

English Language Learning in China: Creating Conversation Groups among University

Students Using *We Are New York*

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As soon as I disembarked the plane in Beijing, I was struck by an HSBC ad that read, “There are more people studying English in China than live in the United Kingdom.” CNN.com reports, “In today's China, English is king.” Not only is English essential in the job market, giving fluent speakers the competitive edge, it is imperative to understand English in order to acquire the information needed to keep up with “China's rapid economic growth and the boom in global trade and tourism.” CNN further reports that according to China Education Daily, “more than 400 million Chinese, about a third of the total population, are studying English” (Flor Cruz, 2011).

My entire professional career has been my work with the Brooklyn College Adult Literacy Program (BCALP), and I have learned a lot about what speakers of languages other than English need in order to gain the fluency required to survive daily life in America and to go on to higher education. Many students enroll in BCALP because they need very basic language and literacy skills, but they almost always ultimately want to attend college. So as a grant funded program responding to the needs of the community, we use a two-pronged approach to help students meet their goals. We need to enable them to understand, retain, and use the fine points of English vocabulary, grammar and syntax while at the same time giving them the opportunity to practice everyday conversational English. Before he or she is ready to enter college, the average BCALP student will probably have to speak to his doctor, or have a conference with her child's teacher or argue with the family's landlord. While good academic English is always important, most non-English speakers' immediate needs are to make themselves clearly understood in important situations and have the ability to understand a variety of Americans, not just well educated college professors.

At BCALP, through the help of the CUNY Office of Academic Affairs, teachers regularly participate in research and professional development projects to enable them to bring the most effective practices to the classroom. One system that has worked to teach both good grammar and fluid speaking skills to students of all levels is X word Grammar developed by graduate students of the late Dr. Robert L. Allen, Teachers College, Columbia University. “The X in X word Grammar stands for our elegant auXiliary verbs that help make the English verb system so simple and, yes, regular. X word Grammar stresses the word order of English, the regularity, and relative simplicity of its syntax” (Hunt 2011).

X word grammar breaks the language down into a few basic components and enables students to build up to more complex expressions of thought. Through a simple question and answer structure it is a natural method for promoting conversation. As students practice asking and answering each other’s questions correctly using the right X word as needed, they are having conversations. Bringing X word Grammar to the classroom fulfills both students’ needs for good academic English and fluid conversational English. It is a “brick-by-brick approach to English grammar,” writes Lee Jay Favors ESOL coordinator at BCALP. “*X-Words* starts with the heart of the language, the verb, and gradually adds every possibility in a sentence. .... Knowing where the x-word is tells you where the subject is and where the object is [correcting] 60% of the errors in...grammar...An *X-Words* student would never write [or say] ***I with mushrooms like pizza***...Everything starts with asking yes or no questions. .. Another thing I might mention is...my students swear that learning *X-words* has made them better

speakers...[though this]... approach to sector analysis was developed with editing in mind.”

In the field of English language teaching there are countless textbooks, learning programs and curricula from which to choose. Few seem to adequately meet the language needs of new Americans. X Word Grammar comes very close to developing both strong written language and conversation skills. Yet no class learns English through X Word Grammar alone. The CUNY instructors bring many and varied opportunities for language development to the adult literacy classes. For example, most teachers create curricula for each semester based on unifying themes such as health, work, family, civics, or the New York City subway system. Both in the classroom and on field trips, teachers utilize many hands-on techniques to help language come alive in the classroom and help students use English in practical and creative ways.

One tool that has become invaluable to classrooms through the city is the *We Are New York (WANY)* video series, produced as a collaborative effort between CUNY and the Mayor’s Office of Adult Education. Written and created by Anthony Tassi of the Mayor’s Office and Dr. Leslee Oppenheim, Director of Adult Language and Literacy Programs, CUNY Office of Academic Affairs, *WANY* is a series of nine videos showing a variety of immigrants working together to overcome obstacles typically faced by new New Yorkers. The series is aired on New York City’s channel 25 and it targets speakers of non-English languages who cannot attend classes, Tuning into the program enables this population to learn English and learn about New York City’s vast services for immigrants. In addition to the videos, the Mayor’s Office, in conjunction with the City University’s Language Immersion Program (CLIP), has created a treasure trove of

teaching materials that can be used along with the videos in ESL programs anywhere. There are comic book style fanzines, grammar workbooks and easy to read short stories.

There are many things that can be done with *WANY*. The program that sparked my interest for independent study abroad in China was the Mayor's Conversation Groups. Created to help volunteers help others with their English, I thought this program would be ideal for a short visit to the country. The premise behind the Mayor's Conversation Groups is that volunteers, who are not professional educators, can be trained to present the *WANY* videos and promote conversation among English language learners. I attended a training lead by Rebecca Lecce, director of CLIP and educator at the Mayor's Office of Education. I learned that the conversations groups consisted of ten two-hour sessions with the same set of activities each class. First there are introductions. Even as the students get to know each others' names, they share more details with each other. Secondly, students break up into small groups and view still pictures taken from the video they would see. Their task is to describe what they see in the picture and to guess what is going on in the scene. Thirdly, the students are given a sheet with five vocabulary words from the video; they are to tell the leader what they thought each word means and try to use it in a sentence. After these activities, the students view the video, stopping at the points of the pictures they had previewed. After viewing the video, the whole class talks about what they had seen and learned.

The Mayor's Conversation Groups program involves showing one of each of the nine episodes at separate sessions and then having a party on the 10<sup>th</sup> session. Being in Nanjing for less than two weeks all together, I knew it was unlikely I would be able to complete the program with a group of English language learners here. Since all of the

videos and supplemental materials are on the Internet, I thought that it would be useful for me to bring even two or three episodes to whomever I would have the opportunity to lead in conversation groups. If they enjoyed the videos and found them beneficial, they would be able to access the episodes they missed on the Web. Also, if their English was fairly strong, they could use the videos to help others in China who are trying to learn English and who need more listening and speaking practice.

Through the help of Professor Shuming Lu, Speech Department, Brooklyn College, I was introduced to Professor Feirong Gu, Foreign Studies Department, Nanjing Agricultural University. Professor Gu arranged for me to meet a group of graduate students who were preparing for study in the United States. They were attending a class to improve their English conversation and oral communication skills. Professor Gu explained how important this is for them. In order for doctoral students to receive a Ph.D. from China, they must publish their research in English in an internationally recognized peer reviewed journal. Their focus, according to Professor Gu, has been on the rigorous, correct, academic English that is needed to rise above the competition and get their work published.

I felt that WANY Conversation Groups would be a perfect fit for this group. They knew enough English to understand and enjoy the videos. They definitely needed conversation practice which they would receive from the class activities. Also, the content of the videos should appeal to them. They, too, would soon be strangers in a strange land. These videos show people with limited English like themselves solving problems in a foreign country. In each video, the main characters work towards the solutions to their problems with the help of family and friends and by contacting a variety

of City agencies for needed resources. So while these videos focus on a finite number and type of problems, they convey a broad message by showing that the New York community had many avenues open to people from all backgrounds. The basic message of the videos is that through communication, help can be found for any problem.

I chose for our first session the video *New Life Café*. It is a story about a grandmother from the Dominican Republic who is opening a café in Washington Heights featuring her native dishes. Right before the café is to open, she learns that she has diabetes and must change her cooking habits, go on medication and increase her activity level. Her family and friends help her every step of the way, from understanding what the doctor is telling her to overhauling her personal life and business plan. We began the session with introductions, which were very low key compared to anything I have experienced in the United States. The students barely said their names, and many were reluctant to give their Chinese names. I think they saw me as their teacher. They may have been too shy to teach “the teacher how to pronounce their Chinese name and found it less stressful to just say “Judy” or “Eric.” I did put them into small groups to discuss what they saw in the pictures. When I asked each group to tell me what they talked about, I deduced that they had each made up a story about their group’s picture. While the English they used to tell me the story was excellent, I immediately noticed that they had not been engaging in English conversation. Each group member had made up a unique story and told the others. We worked on the vocabulary as a whole class. Again this was very teacher-centered and not what I would categorize as a class discussion. Students were polite, attentive and answered in excellent English when they were asked a question. However,

they did not volunteer anything beyond what was required of them and did not speak out or even raise their hands.

After the warm up activities, we watched the video. The students' attention was rapt. They laughed at the many humorous parts. It was obvious that they understood and enjoyed what they were watching. When the video was over, again we had a whole class activity during which students were able to comment on what they had seen and ask questions about anything they did not understand or about which they wanted more information. This was also a fairly quiet activity. The students were friendly, but bookish, and did not seem to trust that they could have a conversation with a teacher in the front of the room. I had brought an undergraduate from the BC Study Abroad in China program with me to help out. We were now at the part of the program that was not part of the Mayor's curriculum. I had pre-arranged with Professor Gu that we would have free time for the students to ask me about the U.S.A., living in America and going to school in America. They had been told about this before meeting me; I expected that they would have a lot of questions prepared.

Yet, even though this was really their time, they continued to be taciturn. The few questions they asked us had to do with health insurance. I think they focused on that because it was a theme in the video *New Life Café* and they thought it would be an acceptable topic. Their American teacher as well as Professor Gu tried to draw them out of passivity as much as possible. I did not feel as though the situation was uncomfortable. I think the students were very happy to be there (they all returned the following day for the follow-up class which was optional). I had the sense that they could not open up in this classroom setting. At one point, my classmate and I tried to scare them a bit with

some truth about the American Universities to which they were all heading. I think they were slightly horrified to learn from us that in many courses, class participation can be 10-20% of your grade.

My experience reflects what Guangwei Hu writes regarding bringing conversational English, or communicative language teaching (CLT) to China. He writes that for over twenty years there have been serious efforts to change the way English is taught in China and to move away from textbook learning and translation skills toward facilitating fluid and fluent oral English communication. To Hu, the problem is that much CLT does not recognize the cultural and learning style differences between the English speaking world and China. He warns that any good language program must use a “cautiously eclectic approach...making well-informed pedagogical choices...grounded in an understanding of socio-cultural influences” (Hu, 2002, p. 103). In other words, what works in New York City probably will not work in Nanjing without some sensitivity towards the unique learning styles, culture, and expectations of the students.

Hu explains, with the caveat that one should not make too many generalizations, that Chinese learning has for centuries been influenced by Confucian principles which contrast sharply with modern American pedagogy. In my few hours with these university students that first session, I was able to see examples of what Hu discusses. He writes about how in China, teachers, books, and the written word are cherished as sources of knowledge. CLT, which involves a lot of student-centered activity, is misaligned with the heart of this tradition. Hu writes, “In contrast to the largely passive role students assume as receivers of knowledge and performers of teacher directions in traditional approaches, CLT proposes that students should be negotiators, communicators, discoverers and

contributors of knowledge and information” (p. 95). During the time I spent with the students, I felt that although I was a graduate student like them, they viewed me as the master. They looked to follow my lead and to gain knowledge from me. Their responses were their way of showing me what they know.

Hu writes that some of the main difficulty of bringing CLT to China has been resistance of the instructors. Many of them do not have the language strength themselves to promote sophisticated English conversation in their classrooms. Classes tended to be large and teachers often did not see the value in CLT. As I continued to compare my class with the education profiled in Hu’s research, I could see they were fortunate in several respects. They were enrolled in a class specifically for oral English and their teacher was a native Minnesotan. She addressed them in clear, correct, but natural and conversational English. Although I could not honestly say my first class was a resounding success, I realize now that my job had been made easier by the students’ previous experience with CLT.

I also observed how my attempt at promoting conversation was hampered by some of the traditional language instruction that must have contributed to these students’ strong English skills. When the students spoke, they spoke with care and precision. They thought for a moment before uttering a word, mentally translating what they wanted to say before presenting it out loud to their classmates and teacher. My challenge was to steer them towards more spontaneous conversation and give them the chance to start thinking in English while speaking English rather than communicate by translating from their native language.

We ended the session on a good note. Towards the end, I felt that the group may have become a little more relaxed and communicative. I was certainly delighted to have met

them and to have had this rare and special opportunity to bring WANY to Chinese graduate students. However, I knew I had to do something different for session two if I really wanted to help these students practice their English oral communication skills.

The next day, I found two additional undergraduates from the BC Study Abroad in China program who were interested in joining us. As soon as we reached the classroom, I designated the four corners for four small, separate conversation groups containing one American student and two to three Chinese students. We conducted the same activities as we had for *The New Life Café* for *The Wedding*, a really fun episode in which the various players needed for a wedding: the musicians, the seamstress, the head waiter, and the photographer, suffer an assortment of mishaps but all make it to the reception hall on time and prepared.

The conversation with the new classroom set-up was free flowing. The small group members introduced themselves in detail so that they all really knew each other as they continued on to talking about the still photos and discussing the vocabulary. After the video, everyone stayed with their group and talked more about what they saw. They were able to ask the American student sitting with them for more information regarding what they saw or to clarify anything they did not understand.

We never really formally regrouped into a “whole class activity.” Since all the students were comfortable and talkative, the boundaries that separated the small groups disappeared and students were talking across the room to each other or asking American students in other groups questions about their experiences in the United States.

Finally, I showed the class the website so that they could access the videos and supplemental materials if they liked. I linked on and showed them a ten minute video

promoting the *WANY* learning program. I thought they would like it because in it ESOL students in America talk about what they gained from *WANY* and ESOL teachers in America talk about why they like to bring *WANY* into their classrooms. I had only planned on showing a few minutes, but the Chinese students were very interested in seeing their American counterparts and watching some classes in action. When the clip was done, I asked the students if I could tape them saying a few words about the *WANY* program. At first, characteristically, they were shy. When I asked them if they would like to have a few minutes to prepare before I taped them, they agreed. Each spoke, and on their videos, they are strong, clear, communicative and sound like students ready for America!

Throughout the whole experience, I have been thinking not only about how to bring conversational English to China, but what learning conversational English will do to the Chinese culture. I had done some preliminary research on ESOL teaching in China in preparation for my trip. I learned China is interested in strengthening the population's English skills related to international business and their overall ability to interact with the English speaking world. As Professor Lu wrote me, "English teaching is a very big business in China" (Lu, 2011). Now that I am in China, I am seeing and experiencing a much bigger picture of what Chinese culture is like and what increasing the knowledge and use of English in China might do to the culture. I am learning about and seeing first hand this culture that is thousands of years old. It is not a few hundred years old like American culture, or even a few years old, like our American pop culture. Yet, as I enjoy trips to ancient Chinese treasures and learn their history, I am struck by American pop music streaming through the shops and Chinese tourists mugging for their photo

memories using American peace and thumbs-up signs. Everywhere our group travels, we are asked by Chinese people we pass to take pictures with them. I understand that we are a curiosity, but wonder if taking pictures with Americans is a way for Chinese individuals to place themselves briefly into our culture. Even in the short time I spent with the university students I saw some of American cultural influence infiltrating the students' mannerisms.

For example, at one point I was talking to a male and female student about some of the differences between students in our respective countries. I told them I was married, as were many students in the United States. I asked them if they were married. They both laughed embarrassedly, and assured me in confused English that they were just friends. They misinterpreted my meaning, in a way that even American students may have. They thought I wanted to know if they were married to each other, when I was inquiring about their respective marital status. What struck me was how the female student reacted physically. She leaned back and then leaned forward with her hand outstretched. For a second, I thought she was going to touch me on the arm with a gesture that in America would convey how silly my question was. She did not actually grab my arm, but I felt that in a way, she was aping my American demeanor. I am very demonstrative when I communicate. I felt that this student was, momentarily, "being" American, not just "speaking" American English.

Michael Agar writes about how being fluent in a second language requires not just knowing the vocabulary and linguistic structure of the language but understanding the culture of its native speakers. "You can master grammar and the dictionary, but without

culture you won't communicate" (Agar, 2002, p.19). He cites many examples of culture's influence on language. There are multi-lingual speakers who choose one language over the other depending on what they are trying to express, and others who have difficulty expressing what they feel because they do not have a deep cultural understanding of any language. I wondered how the students I met were influenced by their understanding of American culture as they spoke with me. I did not have the time or tools to measure the influence of American culture on the language skills they have accumulated. I tried to act naturally with them, in part because I thought they would benefit from conversing with an American in a way typical of what they would face when they are able to study in our country. At the same time, I was always cognizant that I am a guest in their country and tried very hard not to act or speak in any way offensive. I know that the other American students were as well. We all tried to take cues from the Chinese students on how to behave and how to judge appropriate conversation topics. So, for my research, I am also missing a measure of how representative the other American students and I are of American culture.

Yet, even without hard data, I know that American culture has to be an influence on a nation becoming more open to the rest of the world and incorporating English more and more into its relationships with other nations. Agar writes that "culture is powerful, and power unrecognized and uncontrolled can destroy rather than create" (p.26). As our group has traveled through China, we see an almost frantic pace of building and development. The growth of commerce can be physically observed as China races to expand its rail system and as the cities are being built upward and spreading outward. Our tour guide in Xi'an made a joke. Question: "What is the official bird of China?" Answer:

“The crane.” The joke is referring to the ubiquitous construction cranes, not the beautiful feathered creature. Michael Agar writes that cultures need to learn about one another and recognize each other’s influences. I sense that China, as a country, does not have the time to take this measured approach to understanding both the culture and mechanics of the English language. I wonder how American and other English speaking cultural influences will affect to Chinese culture. American culture, especially pop culture, has strong influences around the world. I wonder if China’s centuries’ old culture will be eroded in any way by the influence that the English language will have on it.

I completed my project with a different set of students at the same university. These students were undergraduates and I had been told by Professor Gu to expect them to be a little livelier and a little more fluent in English than the graduate students. In each of the past several years of the Chinese education system, the study of English has begun at earlier and earlier grades. These undergraduates, who are generally younger than the graduate students, have been studying English for a longer period of time, and are reportedly more able to exhibit greater ease in communication.

Michelle Mingyue Gu (2009) was able to research the influence of language and culture on Chinese students of English when she conducted a two-year study of four undergraduates in China, two English majors and two science majors. She followed them through a series interviews, online chats, diary entries and emails. She uncovered the cultural influence of English language mostly through examining the manner in which the students expressed seeing themselves in relation to other students. Although her study was small, she was able to look in an intimate way at four young women who were in the

process of developing into their adult selves. Many of the students' statements sounded quite ordinary. One student from rural area was having trouble fitting in. Another was lamenting a perceived gender bias in China toward male Ph.D.s and was rethinking her career path. Another was complaining that her fellow students were not serious enough about their studies, selfish, and not thinking about the common good. A fourth was explaining her casual attitude toward school work by quoting, "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." To my mind, the words taken from the Chinese students' writing could have been taken from any American student's journal. In the United States, we expect that college is a time of self-discovery. We hope that during their college years, our youth will find out who they are and who they want to be. They will see themselves in relationship to others and find a meaningful place for themselves in society.

Gu recognizes that her study is small and calls out for more and larger research on this issue. She does feel that her four subjects' experiences mirror the experiences of other English language learners in China today. She writes, "English learning at the tertiary level is both a process of acquiring language skills, and a process of understanding who the learners are and how they are related to the learning community, the national socio-cultural context and the imagined global community" (Gu, 2010, p. 150).

I looked for influences of the American culture on the Chinese undergraduates I met. The class of 15 was mostly freshman; there were three sophomores and no upperclassmen. At first they looked a lot like American students with their hands under their desks, fingers flying across the keyboards of their cell phones. When I spoke with them about it they showed me that they were using translation apps to help understand

what was being said in the conversation groups. These undergraduates were certainly more outspoken than the graduating graduate students. They tended to talk over each other and comfortably make jokes to share with others. The few quieter students were the ones whose English was not very strong. I could not tell if their shyness was due to culture or lack of communication skills. So, on the surface, I thought I saw more of a foreign cultural influence on these students than I did on the older ones. Certainly, the speed at which they spoke English, the multitasking with their translation dictionaries, the cross conversations, and a little competitiveness in trying to dominate the conversation seemed possibly the result of outside cultural influences. I cannot conclude that the influence is primarily a result of the acquisition of fluent English language skills. However, their behavior did contrast with what I have seen and read about as the behavior stemming from Chinese culture's influence in the classroom.

At one point, we faced a minor culture clash and Chinese culture won. The students were very surprised and shocked to learn that in America, when a child becomes an adult it is not his or her obligation to take care of his or her parents. They could not accept or understand that most American parents desired for their children to be independent adults. They did not seem to be able to even imagine that when children marry and have their own children, the grandparents do not necessarily provide childcare enabling the young adults to pursue their careers. This was the only point of the two sessions in which the students talked among themselves in Chinese, excluding me from the conversation. We had to move to another topic in order to resume our English conversation group.

I was surprised that these students were surprised and really unhappy to hear about this difference in our cultures. I felt very strongly that they disapproved of the American options. Although they claimed to be very familiar with many American movies, they seemed to have missed this aspect of our culture. I felt that when this contrast between the Chinese and American culture emerged in the classroom, it showed that Chinese culture is tremendously strong, and that integrating English into that culture will not quickly or easily change the many beliefs that have been held and practiced for so many generations.

My research is not without a few limitations. For example, I met a total of about 30 students at a single university for six hours each. This was mainly because I was encumbered by the constraints of time and resources. When I first chose *WANY* to bring with me to China, I hoped that it could help some students with their efforts to become better communicators in oral English. My original and primary goal has been met. However, I have broadened my own curiosity about this amazing country and its young adults. What is happening in China today is unprecedented. This country, with its enormous population, is emerging into the world like a butterfly that has been closed in a large cocoon for eons. How will the expansion of the English language affect China's population and will it, as Gu writes, "negotiate the complicated and changing social context and position [itself] somewhere between English speaking cultures and the mother tongue and culture, and....secure....a legitimate position in the global community" (p. 50)? Certainly, China and the rest of the world will be answering that question in the years to come.

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