

2.5.1 The advantages of textbooks

Textbooks provide teachers with the convenience of not having to spend time on additional training in the preparation of materials. It is also easy for teachers and learners to access or choose learning materials from a variety of professional resources.

The textbook also provides an outline that lays out the main content of lessons and arranges both individual lessons and an entire course in a coherent way. Richards observes that “(t)he idea that commercial materials are technically superior to teacher-made material because they are based on a more systematic and carefully developed syllabus that has had a long history in education. Students, too, often

appreciate studying from an attractively produced class text, since they feel it is an authoritative and accessible tool that can both facilitate learning and make it more enjoyable” (1998: 129). In addition, textbooks can help inexperienced teachers develop skills in teaching.

2.5.2 The disadvantages of textbooks

Textbooks can have a negative influence on teachers. The most negative influence is that the use of textbooks can lead to reification. “Reification refers to the unjustifiable attribution of qualities of excellence, authority, and validity to published textbooks, a tendency often supported by the promotional efforts of publishers” (Richards, 1998:131). The reification of textbooks can easily result in teachers failing to critically look at textbooks. They may accept that the theories and content in the textbooks are more valid than those they could make themselves. If teachers depend on textbooks too much, it may lead to reduction of the level of both the teachers and students’ skills, such as reasoning skill. “If some of the essential skills of teaching are lost, such as the inability to use the pedagogical reasoning skills that are involved in the preparation of instructional materials, the teacher’s role is trivialised and marginalized to that of little more than a technician” (Richards, 1998: 132).

2.6 Teacher education

Teachers are the essential role-players in FL teaching. Teacher education refers to the development of teachers’ teaching skills and language proficiency for effective teaching.

In order to make FL teaching more effective, teachers should be capable of making significant decisions concerning the selection of topics from the textbooks, content allocation (what should be given more attention), time allocation, standards of performance, and modifying instruction to fit different student abilities within the

same classroom.

SLA and FLA need formal instruction in which teachers play an essential role. The language abilities and teaching skills of teachers are of great importance. The conception of developing second or foreign language teachers is made up of two aspects: the conception of what good teaching is, and the essential language knowledge and teaching skills that teachers should have.

Richards (1990:3) points out: “In second language teaching, teacher education programs typically include a knowledge base, drawn from linguistics and language learning theory, and a practical component, based on language teaching methodology and opportunity for teaching. In principle, knowledge and information from such disciplines as linguistics and second language acquisition provide the theoretical basis for the practical components of teacher education programs.”

2.6.1 Characteristics of effective teaching

Teaching methods have been discussed in Section 2.3, which provided a general idea of the main didactics in English teaching history. Good teaching refers to effective teaching. Richards (1998:38) quotes Blum’s descriptions of the characteristics of effective teaching as follows:

- i. Instruction is guided by a pre-planned curriculum.
- ii. There are high expectations for student learning.
- iii. Students are carefully oriented to lessons.
- iv. Instruction is clear and focused.
- v. Learning progress is monitored closely.
- vi. Class time is used for learning.
- vii. There are smooth, efficient classroom routines.
- viii. Standards for classroom behaviour are high.
- ix. Personal interactions between teachers and students are positive.

- x. Incentives and rewards for students are used to promote excellence.

In China, the formal instruction in classroom is generally effective; except that the personal interactions between teachers and students are not enough due to the limited time available in class.

2.6.2 Teaching skills teachers should possess

Richards (1998:46) identifies the essential teaching skills teachers should have. Those that are connected to SLA and FLA are listed below:

- Understand the learning principles and theories.
- Monitor your teaching to see that it conforms to the theory.
- Select syllabuses, materials, and tasks based on the theory.
- Develop tasks and activities based on the learning principles and the syllabus.
- Monitor students' performance in tasks to see that the desired performance is being achieved.
- Try out different teaching strategies.
- Develop personal approaches to teaching.
- Act as a facilitator.
- Focus on a learners-centred approach.

2.7 Assessment of language proficiency

The theories of second and foreign language acquisition can be put into practice every day in the classroom, but one can only see if the theories are valid or not if the success of learners can be measured. And a test is, as Brown (1997:218) suggests, a “method of measuring a person’s ability or knowledge in a given area”. There is a set of techniques, procedures, test items, which constitute an instrument of the teaching practice.

As has been mentioned in Section 2.1, language proficiency is categorised into three levels: conversational fluency, discrete language knowledge proficiency and academic language proficiency. The assessment of language proficiency refers to a method of measuring a person's conversational fluency.

2.7.1 Types of tests

There are four types of tests mentioned by Brown (1987:224-227)

i. Proficiency tests

These tests have traditionally consisted of standardised multiple-choice items on grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension, aural comprehension, and sometimes of a sample of writing, including functional and sociolinguistic competence. However, they often have validity weaknesses. The typical example is TOEFL. About 90% of the questions set in TOEFL are multiple-choice questions, which can easily be guessed by participants.

ii. Diagnostic tests

This test is designed to diagnose knowledge of a particular aspect of a particular language. A diagnostic test in pronunciation might have the purpose of determining which particular phonological features of the target language pose difficulties for a learner.

iii. Achievement tests

The test is directly related to classroom lessons, units, or even a total curriculum, and is limited to particular material covered in a curriculum within a particular time frame.

iv. Aptitude tests

It is designed to measure a person's capacity or general ability to learn a foreign language and to be successful in that undertaking, and considered to be independent of a particular foreign language, predicting success in the acquisition of a particular foreign language.

The English test in entrance examinations to universities in China is a combination of the first three types of tests. This test determines whether learners have understood some difficult and useful grammatical and textual knowledge which covers the important points of the particular curriculum. It does this by using standardised multiple-choice questions on grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension, aural comprehension, and writing. It is clear that such tests are not directed at communicative competence.

2.7.2 Characteristics of CLT assessment

A communicative test has to meet the criteria described by Brown (1987:230-231) as follows:

- i. It should test for grammatical, textual, functional, and sociolinguistic competence as well as strategic competence, which were mentioned in 2.1.
- ii. It has to make use of authentic language within a context.
- iii. It should assess the learner in a variety of language functions and situations.

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the relevant concepts and theoretical views in FLA. These concepts and views will help to understand the problem of low proficiency in EFL for learners in urban schools in China more adequately. In the following chapters the validity and usefulness these concepts will be investigated to determine whether they have any relevance to the problems in Chinese ELT and ELA. Reasons for the problem of low proficiency in EFL for learners in urban schools in China will be discussed.

In the next chapter, Chapter 3, the methods for collecting data to respond to the research questions posed in Chapter 1 will be discussed.

Chapter 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the methods used to collect information with which the research questions listed in Chapter 1 can be answered.

A questionnaire was designed to investigate the reasons for the low efficiency in EFL in Chinese urban schools and to collect information on the issues raised in the seven research questions listed in Chapter 1. These questions are:

- Q1.** Are Chinese students adequately motivated to learn English?
- Q2.** Are the assessment tests in the entrance examinations appropriate?
- Q3.** Is the syllabus appropriate?
- Q4.** Are the learning materials appropriate and relevant?
- Q5.** Is the English teachers' language proficiency adequate?
- Q6.** Are the didactic methods that are used by the teachers effective?
- Q7.** How much time and opportunity do learners have to hear, read, write and speak English?

To obtain answers to these questions, some concepts related to these questions must be clarified. Therefore, the literature review in Chapter 2 discussed the nature of language, theories of SLA and FLA, the teaching methods, syllabus, textbooks, teacher education and assessment. Whether these aspects mentioned are the actual reasons for this low efficiency problem is what the author wishes to determine. For this reason, data relevant to the seven questions above need to be collected: Are Chinese students adequately motivated to learn English? Are the assessment tests in the entrance examinations appropriate? Is the syllabus appropriate? Are the learning materials appropriate and relevant? Is the English teachers' language proficiency

adequate? Are the didactic methods that are used by the teachers effective? How much time and opportunity do learners have to hear, read, write and speak English?

Since the researcher was based in South Africa, data collecting techniques such as interviews and observations were not feasible. Data was mainly collected by using the questionnaire method. The research methodologies applied are explained below.

3.1 The questionnaire method

A questionnaire method is the only research methodology applied in this study. The advantages and disadvantages of this method are discussed below.

3.1.1 Advantages and disadvantages of questionnaires

The questionnaire has clear advantages. Dornyei (2003:9) mentions that “The main attraction of questionnaires is their unprecedented efficiency in terms of (a) researcher time, (b) researcher effort, and (c) financial resources.” The researcher thus spends less time, effort and money in collecting data than with the other methods, which is why this method is easy to apply for any research.

Questionnaires also have some serious limitations (Dornyei, 2003:10).

- i. The simplicity and superficiality of questions: since most people prefer to complete a short questionnaire, the simplicity and superficiality of the questionnaire may limit the depth of the investigation.
- ii. Unreliable and unmotivated respondents: respondents may be prone to leave out some questions or make mistakes because they do not agree with the questions. Some respondents may fail to respond to the questionnaire due to the distance between the researcher and the respondent.
- iii. Respondents may have literacy problems.
- iv. No chance of correcting respondents’ mistakes.

- v. Social desirability (or prestige) bias: people do not always provide true answers about themselves; that is, the results represent what the respondents would like to feel or believe, rather than what they actually feel or believe.

Regenesys School of Public Management (2004:30) summarises the advantages and disadvantages of questionnaires in Table 3 below:

Table 3: Advantages and disadvantages of questionnaires

Advantages	Disadvantages
Inexpensive to administer	Difficult to design
Information is easy to tabulate	Difficult to interpret
Confidentiality is maintained	Impersonal approach
No expertise to administer	Low response rate
	Can't ask for clarity

3.1.2 Selection of participants

There are approximately 50 participants in this questionnaire study. About half of the respondents are the researcher's former classmates in university, former students, colleagues and friends. The others participated in the questionnaire at the request of some participants' friends.

All of the participants are Chinese English learners who have learning experience in middle schools in China and some of whom are teaching English as a course in primary schools and middle schools.

3.1.3 The questionnaire

3.1.3.1 Constructions of questionnaire

Multiple choice questions make the questionnaire much easier for the respondents. However, having only multiple choice questions may limit the ideas and thinking of participants. The setting of the questionnaires was thus much more complicated than anticipated.

The questionnaire designed for the purpose of this research study (see Annexure 2) contains two sections:

Part 1: 26 multiple choices questions about English learning

Part 2: Two essay questions

Most of respondents have little patience with answering complicated essay questions due to the time factor. The easier the questionnaire, the more willing they are to participate in the questionnaire. That is why multiple choice questions form a dominating proportion of the questionnaire. Since multiple choice questions cannot cover every aspect of the information needed, essay questions in Part 2 allow respondents to express their own ideas on the possible reasons for the low proficiency in English and how to improve it, which provide supplemental material.

Q1-Q6 in Part 1 is to allow the researcher to describe the identification of the respondents.

Q7-Q10 contains questions about the English learning experience of each learner. These four questions attempt to obtain information about how long, when, and where the learners learn English and in which language English is/was taught.

Q11 deals with the respondents' opinion of learning about the effects of learning English.

The rest of the questions in Part 1 investigate the possible reasons for the low proficiency of EFL learners in urban middle schools in China.

Q12 aims to investigate the learning motivation of the learners. The results of this question will help in answering research Question 1: "Are Chinese students adequately motivated to learn English?"

Q13 and Q14 deal with the entrance examinations for colleges and universities in China, that is, are set to find out the answer to research Question 2: “Are the assessment tests in the entrance examination appropriate?”

In order to answer research Question 3: “Is the syllabus appropriate”, Q15 is directed particularly at middle school English teachers in China. It investigates their views of the syllabus of the English course.

Q16 deals with the learning materials and textbooks in the middle schools and obtains information about research Question 4: “Are the learning materials appropriate and relevant?”

Q17 aims to determine the language proficiency of English teachers in middle school in China and to answer research Question 5: “Is the English teachers’ language proficiency adequate?”

Q18 is to collect information about the learners’ ideas about the middle school English teaching methods in China, which helps find answers to research question 5: “Are the didactic methods that are used by the teachers effective?”

Q19-Q22 deals with the amount of time to which learners are exposed to English per day. Q23 Q26 require the respondents to rate their own English abilities in listening, speaking, reading and writing. The eight questions are set to answer research question 6, “How much time and opportunity do learners have to hear, read, write and speak English?”

Part 2 contains two essay questions that expect respondents to express their own ideas on the current state of EFL in China within 250 words.

Essay Question 1 (“From your point of view, which aspects of English teaching in China should be changed/improved?”) is to find out which aspects of the teaching in China the respondents think should be improved. This question is aimed to allow respondents to specify the aspects of English teaching they are not satisfied with. Although their opinions are not completely valid and reliable, the problems mentioned by them can be emphasised and pointed out by the researcher.

Essay Question 2: (“What do you think the reasons are for the low proficiency in EFL in China?”) serves to collect more opinions from the respondents.

3.1.3.2 Data collection

The questionnaires (Annexure 2) were sent by e-mail to all of the participants. All were requested to e-mail their feedback back within 15 days.

3.2 Sampling

A limited number of respondents was chosen due to time constraints and the length of the questionnaire. The distribution of participants is as follows:

Table 4: The distribution of participants

Group	Classification	Number of people	Total
1. Current urban middle school students		26	26
2. English teachers in middle schools		2	2
3. Tertiary students in China		3	3
4. Tertiary students outside China		4	4
5. Working respondents	i. Employed by state-owned corporation in China ii. Employed by multinational corporation	1 2	9

	in China.	3	
	iii. Employed by multinational corporation overseas.	2	
	iv. Government employee	1	
	v. Employed by private corporation		
6.	Did not specify	3	3
			47

3.3 Data analysis

All the data were collected via e-mail. The answers to the questions in Part 1 were typed into an Excel worksheet so that the answers can be automatically calculated. The answers to the essay questions had to be analysed manually. It took a much time to process the answers to the essay questions, and the data cannot be 100% correct due to the language mistakes of the respondents, which may impact on the veracity of the research.

3.4 Limitations of the research design

The researcher encountered some problems in the process of implementing the questionnaire.

Firstly, when the researcher designed the questionnaire, she tried to make it impersonal and cover every aspect of the problem. It had to cover all aspects related to the research problem, but at the same time it could not be too long, for the participants might not have been willing to devote much time to it. This in turn meant that all aspects of the problems could in fact not be covered in the questionnaire. For this reason, the questionnaire could not be as effective as it was originally expected to be.

Secondly, since questionnaires do not allow interaction with the respondents, they did have some disadvantages. For instance, one cannot ask further questions on the basis of the answers of the respondents.

The sampling method was less satisfactory due to the selection of the informants. Most of them are students, friends and colleagues of the researcher, which limits the validity of opinions to be collected. However, their responses do provide some information of value.

If the researcher could undertake this study again, some improvements would be made to ensure that methodological approach adopted was more effective and valid. For instance, some other methods, such as interviews and classroom observations, would be utilised. It would also be much better for the research to be undertaken in China, so that first-hand information could be collected and questionnaires could be handed out to more individuals or groups who are not merely acquaintances of the researcher.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter presented the advantages and disadvantages of questionnaire research method, the procedure of the methodology, and discussed the limitations of the method. The researcher intended to use this methodology to collect more valid and useful information in order to develop the findings in the next chapter.

Chapter 4

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to describe, analyse and interpret the data collected to deal with the research questions listed in Chapter 1, to describe the findings, and then to develop recommendations about addressing the low proficiency in English as a foreign language for learners in Chinese urban middle schools.

Brynard and Hanekom (1997:55) point out that there are two phases in the analysis of collected data. The first phase of the analysis is to eliminate irrelevant data by means of appropriate techniques, such as interviews or observations; the second phase is “the in-depth analysis and integration of the data, which is regarded as critical to the research.” They point out that a thorough researcher should create ‘new’ knowledge rather than merely transferring existing knowledge.

The first phase of analysis was completed during the collection of data through questionnaires to obtain data relevant to this research. In this chapter, the second phase, namely the in-depth analysis and integration of the data, is presented to put forward new findings, such as to create “new” knowledge.

4.2 Data Analysis

For the purpose of the data analysis, information from the questionnaire responses was extracted.

4.2.1 Question 1 to Question 6

Question 1: Gender

Of the 47 respondents, 18 are male and 29 are female.

Question 2: Nationality

Of the 47 respondents, 46 are Chinese, while one is American. This shows that English is a foreign language for about 99% of informants, and hence information from these respondents is useful for the purpose of this research.

Question 3: Age group

- Of the 47 respondents, 26 of the respondents are 12-18 years old, such as current middle school students.
- Seven of the respondents are university students.
- Seventeen are older than 24 years as they are currently working.

Question 4: Current positions

- Twenty-six of the respondents are middle school students in China.
- Seven of the respondents are tertiary students in China or English-speaking countries.
- Two of the respondents are specialists involved in English teaching.
- One is employed by a state-owned corporation in China, but none are employed by state-owned corporations abroad. Two are employed by multinational corporations in China, and three are employed by multinational corporations abroad.
- Two of the respondents are government employees, one is employed by a private corporation, and one is a researcher abroad.
- Two of the respondents chose to answer (j). It could be assumed that these respondents are tertiary students, but may not be familiar with the term “tertiary”.

- Three of the respondents did not specify their current positions.

The figures above show that most of the respondents are having or have had English learning or teaching experience, so that they are familiar with the state of EFL in China and can provide the researcher with useful information.

Question 5: Current residence

Of the 47 respondents, 40 stay in China, and seven are currently studying or working outside China.

The above figures show that about 80% of the respondents are studying or working in China, which enables them to provide first-hand information on EFL in China. The 20% of the respondents who are in English-speaking countries may provide information on the state of English teaching and learning in other countries, which may inspire some effective ways of solving the low proficiency problem in China.

Question 6: Which language are you best at?

Of the 47 respondents, 19 are best at Putonghua; 11 are best in one of the Chinese dialects; none speak any of the non-Chinese languages of China; and 17 are best at both Putonghua and one of the Chinese dialects.

Putonghua is the standard Chinese which is widely used in China. It is used at schools as the language of instruction, meaning that when teaching English, Putonghua is used by teachers to explain grammar, vocabulary etc. in class.

The figures above show that 28 of the respondents are better at their own dialects than they are at Putonghua. Since Putonghua is the language of instruction, also for teaching English, the proficiency in Putonghua may affect students' EFL learning to a greater or lesser extent.

Question 7: How long have you studied English?

Of the 47 respondents, 22 have studied English for one to six years, eight for seven to ten years, and 17 for more than ten years.

These responses show that most Chinese people have spent much time studying English. However, the question to ask is why their English proficiency is not as good as expected after such a long time of study.

Question 8: When did you learn English in middle school?

- Of the 47 respondents, five studied English between 1977 and 1986. These respondents studied English in middle school at a time when limited research had been undertaken to improve methods of teaching English to foreign learners.
- Fourteen of the respondents studied English between 1987 and 1996. This was after the Open Policy in the early 1980s in China and English teaching was going through the reform period.
- Twenty-eight studied English after 1997.

The above figures show that everyone is exposed to learning English in middle schools, and most of them are studying or have studied English in middle schools after 1997, when the English teaching reform was launched. This indicates that they are well aware of the current situation in English teaching.

Question 9: Where did you learn English?

Of the 47 respondents, six learned English in a rural area. The rest (41 of the respondents) learned English in urban middle schools in China.

The figures show that more than 90% of respondents studied in urban middle schools. Their opinions should therefore reflect the real state of EFL in urban middle schools.

Question 10: Is/was Putonghua the teaching language in English teaching when you are/were in middle school?

Of the 47 respondents, 36 said that Putonghua was the teaching language when they learned English, while 11 were taught in dialects. That is, 25% of English teaching takes place in the Chinese dialects and the rest takes place in Putonghua.

Since more than half of the respondents are not good at Putonghua, their English learning may be affected by the teaching of language.

Question 11: What was your personal motivation to learn English?

- Eighteen of the respondents (that is, one third) stated that their motivation to learn English was to pass English examinations.
- Three responded that he/she learns English to meet job requirements.
- Four learnt English to meet communication needs, for instance, greeting English speaking people or obtaining information from English TV programmes.
- Fourteen of the respondents had other reasons:
 - “I like it”
 - “I love English as a language”
 - “I want to study English abroad”
 - “I am fond of singing English songs”
 - “Personal interest”
- Four of the 47 respondents chose both A and B: in order to pass English examinations and to meet job requirements.
- One respondent chose A and C: to pass English examinations and to meet communication usage.
- Three respondents chose A, B, C and D: in order to pass English examinations, to meet job requirements and to meet communication needs.

According to the above responses, approximately 40% of the respondents learn

English to pass examinations, and about 30% of the respondents have various other motives, such as personal interest, or further study abroad. Only 0.09% of the respondents stated that they learn English to meet daily communication needs.

Many respondents are learning English to pass examinations. As mentioned in Section 2.2, the more positive their attitudes, the more positive learners will be to acquire a foreign language; only for external pressures, such as passing examinations, will result in minimal motivation and negative attitudes. The motivation for learning FLA in China is therefore not strong.

In addition to this, is the shortfall in testing all language skills in an examination setting, (such as ignoring the importance of speaking and listening, as well as the comprehension skills in language acquisition, excluding it from the examination altogether) which only encourages learners to neglect practising these two skills.

Question 12: Do you think you acquired English effectively?

Of the 47 respondents, 28 think they did not study English effectively. Nineteen are satisfied with their level of proficiency in English. So, almost two thirds of the respondents are not satisfied with their studies of the English language. Since the English learning experience of Chinese people takes place in middle school, these responses therefore suggest that the root problem of the low levels of proficiency in English amongst Chinese people lies in English teaching in middle school. Considering the various teaching methods mentioned in Section 2.3.1, this indicates that the wrong approach to teaching English is possibly being used, that the pedagogy of teaching English needs to be vastly improved to meet people's expectations.

Question 13: Are you familiar with the entrance examinations to universities and colleges in China?

Of the 47 respondents, 34 answered positively, meaning that they are familiar with the entrance examinations. The other 13 respondents are not familiar with the

examinations, because they took part in the entrance examinations a long time ago and are no longer involved in English teaching or learning.

That is to say, two thirds of the respondents are familiar with the entrance examinations. They are currently middle school students, English teachers from middle schools and tertiary students who just passed the entrance examinations and their opinions are therefore valid.

Question 14: Do you think the questions that are set in the entrance examinations are appropriate?

As mentioned in Section 2.7, a test is a means to measure a person's ability in a given area, and the entrance examinations should therefore be set to measure English learners' organisational and pragmatic competencies.

Language should be learnt for the purpose of communication. An appropriate test at this stage depends on whether the test measures the English language proficiency of Chinese learners in grammatical knowledge, textual knowledge and skills, functional knowledge and skills, and sociolinguistic knowledge and skills. That is to say, an appropriate test should cover the four skills of English learners, listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. Also, as mentioned in Section 2.7.2, a communicative test has to make use of authentic language within a text. In addition to this, a test should assess the learner in a variety of language functions and situations; types of questions in a test are supposed to be varied. To set only multiple choice questions, will limit the validity of a test, simply because it is easier to question the answers to multiple choice questions.

Of the 47 respondents, 23 answered positively, and 24 answered negatively. This indicates that the questions set in the entrance examinations need improving, or that the participants should be better prepared when writing the examinations.

More than half of the candidates involved in the questionnaire said that their motivation for learning English was to pass examinations (Question 11). Hence, the questions set in the entrance examinations are of most importance to the learner, as this will affect the focus of his/her learning. Whether the questions set in the examinations are appropriate or not will directly affect the learning result of the English learners. From the responses to Question 14, it is clear that half of the respondents think the questions set in the entrance examinations need to be improved. For instance, the entrance examinations do not cover oral testing, and therefore most learners seldom practise speaking skills. However, functional and sociolinguistic skills are as important as grammatical and textual knowledge in English learning. Yet multiple choice questions take up about 90% of the questions in the entrance examination. So the questions set in the entrance examinations may be one of the possible reasons for the low proficiency problem.

**Question 15: Do you think the syllabus of the English course is appropriate?
(This question is for English teachers in middle schools)**

The appropriate syllabus for the English course is supposed to be a communicative syllabus.

Only one of the respondents thinks that the syllabus is appropriate. Five think that the syllabus is inappropriate. Eighteen of the respondents chose (C): they think that it needs improving. The rest of the respondents (23) did not choose any option.

This question is aimed at English teachers in middle schools. From the results of Question 4, the current position, it is obvious that some respondents, who are not English teachers in middle school, did answer this question. They may have misunderstood the question due to inadequate language proficiency or they did not read the guidelines to the questionnaire carefully.

As mentioned in Section 2.4.3, the present syllabus is a communicative syllabus, in

which the teaching aims and requirements are expounded. It is necessary to look at the present syllabus in China to find out why there is only one respondent who is satisfied with the syllabus.

One possible reason is that EFL teachers in China do not implement the syllabus as expected by authorities, which may be why so many respondents are not satisfied with the syllabus, although the syllabus is judged as a communicative one.

In addition to this, it shows that the present syllabus still needs improving. Firstly, China is a country with wide areas and the economies are developed in an unbalanced way in different areas, which leads to big differences between middle schools in different areas: urban and rural, eastern and western areas. These differences are ascribed to teaching and learning situations, materials, and the attitudes the learners and their parents hold towards English language learning. It was reported that, in the urban and developed areas, learners think the teaching aims and requirements do not meet their needs, while the learners from the rural or developing areas pay little attention to English learning. Therefore, the teaching in these areas cannot achieve the expected goals in the syllabus (English Teaching Studies, 2005).

As indicated in the above-mentioned problem, various syllabi are necessary on the bases of different situations of learners. For instance, there is one syllabus for those rural learners who cannot be exposed to English as much as urban learners, while the other syllabus has more requirements for those urban learners who have more exposure to English. Different requirements are set for different learners, which helps to encourage rural learners to learn English with confidence, at the same time meeting the urban learners extra needs for English acquisition.

Secondly, the teaching aims and requirements described in the syllabus are not concrete enough. For instance, in the present syllabus there are no particular requirements for Senior One (Grade 10), which makes it difficult for teachers.

Regarding this problem, the present syllabus should ideally cover all requirements for each grade, so that teachers are guided in terms of minimum outcomes for any given syllabus.

In other words, the present syllabus in middle school in China needs improving, and the EFL teachers should implement the syllabus as expected.

Question 16: Are the learning materials appropriate and relevant?

The learning materials herein mainly refer to the textbooks currently used in middle schools in China. Besides the textbooks, some schools occasionally use English novels, newspapers, TV shows or music as supplementary materials. However, most schools rely on textbooks. While using textbooks as a medium for teaching has its advantages (see Section 2.5.1), these advantages are predominantly for the benefit of the teacher/facilitator, rather than the learner.

Five of the respondents think the learning materials appropriate and relevant. Four of them hold the opposite idea. And 38 of the respondents think the learning materials need improving.

Why do most of the respondents think the present learning materials need improving? In light of this question, it is necessary to know more about these learning materials.

The textbook, *English for China*, is used in most middle schools in China. From 1988 to 1991, the Chinese government and the United Nation's Developing and Arranging Office came to an agreement that the People's Education Publishing House and the British Publishing Group, Longman, would design and publish a new set of teaching materials called *English for China*. The textbooks were tested in 1993. After competing with many other teaching materials, *English for China* was chosen as the textbook to be used by 70% of the middle schools in China.

However, *English for China* has some drawbacks: Firstly, although it has been changed many times and has been much improved. It has not totally broken away from the traditional method. It tries to use authentic contexts that contain many topics that often appear in the daily life, but it cannot cover every situation, for example, topics at airports or on a new campus. So when students have to face real language situations, they will find that they cannot understand or express themselves well enough, which will take some time for them to adjust the studied-in-China language to their new circumstance. For example, when they want buy something at a shop, they will not understand what “two-fifty” means, because what they were taught in China is “two hundred and fifty”.

Secondly, the grammar translation method is emphasised in this textbook. For instance, in the accompanying exercises in the last part of the textbook, there is a large amount of translation work for students to do. So teachers may pay more attention to these exercises instead of focusing on fostering learners’ communication skills.

Thus it can be said that the learning materials used in middle schools in China need to be improved. Improvements may mean covering more language situations, providing more useful words and expressions used in real life, even spoken language or slang. On the other hand, it may emphasise the importance of speaking and listening comprehensions, as well as setting more speaking and listening questions in the exercises.

Also, students need to have access to more learning materials to supplement the textbooks.

Question 17: Is the English teacher’s language proficiency adequate?

As mentioned in Chapter 2.6, a good foreign language teacher should teach in an effective way, having essential language knowledge and teaching skills. The

English language proficiency is one of the essential skills for an English teacher.

As discussed in Section 2.1.2, language proficiency has three levels, namely conversational fluency, discrete language proficiency, and academic language proficiency. Since teachers should possess teaching skills, such as monitoring students' performance and developing tasks and activities based on the learning principles and syllabus, teachers are required to have a better language proficiency than learners, that is, they should try to attain all three types of language proficiency.

Only seven of the 47 respondents are satisfied with the language proficiency of their English teacher. The rest of them don't think the English language proficiency of their teacher is adequate. Most English teachers of these respondents cannot freely speak English in class. They prefer to use Chinese more than English in class. Furthermore, some teachers speak English with a heavy Chinese accent.

According to a recent survey (News Centre, 2007) in some regions in China, only half of the middle school English teachers are qualified with the requirements required by The Law of Teachers. In the Nan District of Xiaogan City, for example, approximately half of the 234 teachers do not have the required degrees. Only six of the 38 teachers from senior middle schools have Bachelor's degrees. Furthermore, a large number of English teachers are not willing to stay in middle schools but prefer to work in foreign capital corporations because of higher salaries. Job-hopping in their careers causes a loss of English teachers.

Even those English teachers who do have Bachelor's degrees in English, lack vital language abilities, such as listening and speaking abilities that are fundamental in the teaching process. They themselves are not proficient enough to teach the English class in English only.

Question 18: How do you like the way your English teacher teaches/taught you English in middle school?

Eleven of the respondents like the way their EFL teachers teach a lot. Five do not accept the English teaching approach at all. In their opinion, English classes are boring. Most of the respondents (30) think the teaching methods are acceptable, but that they can be improved in many respects.

In Section 2.3, many language teaching methods were presented. The traditional teaching methods, such as the grammar translation method, or the reading method, have their own advantages and disadvantages. The CLT method is popular, because it focuses on learners' communicative skill and applies various techniques, for example, a guided role-play to inspire learners' interest in the language.

For middle school students, they can do something better if they have an interest in it. The teaching methods that EFL teachers apply can either motivate or frustrate learners' interest. For example, if they are always expected to do grammar questions or translation exercises in an English class, they will become tired of it. On the contrary, they would enjoy attending an English class where they could play games, sing songs or watch movies. Since most respondents do not like the present teaching methods in an EFL classroom. It shows that EFL teaching methodologies should be immediately improved.

Question 19: How much time and opportunity do you have to listen to English daily?

- Six of the respondents can listen to English for five hours and above per day.
- Twelve of the respondents can listen to English for one to four hours per day.
- Twenty-six of the respondents can only listen to English for less than an hour per day.
- Three have no opportunity to listen to English at all.

These figures show that one third of the respondents are able to listen to English for long periods of time daily. They may study abroad or work in foreign capital companies. The rest of respondents have little time to listen to English on a daily basis.

Learning a second or foreign language takes time and opportunities to be exposed to the language, which is especially important for EFL. However, hearing alone is not necessarily useful. Exposure to English must be meaningful, which requires interaction.

Question 20: How much time and opportunity do you have to speak English daily?

- One of the respondents has an opportunity to speak English for five hours or more per day.
- Nine of the respondents can speak English for one to four hours per day.
- Twenty-seven can speak English for less than an hour per day.
- Ten have no opportunity to speak English at all.

The figures show that only fewer than 20% of respondents have sufficient time and opportunity to speak English. They may study or live abroad, work in a foreign capital company, or they are English teachers. Most respondents have little time to speak English daily. Practising, especially speaking a second or a foreign language is of great importance. If learners only understand, read or write a second or a foreign language but cannot speak it, so they cannot be viewed as being proficient in this language.

As elaborated on in Section 2.2.2.1, according to behaviouristic theory, it is suggested that, as explained by Lightbown and Spada (1993:23), SLA is an acquisition of knowledge systems that can eventually be called on automatically for both speaking and understanding. This is achieved by regular use of a language through constant

interaction in that language. As highlighted in the paragraph above, this is not the case with the average learner of English in China who has very little time to practise or interact in English.

Question 21: How much time and opportunity do you have to read English daily?

- Three of the respondents have the opportunity to read English (learning materials, newspapers, or work related documents) for five hours or more per day.
- Eight of the respondents have the opportunity to read English for one to four hours per day.
- Thirty-four of the respondents can read English for fewer than an hour per day.
- Two have no access to reading English at all.

These figures also show that most respondents have little time to read English daily, which indicates that they need more time to read English to improve their reading comprehension.

Question 22: How much time and opportunity do you have to write English daily?

- Two of the respondents have the opportunity to write English for five hours and above per day. Both of the respondents are tertiary students studying in English-speaking countries, and they are currently busy with their dissertations.
- Eleven of the respondents have the opportunity to write English for one to three hours per day. They may study abroad; work overseas or in foreign capital companies, or study in middle schools.
- Twenty-five of the respondents have the opportunity to write English for less than an hour per day.
- Nine have no opportunity to write English at all.

The figures show that most respondents have little time to write English daily.

It is clear from Questions 19 to 22 that most respondents have little chance to listen, speak, read and write English every day. However, most of them still have a little time each day to listen speak, read and write English.

From the above-mentioned information, it becomes clear that there is little time and few opportunities in which to be exposed to English, which is a common problem for most EFL respondents. It is then not surprising that despite the many years that they have studied English, they are still not good at English.

Question 23: How do you rate your English listening proficiency skills?

- Six of the respondents think their English listening skills are poor.
- Twenty-six of the respondents think their listening skills are average.
- Eleven of the respondents think their listening skills are good. The respondents' criterion of good listening proficiency is that they can understand CCTV English programmes or they can understand what English-people say during their communication.
- Three of the respondents think their listening skills are excellent.

These figures show that less than one third of respondents are satisfied with their English listening proficiency.

Question 24: How do you rate your English speaking proficiency skills?

- Five of the respondents think their English speaking skills are poor.
- Twenty-four of the respondents think their speaking skills are average.
- Twelve of the respondents think their speaking skills are good. The criterion for good speaking proficiency is that they can communicate freely and smoothly with English-speaking people.
- Four of the respondents think their speaking skills are excellent.
- One respondent chose both poor and average, which is an ambiguous response.

One third of respondents think their speaking proficiency is good. It shows that after a

long time studying EFL, learners have little time or opportunity for practising their speaking skills, and so their English proficiency still needs improving.

Question 25: How do you rate your English reading proficiency skills?

- Three of the respondents think their English reading skills are poor.
- Thirteen of the respondents think their reading skills are average.
- Twenty-four of the respondents think their reading skills are good. The criterion for good reading proficiency in English is that the learners can read and understand a newspaper and English materials they meet in their study or work places.
- Six of the respondents think their reading skills are excellent.

Two thirds of the respondents are satisfied with their reading proficiency in English, which means most respondents think their reading proficiency in English is better than their listening and speaking proficiency. It supports the low proficiency problem that has been discussed in Section 1.2 to be correct.

Question 26: How do you rate your English writing proficiency skills?

- Six of the respondents think their English writing skills are poor.
- Twenty of the respondents think their writing skills are average.
- Sixteen of the respondents think their writing skills are good
- Four of the respondents think their writing skills are excellent.

Almost half of the respondents think their writing proficiency is good enough to meet their needs in their study or work places.

The figures from Questions 23 to 26 show that most respondents are more confident about their English proficiency in reading and writing skills than they are about their listening and speaking skills. However, most of the respondents rate their English proficiency in all four skills as poor or average.

From Question 1 to Question 26, the following information relevant to this research

has been collected:

- The motivation to learn English of EFL learners is not strong enough.
- The setting of the entrance examinations to universities and colleges needs improving.
- The present syllabus in middle schools in China can be improved in some respects and the EFL teachers should implement the syllabus as expected.
- The English teachers' language proficiency is not adequate.
- The EFL teachers should adopt more teaching methods to teach the EFL learners.
- EFL learners have inadequate time and opportunities to be exposed to English meaningfully.

Essay Question 1:

Q1. In your point of view, which aspects of English teaching in China should be changed or improved?

The respondents' answers are summarised as follows:

The setting of entrance examinations:

- The *setting of examinations* should not focus on grammar.
- Students' *listening and speaking* skills should be enhanced. English teaching should be focused on the practical elements. IELTS (the International English Language Testing System) is a good kind of English test as it is a comprehensive test of English proficiency, emphasising skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. These language skills are increasingly demanded by international employers, education institutions and professional associations.

Learning materials:

- The vocabulary should be extended to meet the needs of students.
- The teaching content is boring.
- The English learning materials are outdated.

Teacher education:

- Teachers should educate students more about Western culture
- Teachers should learn from native language learning. Listening and speaking should be the most important aspects in learning English..
- Teachers should use more English in class.

Teaching methodology:

- English teaching is focused too much on grammar.
- The English listening and speaking ability of students should be reinforced.
- More opportunities to speak English should be provided in class, with interaction practice.
- Teaching and learning English should be made more interesting.
- English teaching should not be conducted by spoon-feeding. How to rouse students' interest in English learning is an important aspect teachers need to consider. Instead of simply forcing students to memorise vocabulary and grammar, more emphasis should be placed on effective training, as well as the practising the four English skills -- especially listening and speaking. Students can be encouraged to improve their English learning with the help of the modern tools available, such as the Internet or TV programmes.
- Chinese teachers should begin by studying and adopting the methods of reading and writing described in the important book, *In The Middle* by Nancie Atwell. Her work has led to great change in English teaching methods among junior middle schools, involving reading and writing in ways that will hold the students' interest. Her approach is to set up reading and writing workshops and guide students in choosing the best books to read that match their own interests, and to write on subjects and in styles that are most meaningful to them.

Learning time and opportunity:

- Students should be given more opportunity to practise speaking, reading, listening, and writing English in class.

Twenty-three of the respondents answered in Chinese. Most respondents' English answers have too many grammar mistakes to understand.

The answers given strongly suggest that the method of teaching is not ideal and is lacking both in terms of effective teaching (such as lacking in criteria as laid out in Section 2.6.1), as well as in teacher skills (see Section 2.6.2) – something that goes hand in hand. At the same time the suitability of textbooks is highlighted again.

Q2. What do you think might be the reasons for the low proficiency in EFL in China?

The respondents' answers are summarised as follows:

Motivation and attitude:

- Learners do not want to study as they lack the motivation to learn English.
- Learners do not have a positive attitude towards learning English. The motivation to learn English is only to pass examinations.
- Pressure from parents. Parents want their children to obtain a high mark in the examinations.

Language environment:

- It is not easy for Chinese people, who have a long history and culture, to accept another language besides their own language, namely Chinese.
- Learners seldom listen to and speak English. They only read and write English.
- People have little access to English. Students do not have enough time to speak and listen to native English speakers.

- Lack of opportunity for students to practise in an environment where only English is spoken. Creating reading and writing workshops of the kind described by Atwell can do a great deal to create a positive English reading, writing and speaking environment.

Teacher education:

- The teachers are not qualified. Their own language proficiency is not sufficient to handle classes.

Teaching methodology:

- The teaching approach is boring and meaningless. The English teaching methods should be improved.
- Too much focus on grammar, instead of on speaking and listening.
- Students are affected by the traditional teaching methods, and they are not getting used to speaking English and practising what they have learnt.

Teaching materials:

- Lack of teaching materials and facilities.

4.3. Conclusion

In this chapter, the findings drawn from the analysis of data are compared with the objectives of this research and presented as below:

- Most of the respondents, who are mainly from urban middle schools or have many years of experience studying English at different times, are not satisfied with their English language proficiency.
- The reasons for the low English proficiency are categorised as below:
 - i. More than a quarter of the respondents are not good at Putonghua, which is the language of instruction for English classes. There are over 200 languages in China, one of which is Chinese. As a language, Chinese has a standard variety and dialects. The formal standard is called Putonghua.
 - ii. A large number of people in China speak Chinese dialects.

- iii. The motivation for learning is restricted: most of the respondents learn English to pass examinations and meet job requirements; only a few of them learn English for their own personal needs. Some of the students are too lazy to learn English.
 - iv. The setting of entrance examinations: half of the respondents do not think the questions in the examinations are appropriate. These questions in the entrance examinations focus on grammar, resulting in students and teachers focusing only on grammar.
 - v. The syllabus of English teaching materials for middle schools needs to be improved.
 - vi. The traditional teaching methods in class need to be improved: two thirds of the respondents think that the teaching methods in middle schools are communicative, but need to be improved.
 - vii. The lack of learning environment: more than half of the respondents have less than one hour per day to listen to, speak, read and write English. Only 10-20% of respondents can access English for five hours or more and 30-40% of respondents for one to four hours.
 - viii. The English language proficiency of teachers is not adequate.
 - ix. The teaching materials and facilities are not sufficient.
- According to the respondents' answers, EFL can be improved in many aspects:
 - i. Teaching can inspire the interest of learners by using interesting and various teaching methods.
 - ii. The questions set in the entrance examinations can be changed so that even the students who are learning English to pass examinations can learn English so to use it in daily life.
 - iii. The learning materials should be improved to be more interesting and practical.
 - iv. Improve the syllabus of English course in middle schools.
 - v. Improve the language proficiency of the English teachers.
 - vi. Improve the curriculum of English course.

As explored in Chapter 2, there are many factors that influence, determine and play an important part in the language learning process. From the analysis of the respondents' answers it has become clear that not all of these aspects explored in Chapter 2 have been applied (or correctly applied) to achieve the best end result possible for English learners, such as proficiency in English.

Chapter 5

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Introduction

The results of the questionnaire described in this dissertation were discussed in Chapter 4. The following conclusions of the findings and recommendations are therefore presented in this chapter.

5.2 Recommendations

On the basis of the results of the questionnaires, one can say that the main reasons for the low proficiency in EFL lie in the limited motivation of learners to learn English, the inappropriate syllabus, the examinations of English courses, the ineffective teaching methods, the insufficient learning materials, and the quality of exposure to English.

The following recommendations are suggested in response to the research questions mentioned in Chapter 1, and provide suggestions to improve the low proficiency in EFL in urban middle schools in China.

5.2.1 Research Q1: Are Chinese students adequately motivated to learn English?

According to the response to Question 11, many of the respondents' motivation to learn English is to pass examinations. Passing examinations leads to better chances of getting into good universities. Getting into a good university will in turn lead to better

job opportunities.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, motivation for FLA is external, for instance, to pass examinations or handle problems relating to English in work places. However, external motivations are not adequate for learners to acquire English well. If learners are forced to study English, they may revolt against the language. On the other hand, learners do not have a suitable language environment in which to sufficiently practice English. It is thus difficult for them to achieve good results. Internal motivations, such as interest, participating in the Olympic Games and trade with the West will encourage learners to keep on studying English hard and effectively.

At this stage, the problem of motivation is therefore a difficult problem to be solved in China at present.

5.2.2 Research Q2: Are the assessment tests in the entrance examinations appropriate?

The responses to question 14 show that almost half of the respondents think that the assessment tests in the entrance examinations are not appropriate. As so many respondents are critical of the assessment test in the entrance examinations, it is better to look at the score distribution in the examinations.

Table 5: The marks distribution in the entrance examinations to universities in China (Total score: 150):

Item	Score
1. Listening comprehension	10
2. Grammar knowledge	40
3. Cloze test	30
4. Reading comprehension	40

5. Writing	30
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Learners ignore the speaking capability in their preparation for these examinations, as speaking is not included in the score distribution. As is known, more and more tourists from English-speaking countries come to visit China and many corporations invest in China. Even for those learners who may never leave China, they still need to speak English with people from English-speaking countries in work places or sometimes in public places. The assessment should therefore be reconsidered to place more emphasis on speaking so that learners will be more competent in situations where they must speak English.

In addition, listening comprehension is less than 10% in the examinations, which has led learners to focus less attention to their listening ability.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the aim of a test is to assess a person's ability or knowledge in a given area. The most serious problem regarding setting questions for English assessments is that there are no questions that assess the speaking ability of students. This has led to the neglect of the English-speaking ability of students during the process of learning English.

A good test should be practical, reliable, and valid. Entrance examinations in China are so to some extent, like TOEFL, which are proficiency tests, but have poor validity. For instance, the grammar questions are similar every year, and learners can obtain high marks after memorising answers and practising the same questions in the previous examinations. In addition to this, the test does not measure the learners' ability to speak a foreign language.

The university entrance examinations should emphasise the speaking ability. Questions in the examinations could be rearranged to highlight aspects of English learning that are important to students. If the examinations included set questions for

measuring speaking ability and adopted more questions for this purpose, the learners would be urged to learn English in a more effective way.

5.2.3 Research Q3: Is the syllabus appropriate?

Although Question 15 is specifically for English teachers, some respondents who most probably did not carefully read the requirements answered the question as well. Even though more respondents than expected answered this question, only one respondent thinks the syllabus is appropriate, while the other respondents are dissatisfied with the present syllabus.

As discussed in Chapters 2 and 4, the present syllabus is generally communicative, but there are two aspects that need improving.

On the one hand, it is necessary to re-establish the teaching requirements in the syllabus, such as how many words and phrases Senior One students must master. The learning and teaching situation differences in various areas in China should be considered when the syllabus is set up. For instance, Senior One (Grade 10) students in developing areas, who have more learning materials and access to English, can grasp 3 000 English words, whilst students from remote areas can only acquire 2 000 words. It would be more appropriate to adjust standards and requirements to local conditions, so that the level of teaching English can be improved in all the areas in China.

On the other hand, because of the changing needs of students, it is generally important for the English syllabus to adapt and change to meet these changing needs. For example, in the past five years, students have had few opportunities to communicate with English people in daily life. Matters are changing nowadays. Depending on the interaction needs, the syllabus should emphasize listening and speaking abilities more than ever before.

5.2.4 Research Q4: Are the learning materials appropriate and relevant?

In response to Question 16, some respondents expressed their opinions about the learning materials used in middle schools in China, which are generally seen as out of date. For instance, the content has not changed for many years and therefore cannot meet the learners' communication needs.

It is important to be able to adopt a good textbook to suit the current circumstances and/or teaching environment. As the theory presented in Section 2.5 indicates, that textbooks can help teachers in that they do not need to spend more time preparing teaching content. Some suggestions on how to make the learning materials appropriate and relevant are as follows:

Firstly, to meet the needs of teaching English, more than one type of learning material is required. As mentioned in Chapter 2, teachers and learners should be able to choose from a variety of learning materials, such as movies, songs and so forth, to suit their own interests and needs. The variety of choices can broaden the learners' mind and help experienced teachers develop their teaching skills.

Secondly, in the textbook, more authentic articles should be adopted to provide learners with more chances to be exposed to authentic language, such as clips from movies, so that they can learn and use the language much more appropriately.

Only if the learning materials are more relevant to learners' lives can the learners learn the English language better.

5.2.5 Research Q5: Is the English teachers' language proficiency adequate?

Another factor, mentioned in answers to Q17 and a number of times in the responses to essay Q2, is the quantity and quality of the English teachers. Lack of available English teachers and English teachers' poor language proficiency, affect the teaching results. From the response to Q17, it is clear that four fifths of the respondents are not satisfied with the teachers' language proficiency.

Chapter 2 points out that an effective teaching method should have the following characteristics: Instructions are clear and focused; there are smooth, efficient classroom routines; and personal interactions between teachers and students are positive. Thus, the language proficiency of English teachers is significant and if not satisfactory, should be improved, because the students' English ability will be either positively or negatively affected by their English teacher's language proficiency. English teachers should have access to language training programmes so that they are exposed to English, such as in English training and courses or short-term studies in English-speaking countries to improve their speaking and listening abilities.

The training of students from teachers' colleges and universities should also focus on the speaking and listening capabilities of the students, so that the students from these institutions are suitably qualified when they begin to teach in middle schools. In this way, teachers' English proficiency will be more adequate in the future.

5.2.6 Research Q6: Are the didactic methods that are used by teachers effective?

Only around 20% of the respondents think the didactic methods are effective. Most of the respondents are not satisfied with the English courses in middle school. In their opinions, English courses are boring and the teaching methods should be improved.

Teaching English in China has undergone many changes in the past century. Since 1980, the communicative approach has become one of the most popular English teaching methods. However, due to the pressures of entrance examinations on learners, and at the same time on teachers, learners and teachers are thus learning and teaching to achieve higher marks respectively. The communicative approach alone, which takes time and does not help in achieving high marks for entrance examinations, cannot be applied in middle schools. The direct method and the situational method are not popularly applied in English teaching in most middle schools; however, the reading method, the structural approach and the audio-lingual method are still being used by almost all the middle schools.

Although more and more modern teaching facilities are used in the teaching process, such as radios, TV sets and computers, the teaching results do not meet the expectations of the teachers and the students. The problem is that teachers make full use of all assisting methods and equipment, but ignore the central target of teaching: the students. The students enjoy listening to some English music, watching some English television programmes and films (which help to increase their interest in English), but these methods do not sufficiently help the students in learning English. Because the English classes are for learning from textbooks on which the entrance examinations are based, the students do not have extra time to enjoy what they are really fond of.

In the researcher's opinion, using teaching facilities, such as TV sets or computers, does not mean that the teaching is more effective. More important is practice in an all-English environment. Modern teaching facilities can only provide the assisting equipment in English teaching, and cannot be the focus of the teaching process. A good suggestion, which is mentioned in Chapter 4, as one of the respondents who is from the USA recommended, is for Chinese teachers to begin by studying and adopting the workshop methods of reading and writing described in *In the Middle* by

Nancie Atwell (1988: 77).

5.2.7 Research Q7: How much time and opportunity do learners have to hear, read, write and speak English?

Besides all the factors discussed above, the time and opportunities that provide learners the opportunity to practise listening, reading, writing and speaking English, are essential and of great consequence. A good example of this is that there is an English corner in some schools. Teachers and students can go there at some specific time and speak English. This type of activity is a good way of dealing with the problem. Practice makes perfect. This requires the teachers to reduce the homework given to the students, for the burden on the students in middle schools is extremely heavy – they do not even have enough time to sleep.

5.3 Conclusions

In this study, the researcher intended to establish the reasons for the low proficiency in EFL in urban middle schools in China.

The researcher designed a questionnaire on the above-mentioned problem and sent it via e-mail to Chinese learners of English who have experience in studying English in middle schools in China. After the feedback was sent back to the researcher, questionnaire results were summarized, and confirmed the analyses of the researcher. However, there is a limitation: since the questionnaire was set up and designed by the researcher, the validity of this information is restricted. Besides this, the sample of the respondents is not a true reflection of the group being researched. Only a few of the respondents are English teachers, limiting the value of the results.

After determining the main reasons for this problem, the researcher put forward some recommendations to address it in an academic way. These recommendations address

the following: adding value to the present syllabus (improving the setting of exam papers assessment), providing more teaching materials, improving the language proficiency; the teaching abilities of the English teachers, and letting students have more exposure to English.

All the objectives of this research have been accomplished. Of course, this research has certain limitations, as there are many factors that have influenced and impacted on the EFL teaching. As a student, the researcher cannot consider all of them due to distance, limited time and resources.

Further research could consider the following question suggested for other researchers who are interested in this subject as well: since it will be a major project to reform the entrance examinations in China (such as the way in which English skills are tested/measured), and to overcome the economic and traditional factors, how possible will it be to effectively test the English skills of students in a way that will also be of benefit to the student? In other words, how can the English assessment in these entrance examinations be structured in a way that it encourages students (and teachers) to learn English in a way that results in English proficiency rather than limited skill in English solely for the purpose of passing the entrance examination.

The English assessment (the entrance examination) is the key factor and has a deep influence on this problem. If the assessments can be improved to meet the needs of the students, teachers and the country, the other problems will be much easier to improve and resolve.

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Annexure 1

Department of Afrikaans
Faculty of Humanities
University of Pretoria
21 November 2006

CONSENT FORM

Dear Sir/Madam

I, the undersigned, am engaged in research on *The problem of low proficiency in English as a foreign language in urban middle schools in China*. One of the tasks I need to undertake is to collect information from selected respondents on aspects of the problem.

The purpose of this letter is to ask you to act as a respondent in my research. If you agree, would you please indicate your willingness by signing the note of consent on the last page of this letter and returning it to me by e-mail? To do so, you will obviously have to scan the signed page so that it can be sent electronically.

To enable you to decide about my request, please read the following notes:

Purpose of this study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the problem of low proficiency in English as a foreign language in urban middle schools in China.

Procedures

If you agree to participate in my study, I will supply you with a questionnaire, asking you to respond to the questions. Completing the questionnaire will not take more than one hour.

Risks and benefits of participating in the study

There are no risks in participating in this study since all information provided by you will be treated as confidential.

There will, clearly, be benefits attached to your participating since you will be contributing to our obtaining a clearer understanding of EFL teaching in China, which will, hopefully, lead to improved English teaching and learning.

Confidentiality

The responses to the questionnaire in this study will be kept private. I undertake not to include any information in the dissertation or any other report that may emanate from it and which could identify any respondent. Responses will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records.

Voluntary nature of the study

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will obviously not involve any penalty. You can terminate your participation at any time you like and can also withdraw from participation at any point.

Contacts and questions

The researcher conducting this study is Lai Yajuan. You may direct any questions you have by contacting her at +27-832288285, SA, or e-mailing yajuanlai@yahoo.com.cn.

Statement of consent

I, _____, hereby give my consent to Yajuan Lai to use the information I will supply to the questionnaire for the purpose of the study on *The problem of low proficiency in English as a foreign language in urban middle school in China*.

Signature:

Date:

Signature of investigator:

Date:

Annexure 2

QUESTIONNAIRE

*MA Research: The problem of low proficiency in learning English
as a foreign language in urban middle schools in China*

27 November 2006

Dear Sir or Madam

Thank you so much for taking the time to complete this questionnaire regarding my MA research: *The problem of low proficiency in learning English as a foreign language in urban middle schools in China*.

China is developing at a very rapid rate and consequently communication between China and Western countries continues to increase, making English indispensable in China. Although Chinese urban students pay more attention to English learning nowadays, they don't acquire it effectively.

I aim to propose resolutions for this problem, and the information obtained through this questionnaire will be essential and necessary to help collect relevant information on the state of learning EFL in urban middle schools in China.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and there are no foreseeable risks associated with it. However, if you feel uncomfortable with answering any questions, you may withdraw from the study at any point. It is, however, very important for me to learn your opinion. Your questionnaire responses will be strictly confidential and data from this study will be reported in the dissertation anonymously.

Could you please kindly email your feedback at yajuanlai@huawei.com before 10 December 2006. Your cooperation and help will be highly appreciated.

Yours sincerely

Yajuan Lai
University of Pretoria

Instructions for completing the questionnaire

This is a questionnaire on issues the research needs to cover. Kindly be advised that this guide is designed to assist you in answering the questionnaire.

- 1) *Provide answers to the questionnaire by emails.*
- 2) *Write down answers to questions in Part 1 in the brackets before each question.*
- 3) *You are encouraged to express your views freely and fully to questions in Part 2.*

Part 1. Multiple Choices

() **Q1. Gender:**

- a. Male
- b. Female

() **Q2. Nationalities:**

- a. Chinese
- b. Other

() **Q3. Age Group:**

- a. Younger than 12 years old
- b. 12 – 18 years
- c. 19 – 23 years
- d. 24 years and older

() **Q4. Current Position:**

- a. Middle school student in China
- b. English teacher in Middle schools in China
- c. Tertiary student in China
- d. Tertiary student in English speaking countries
- e. Teacher or specialist involved in English teaching
- f. Employed by state-owned corporation in China
- g. Employed by state-owned corporation overseas
- h. Employed by Multinational corporation in China
- i. Employed by Multinational corporation overseas
- j. Other (Please specify here _____)



- () **Q5. Current residence:**
- a. China
 - b. Overseas (English speaking countries)
- () **Q6. Which language are you best at?**
- a. Putonghua
 - b. One of Chinese dialects (e.g. Cantonese)
 - c. A Non-Chinese languages of China
- () **Q7. How long have you learned English (in years)?**
- a. 1-6 years
 - b. 7-10 years
 - c. More than 10 years
- () **Q8. When did you learn English in middle school?**
- a. Between 1977-1986
 - b. Between 1987- 1996
 - c. After 1997
- () **Q9. Where did you learn English?**
- a. Middle schools in urban areas
 - b. Middle schools in rural areas
- () **Q10. Is/was Putonghua the teaching language in English teaching when you are/were in middle school?**
- a. Yes
 - b. No
- () **Q11. What was your personal motivation to learn English?**
- a. To pass English Exams
 - b. To meet job requirements
 - c. To meet daily communication usage
 - d. Other (Please specify here _____)
- () **Q12. Do you think you acquired English effectively?**
- a. Yes
 - b. No
- () **Q13. Are you familiar with the entrance examinations to universities and colleges in China?**
- a. Yes
 - b. No
- () **Q14. Do you think the questions that are set in the entrance examinations are appropriate?**
- a. Yes
 - b. No

- () **Q15. Do you think the syllabus of the English course is appropriate? (This question is for English teachers in middle schools)**
- a. Yes, it is appropriate.
 - b. No, it is not appropriate.
 - c. It needs improving.
- () **Q16. How do you like the way your English teacher teaches/taught you English in middle school?**
- a. It is interesting and helpful.
 - b. It is boring.
 - c. It is fine, but it can be improved in many aspects.
- () **Q17. How much time and opportunity do you have to listen to English daily?**
- a. 5 hours and above
 - b. 1-4 hours
 - c. Fewer than 1 hour
 - d. No access to English at all
- () **Q18. How much time and opportunity do you have to speak English daily?**
- a. 5 hours and above
 - b. 1-4 hours
 - c. Fewer than 1 hour
 - d. No access to English at all
- () **Q19. How much time and opportunity do you have to read English daily?**
- a. 5 hours and above
 - b. 1-4 hours
 - c. Fewer than 1 hour
 - d. No access to English at all
- () **Q20. How much time and opportunity do you have to write English daily?**
- a. 5 hours and above
 - b. 1-4 hours
 - c. Less than 1 hour
 - d. No access to English at all



- () **Q1. How do you rate your English listening proficiency skill?**
- a. Poor
 - b. Average
 - c. Good
 - d. Excellent
- () **Q2. How do you rate your English speaking proficiency skill?**
- a. Poor
 - b. Average
 - c. Good
 - d. Excellent
- () **Q3. How do you rate your English reading proficiency skill?**
- a. Poor
 - b. Average
 - c. Good
 - d. Excellent
- () **Q4. How do you rate your English writing proficiency skill?**
- a. Poor
 - b. Average
 - c. Good
 - d. Excellent

Part 2. Essay questions (within 250 words)

- Q1. In your point of view, what aspects of English teaching in China should be changed/ improved?**
- Q2. What do you think might be the reasons for the low proficiency in EFL in China?**