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TEACHING ENGLISH IN CHINA

## CONTENTS

<b>1.</b>	<b>Editorial</b>		1
<b>2.</b>	<b>Articles from other Journals</b>		
	How Powerful Can a Language Test Be - The MET in China	Li Xiaoju	4
	Developing Extensive Reading Skills with Culturally Relevant Folktales	Kevin Stuart	15
<b>3.</b>	<b>Articles from SEdC/ODA/BC Projects in China</b>		
	Teach Yourself English	Anthony Luxon	18
	Chinese Learners' Listening Problems - A Discussion	Que Zijiang	23
	An Academic Reading and Writing Course	Tony Fitzgerald & Tony Skevington	31
	An Integrated Approach to Text-Based English Teaching	Tian Hailong	36
	Using Long Texts Communicatively in ESP	Zhao Huiping	41
	Learner Strategies in Inferring the Meaning of Unfamiliar Words in Reading Texts	Zhang Zuogong	48
	EAP Writing: A Process Model	Cai Yun	57
	An Alternative to Rote - Learning in Teaching Vocabulary	Yue Chunfang	60
	Memory Strategies	Jiang Li & Jin Li	64
	How to Stop Worrying and Love the IELTS Exam: An Experiment in Self-Directed Learning	Ian Cotton & Julia Hathaway	72
<b>4.</b>	<b>General Interest</b>		
	The Management of Tertiary English Instruction in China	Yang Xun	83
	When is a Mistake not a Mistake? An Argument for "Chinglish" as a Positive Advance in the Development of the English Language	Maurice Varney	89
	The Chinese Essay and its Interference in Writing Essays in English	Ken Keobke	96

# AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO TEXT-BASED ENGLISH TEACHING

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## The present English teaching situation in China

English has been taught for long time in China, and English teaching has experienced a number of developments. Recently communicative language teaching has been introduced into English classes. This new trend is marked by the teaching goal being recognized as developing the students' communicative competence. This communicative competence does not only involve the students' ability to deal correctly with language usage, but also includes the ability to use it appropriately in a real situation. Attempts at achieving such a goal, admittedly, have met with problems, one of which comes from the text-based materials in existing English textbooks. Most of the present textbooks, though no longer written around structural syllabuses, still require a detailed understanding of the language usage before any activities that involve language use. In the class where such materials are used, the teacher has to explain more and the students are not actively involved in the learning. They have no chance to use the language. As a result, the students' communicative competence remains underdeveloped.

In developing communicative competence it is believed that authentic materials are most helpful. A train timetable or an advertisement is more likely to create a life-like situation on class. However, this does not mean that it is necessary to replace text-based materials. This is partly because the textbooks, widely used in China's English classes, would be very expensive to replace, and partly because the texts, with some modification, can be used more communicatively. That is, the texts can provide opportunities for the real use of the language.

## An integrated approach

To use text-based materials more communicatively, the texts serve as a base for language activities. In performing these activities, students are actually solving problems through language as in real life. The performance of the language activities engages, on the students' part, listening, speaking, reading and writing simultaneously. Therefore, this approach to the text may be labelled an integrated approach. Such an approach is not a simple incorporation of language use to language usage or an integration of grammar and functional teaching. It also includes:

- 1) Integrating the four skills in language activities;
- 2) Designing the language activities with reference to the texts;
- 3) Performing the activities in the hope of understanding the texts;
- 4) Developing students' communicative competence in the performance of the activities.

## A model lesson

To demonstrate this integrated approach, a model lesson is provided here. The text is from Guided Reading (Li Xiangcong, 1988:400) for students of upper-intermediate level.

## The text

The initial fund of general scientific knowledge is an invaluable asset, but the young scientists should have no illusion about how little it is compared with what he or she should acquire during succeeding years. As to the precise value of this initial fund of knowledge, this depends to a great degree on how it has been acquired and on who has been imparting it. Young scientists cannot realize too soon that existing scientific knowledge is not nearly so complete, certain and unalterable as many textbooks seem to imply. The original papers of great scientists describing their discoveries and explaining their theories are never as rigid and self-confident as the resumes of these discoveries and theories in textbooks by other men often suggested. Young scientists consulting these original works will find in them 'it appears that', 'it probably means', 'it seems likely that', more than once, not as expressions of good manners or false modesty, but as expressions of elements of doubt which great men felt and honestly put on record. Many statements which have appeared in textbooks as universal and absolute truths have, in their original form, been put forward as only approximately true, or true only in certain circumstances.

### A possible teaching plan

**Objective I:** To familiarize students with the topic.

Skill focused on : Listening.

Skills integrated: Speaking, writing and reading.

Classroom activities:

- The teacher dictates some questions concerning the content of the text. For example:
  - a. Who are the young scientists?
  - b. How was scientific knowledge first formulated?
  - c. How does a teacher impart the knowledge to his students?
- Students listen to the text being read once or twice.
- Discuss answers in groups of four or five.
- Write down the answers.
- Scan the text to check the answers.

**Objective II:** To learn the vocabulary and grammar and to understand the text.

Skill focused on: Reading.

Skills integrated: Listening, speaking and writing.

### Classroom activities:

- Students read the text to underline the expressions that describe the two ways of imparting knowledge (in original papers and in textbooks).
- Discuss the findings in small groups.
- List these expressions in notebooks, as follows:  
The way in original papers: it appears that, it probably means, it seems likely that, approximately true, true only in certain circumstances.  
The way in textbooks: complete, certain, unalterable, rigid, self-confident, universal and absolute truth.
- Choose from the list to fill in the following blanks, and justify your choice through group discussion.
  - a. \_\_\_\_\_ the initial fund of general scientific knowledge is an invaluable asset, but it is less important than what he or she should acquire during succeeding years.
  - b. It is helpful for young scientists to realize that existing scientific knowledge is not nearly so complete, certain and \_\_\_\_\_ as many textbooks seem to imply.
  - c. Great scientists do not describe their discoveries as \_\_\_\_\_ as other men do in textbooks.

(Key: a. It seems likely that                      b. unalterable                      c. rigidly)

**Objective III:** To understand the main idea of the text.

Skill focused on: Writing.

Skills integrated: Speaking and listening.

### Classroom activities:

- Students work in groups of four. Each of the students is given a numbered card on which there is a word or phrase. For example, 1. comparison 2. the original paper 3. universal truth 4. call on. The students use that word or phrase to say one or two sentences in the fixed order so that all the sentences make up a summary of the text.
- Students note down the group's summary.
- Each group reads its summary to the class.
- Students listen to the teacher read his/her summary.

### A possible summary from the teacher:

The author makes a comparison between the two ways of expressing knowledge. Original papers often formulate knowledge as approximate truth, while the textbooks describe it as universal truth. By doing so, the author calls on the young scientists not to depend too much on the knowledge they acquire from textbooks.

- Students compare these summaries and write the best one.

### A comparison between this approach and the traditional approach

Different from this integrated approach, a traditional approach to text-based materials is likely to focus on vocabulary and grammar. In class the teacher would let students read the new words after him/her. When he teaches the above text, he would explain the pattern '... cannot do something too soon,' but his/her explanations are often decontextualised. The only activity the

students are possibly involved in, which is making up sentences with the new word or new sentence pattern, is also a mere practice of language usage and concerns no language use. This traditional approach is obviously not as helpful as the integrated approach in developing students' communicative competence. A comparison between these two approaches in the following chart provides strong support for this point.

The integrated approach	The traditional approach
Text used as basis for language activities	Text used as a source for grammar and vocabulary
The four skills are involved	Only reading is focused on
Language activities are contextualised	Language activity is decontextualised
Real use of the target language in class	Minimum use of the target language, no real use
Problem-solving is essential	Knowledge-remembering is essential
A deep understanding of text meaning is preferred	A mastery of language usage is aimed at
The text is learned as a whole-holistic approach	The text is learned sentence by sentence-atomistic approach
Student-centred	Teacher-centred
Vocabulary is learned in context	Vocabulary is learned often in isolation
Focus on use	Focus on usage

## Conclusion

It is suggested that a foreign language should be learned through use (Widdowson, 1978:15-20). In my experience, this is the most effective way of developing students' communicative competence. To learn English through use in the text-based context, it seems to me, requires two things. Firstly, it involves an integration of the four skills by the learners. When a learner speaks, he cannot help but listen. In terms of written text, it is also often the case that a learner learns reading by writing and writing by reading. Secondly, it requires a communicative exploitation of the texts by the teacher. Teachers have to design various language activities which provide a context for real language use. These two points combined together develops the integrated approach discussed in this paper.

In this sense, this approach is also an integration of the teacher's effort with the students'. Such a joint effort has yielded encouraging results in my experiment. After a period of adjustment from the traditional way, the students feel this approach is preferable, and they are now more at ease with oral as well as written English.

### References

**Li Xiangcong** 1988 New English Course - Guided Reading-Book Three. Beijing: Qinghua University Press.

**Widdowson, H.G** 1978 Teaching Language as Communication. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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