

TEACHING THE TEACHER: ENGLISH TRAINING FOR CHINESE PE TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

Training academic staff to teach in English as a form of workplace training is relatively rare, as the ability to teach using English as a medium, if important, is established at the staff recruitment stage. However occasionally there is a need for such training as a form of professional development. Even at English as a Medium of Instruction institutions in China, Physical Education (PE) is a subject mainly taught by Chinese teachers, in Chinese. This reflective article describes one particular PE Centre's desire to enable their staff to improve their English and the Staff English course that was created to meet this need. Challenges to both the English teacher and her PE Staff English students were many, relating to: the linguistic nature of PE as a subject, the logistics of teaching PE, the PE-teachers themselves as students, and to some degree the role of PE teachers within the University.

重视英语教学能力的岗位在招聘时往往会明确的对此能力提出要求，因此，教职工的在职培训一般不会把用英语教学列为培训内容。然而，偶尔也会有这种职业培训的需要，因为即使是在用英语作为教学语言的高校，体育课程一般也由中国教师用中文教授。本文描述了某体育中心提供的员工英语课。该体育中心希望能够通过这种培训提高员工的英语水平。在此期间，英语教师和体育中心的员工学员遇到了多方面的挑战。这些挑战涉及到体育课程的语言本质，体育教学的后勤准备工作，体育老师的学生身份，以及一定程度上体育老师在大学的角色问题。

INTRODUCTION

The following is a discussion of a reflection on my 2-year experience (2014-2016) training Chinese Physical Education (PE) teachers how to teach PE class in English, instead of Chinese, at Xi'an Jiaotong Liverpool University (hereafter XJTU or "the University"), a Sino-British English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) University. As these students were teachers, this experience could be viewed as relating to issues involved in teacher training, or even workplace training, yet the English that was taught was of a specific purpose – for teaching PE – and therefore could also be viewed as covering issues related to teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP). For these reasons, and due to a lack of previous research, this paper does not attempt to place its observations within a specific theoretical framework; rather, it is more a description and reflection of a unique teacher training situation. This article aims to provide an outline of both my experience creating and delivering the PE Staff English (PESE) course and recommendations for those wishing to embark on similar Academic Staff English training programmes.

THE PHYSICAL EDUCATION CENTRE (PEC) AND THE PE STAFF ENGLISH STUDENTS

PE is compulsory for Chinese students in the first year of the undergraduate degree at XJTU, yet although other classes at this EMI university are taught in English, PE instruction tends to be taught mainly by Chinese teachers, using Chinese language. Although at the time of the PE Staff English course there was no official requirement for PEC staff to teach in English (P. Zhao, personal communication, 2016) because almost all students are Chinese and the international students did not have to take PE classes, the student body at EMI tertiary institutions such as XJTU is changing, as more non-Chinese international students are being recruited (Feng, 2012; Onsman, 2013), necessitating PE classes

to eventually be held in English (Zhao, Personal Communication, 2016). At the same time, in XJTU there is an increasing demand for the PEC staff to communicate with their colleagues in English, and better English would also enable these teachers to attend conferences and read scholarly journals written in English, thereby increasing their knowledge in the field. These were the major reasons why the PESE course was created.

The nature of the PEC within the University meant that although the employees were teaching, they were considered Administration Staff, so were subject to the additional demands of such a role, such as a high student pastoral care load (P. Zhao, personal communication, 2016). This meant that attending a Staff English course was another demand on their time. Even so, the Team Leader of the PEC (Zhao) was highly positive and supportive of the PESE course, as his desire was for his fellow PE teachers to be more proficient in English, thus raising the profile of the Centre throughout the University.

Each PE teacher was in charge of teaching one particular sport and there were ten of these (badminton, tennis, roller skating, Ultimate Frisbee, Latin dance, basketball, fitness and body building, football, and ping pong). At the time the course was run, the PEC had one native English speaker, employed to teach golf; the other sports were all taught by Chinese (Mandarin-speaking) teachers. The PESE class, of about 17 students, had a variety of English levels, ranging from about IELTS 4.5 to 7, a gender ratio of 2:1 male to female and an age range of early 20s to late 30s. The length of time they had been teaching PE at the university varied from one to three years (P. Zhao, personal communication, 2016).

PE STAFF ENGLISH (PESE) COURSE DESIGN: CONTENT, TEACHING METHOD AND ASSESSMENT

The PESE course provides teacher training focusing on pedagogy, PE as an ESP, as well as Workplace English. The course that was designed focused mainly on the latter two aspects, but pedagogical skills were also taught when needed (refer to Figure 1).

Few texts or research that could inform design and content of a Staff English course for PE teachers were found. In terms of texts, General English books often had a chapter about sport/ hobbies/ past times, but PE teaching texts, as used in high schools in the UK or the US, were far too complex (for both the PE teachers and their students) and tended to mainly focus on concepts related to physiology or ethics, which were not covered in the PE programme at this university at the time. Perhaps reflective of the lack of suitable texts, one research paper found, based in Iran, was in fact using English for Academic Purposes (EAP) books to teach their MSc PE students (Hashemi, Lamir & Namjoo, 2011).

Therefore, the PESE course was set up from scratch and underwent modification from semester to semester, according to student feedback and progress, over the 2014-2016 period. PESE classes were held twice a week, an hour at a time, and unless they included demo lessons, held in a regular classroom. Teaching materials were adapted from General English texts or created by the teacher.

YEAR 1 (SEMESTER 1 AND 2) OF THE PE STAFF ENGLISH COURSE

Teaching Approach

The classes tended to be teacher-centred with about 80% teacher-talk-time. Although research has argued that PE teaching tends to not have enough of a holistic and critical-thinking approach, instead merely focusing on teaching skills and related language (Sun, 2011; Fazio, Isidori & Bartoll, 2015), in the beginning, the PE Staff English course focused on the basics, and this was mainly related to lexicon. Developing sports- ▶

related vocab was vital before students could even try to instruct others in English. Due to the practical nature of the vocabulary taught, classes usually included games and “Simon Says” kind of activities. In the first year, little explicit teaching or practice of reading or listening were incorporated in classes due to the lack of time and the fact that the PE teachers mainly needed spoken and written English skills in their job.

Most of the first semester concentrated on teaching the vocabulary for each of the ten sports, one sport each class, to be followed by a skill demo in the following class, which would show the usage of this new language. Each teacher taught a PE subskill related to their sport, using English, to their PESE classmates

and the PESE teacher, who acted as PE students.

Content

As can be seen in Fig. 1, the learning and usage of relevant vocabulary and general spoken and written English skills was a major part of Semester 1 Year 1, however general pedagogical and work-related skills, such as writing emails, were also covered. As part of their job, some of the PE teachers had to write emails in English to communicate with colleagues and students about sports days, for example. In the past, these were often too informal or missing vital information.

In the second semester of Year 1 of the programme, grammar and general English vocabulary were the focus. Improving basic writing skills consolidated the work that

had been done on email writing in Semester 1. One benefit of the training is to create handouts and materials for PE class where no handouts are used traditionally. General teacher training principles were also added to the course design in order to change what had been observed as a traditional teacher-centred class to a more student-centred class. How to give a presentation and to take part in a formal meeting in English rounded out the Semester 2 course.

Assessment

Most assessment tasks were formative; however, some of the assessment was more formalised and given a grade. As an example of a less formalized assessment, the PESE students were asked to send me an email (inviting XJTLU staff to participate in a particular sports event), which was given

feedback on. More formalised assessment took the form of two written tests testing the material covered in class, a presentation on a topic related to their sport and feedback on observations of their actual PE classes with XJTLU students.

The observations were not only an assessment tool; they gave the students a chance to put into practice what had been learnt in class. During the observations, students were supposed to teach at least 20 minutes of their regular timetabled 50-minute PE class in English; some spoke for more than 20 minutes, some for less. For efficiency, as I was unable to observe all students directly, the classes were video recorded, watched later, and written and oral feedback were given to each student. The feedback related to: the amount of English used (both during the demonstration phase and the practice phase of the lesson), the accuracy of grammar, word usage, and pronunciation. The majority of the teachers spoke in English 90-100% of the time during the demonstration phase and 70-100% of the time during the practice phase of the lesson. Most students had two observations and in the second they were asked to give their students handouts they had created, to demonstrate what they had learnt from the ‘materials design’ lesson in class.

Progression in Skill Level and Course Feedback

The Staff English courses are generally an informal and voluntary part of a staff member’s personal development. Therefore, there was no stringent measurement of progress or the efficacy of my teaching approach. Although the observed lessons were a subjective ‘snap shot’ of their usage of English in the class situation, the results were still impressive, especially from some of the PESE students who were initially very unconfident in speaking English. All students who had two observations increased the amount of English they spoke over the two observed

classes and, in general, students improved their scores over the two tests. Email writing in particular improved greatly, especially in terms of including relevant details. Therefore, it can anecdotally be concluded that progress was made in both confidence and PE-related English and workplace English skill levels over the period of the course.

At the end of the first year a bilingual written questionnaire was given to the students to gain feedback to help design the following year’s course. In general, the students enjoyed the English vocabulary games, writing emails, and learning sports-related language. Even though many were not initially confident with their speaking, the course feedback mentioned “Giving a Presentation” as one of the most beneficial skills they learnt, as 99% of the students totally agreed or agreed with “Learning to give a presentation was useful for me as an individual” and “Learning to give a presentation was useful for me in my job”. However, there was disagreement about the need for testing, homework and explicit grammar teaching, so apart from the testing, these course components were dropped from the following year’s course design. Students also wanted more speaking practice on topics relevant to their field.

YEAR 2 (FIRST SEMESTER ONLY) OF THE PE STAFF ENGLISH COURSE

In response to course feedback, a greater amount of speaking practice was incorporated into the second year of the course. Once their confidence grew, classes tended to be focused on integrating skills, discussing controversial topics based on readings or recordings related to sport, such as “Doping during the Olympics”, thereby trying to incorporate a more holistic, analytic and social content focus, and modelling a more student-centred teaching technique, as recommended by the research (Sun, 2011; Fazio et al., 2015).

Assessment tools used in this year of the course were two tests, similar in style to the first year but containing a 100-word writing component.

Due to staffing reasons, the second semester was taught by another teacher.

CHALLENGES

Although I have a background in health science and am keen on sport, once I started planning this course I realised what a complicated teaching task this was. The challenges were several: the purpose of PESE classes, the class profile, the nature of PE teaching, PE English as form of ESP, and L1 interference.

The purpose of PE Staff English classes and the PEC Teachers

The provision of free English lessons to staff is not to be taken for granted. The University is to be commended for giving staff the opportunity to improve their English for both professional and personal reasons, especially during their working hours. However, the purpose of these classes, and the addition of them on top of their normally heavy workload, proved challenging at times for all involved. This was complicated by trying to formalise the course, both by myself and the PEC Team Leader.

The PEC staff’s dual role as teachers and administrators reflected on their, at times, poor attendance and an inability to complete homework. As homework was rarely able to be finished, the course outline had to be altered halfway through the first year to reflect this. The change from being a class in the evening to one during the day, in Year 1 Semester 1, initially solved the attendance problem. However, even though permission to attend and hold the class during working hours was obtained from Senior Management, attendance was still often erratic as the students struggled to meet the various demands on their time. Moreover, in the second year attendance ▶

SEMESTER ONE	
PE as an ESP	Vocabulary related to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parts of the body • Equipment needed in each sport • Verbs and prepositions to describe particular movements in a sport – for teaching or giving correction e.g. “Straighten up your arm” • Instructional Language e.g. “pair up”
Pedagogical Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of gestures to reinforce commands to PE students during class • Involving students in class
Work-place English	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing emails
SEMESTER TWO	
Pedagogical Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designing hand outs and Power Point slides
Work place English	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participating in a meeting • Giving a presentation
General English	Grammar: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of imperatives • Expressing comparison/ contrast • Language of instruction • Language of sequencing • Giving advice • Error correction of common errors in the tests Vocabulary: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concepts of synonyms • Concepts of prefixes and suffixes Writing skills: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paragraphing • Topic sentences • Punctuation

▲ Figure 1.: Year One PESE course content outline

was optional and of the 17 or so teachers in the PEC, there was only a core of about 5-10 regular attendees.

During the second semester of the first year the PEC Team Leader wished to link the PESE course to promotion opportunities. This added a new dimension to the course, both in terms of the attendance level expected and type of assessments given. The second test in the second semester of the first year was added as a more objective way of measuring performance (as could be compared to the results in the first test) and then used to inform the PESE course student's performance as a PEC employee under the XJTLU Professional Development Review system (PDR). While this not only proved problematic logistically in terms of fitting the PESE results into the PDR criteria, the usage of performance from a reasonably informal English class to inform a PDR evaluation had ethical implications that I was uncomfortable with, so the test was only tied to the PDR for one semester of the two-year programme. This is something to keep in mind when designing Staff English courses; often the purpose of the course and the definition of its success differ between the teacher, the students, and other stakeholders (Hashemi et al., 2011; Cargill, O'Connor, & Li, 2012).

A challenge to student-centred teaching and course design content was the nature of the PE teacher-students themselves. Although they were very enthusiastic and personable to teach, in terms of English skills, they were a mixed-ability class. In addition, some teachers seemed to have no grounding in sport in general and the concepts associated with it, such as nutrition, which limited possible PE Staff English course content. They also tended to only teach one sport, so some did not see the point in learning about other sports. The students seemed to be kinaesthetic learners and disliked to sit still too long, nor have too much of a reading/

writing or grammar focus, which was a challenge to a teacher used to teaching English for Academic Purposes. To cater for their learning style, where possible, classes were kept light-hearted and active.

The Nature of Teaching PE as a Subject

Teaching PE is not like teaching in other subjects – the content and method is highly practical, visual and physical, and teaching usually takes place outside of a classroom. Therefore, there was no whiteboard, no PPT or handouts, students did not bring pens or paper to class, nor was there anywhere for them to sit to take notes on any new language. In fact, there seemed to be no expectation that they would take notes or ask questions and the classes were very teacher-centred and the students passive. As a result, part of the PE Staff English course in both years included some basic teaching techniques to ensure students were more involved in the PE class and could better understand the English being used by their teachers.

PE English as a Form of ESP and L1 Transference

In terms of content design, the amount and variety of sports-specific vocabulary and grammar needing to be taught was immense and at times overwhelming. Language associated with PE teaching and practice could be viewed as ESP in its own right with its own discourse, and the effect of this, therefore, will not be focused on here (for further information see Pirsl & Pirsl, 2014). However, the effect of L1 transference on learning will be touched upon.

L1 transference affected both grammatical and vocabulary accuracy. The fact that in Mandarin prepositions can be used on their own as verbs (Concise English-Chinese Chinese-English Dictionary, 2011), lead to incorrect utterances such as “up your arm”. In Mandarin, the universal “qiu” (ball) is used for all sports including badminton, so getting

the badminton teacher to stop calling the shuttlecock a “ball”, required some patience.

THE FUTURE AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The students' English skills and confidence progressed well throughout the period, and from student feedback it seems they gained both personally and professionally from the course, with comments such as:

“From these [sic] course I have learned many [sic]: PE vocabulary, presentation skills, participating in meeting in English, how to write a good email, the difference between Chinese and English, and my speaking English have [sic] improved very much.”

Unfortunately, although gains were made in the PEC students' English ability and confidence communicating in both oral and written English, this has not been transferred as of yet to their teaching; PE classes are still taught mainly in Chinese (P. Zhao, personal communication, 2016). The main reason for this is there is still no official requirement from the University for staff to teach classes in English. Moreover, due to the teachers' lack of fluency in English, they feel more comfortable teaching in Chinese (P. Zhao, personal communication, 2016). However, discussions are underway at XJTLU regarding the addition of PE classes to the undergraduate curriculum for international students (P. Zhao, personal communication, 2016) which will bring challenges to staff in terms of the design and delivery of PE classes.

Recommendations

For those who may wish to design a similar course, my advice would be:

1. Determine the purpose of any Staff English (SE) training and get stakeholders agreement on this.
2. Sit in on a few of the SE students' own classes as a form of needs analysis.
3. Ensure classes are active and



THE AUTHOR WITH HER STUDENTS

- try to schedule classes during the day, to ensure a greater likelihood of attendance and concentration.
4. Make use of the SE students' learning styles and general life experience for more meaningful and effective learning to take place.
5. Be flexible about attendance, homework and content.
6. Ask for feedback from both SE students and their supervisor to ensure needs are being met.
7. Be willing to adapt the course to meet the needs of the students as the course progresses.

In terms of PE Staff English courses, there is a real need to develop ESP and teacher training materials. Research into whether Chinese PE teachers at other EMIs are teaching their students in English, and if not, what Staff English training is being provided would also be of value.

Although at times challenging, teaching on this PE Staff English course was the highlight of my week; the enthusiasm of the students, the relatively quick gains in language skill level and the practical content made for very satisfying teaching. There is much to be gained from EMI universities running courses such as this for their staff. ○

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