From classroom to imagined community: A study of three learners of Crazy English in China

LI JINGYAN – The University of Melbourne/Harbin Institute of Technology

ABSTRACT

Crazy English (CE) is one of the most radical and most popular English-training programs in China. There has been controversy over the method since its beginning, with learners declaring that it heightens their motivation and generates positive learning (Wang 2002) and academics being critical of its unorthodox teaching practices, extravagant claims of learning outcomes and unabashed pursuit of commercial success. Yet a decade on, it is clearly more than just a passing phenomenon. Indeed, it seems that CE has become a subculture in China (Shen and Gao 2003: 201) and if the method offers anything new or valuable, it should not be ignored. This paper outlines a qualitative study of CE in which its concepts and values in terms of foreign-language learning and motivation were identified and the pedagogical practices and motivational force of the method were documented and examined.

Introduction

English has been studied for more than 100 years in China, beginning with the establishment of Tongwen Guan, the first formal English school in the late Qing Dynasty (1861–1911), and continuing into the Modern Era (1949 onwards). English has largely been a ‘transparent window’ (Orton 2005: 41) to ‘re-skill’ (Giddens 1991: 7) and to respond to the West. It has been studied most commonly as a tool for national development (Lam and Chow 2004; Gao 2005; Orton 2007). Following China’s defeat in the two Opium Wars (1840–60), English was added to the curriculum of military institutions for technological purposes as the country moved to modernise. Following the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the language was viewed as a means of accessing science and technology. In the economic recovery period (1960–66), English became a compulsory subject in China’s college matriculation examinations, but during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) it was reduced to an instrument of political propaganda. In the Open Door period (1978 onwards), English is once again seen as an essential instrument for modernisation and economic development and has been strongly promoted in secondary and tertiary curriculums. All the newly revised national syllabuses for schools and universities, published by the Chinese Ministry of Education, have confirmed the significant position of English in the country’s development, with English being compulsory from Primary Grade One.

With China’s increasingly active involvement in globalisation and international affairs, English teaching has exploded in the past two decades, gaining increasing attention from governments, organisations and individuals. When addressing a 1996 conference in Beijing on English language instruction in China, Li Lanqing, Vice-Premier of the State Council, asserted that the urgent improvement of the English proficiency of the Chinese people was not merely an educational issue, but an issue associated with modernisation. The teaching and learning of English is a primary thrust of the government’s strategy for achieving long-term national economic reform and success in the international marketplace. However, the mastery of English is not just an aspect of government rhetoric. The image of modern Chinese people is reflected in senior government leaders who speak English fluently on important occasions and in the use of English by famous athletes who made presentations in support of Beijing’s bid for the 2008 Olympic Games. These Chinese citizens of the new century greatly impress people inside and outside the country.

The Chinese people generally realise the increasing importance of English. English is one of the three key subjects in junior to tertiary matriculation examinations. As part of their studies, undergraduates in many universities have to pass the College English Test (CET) Band 4 certificates and postgraduate
students are expected to pass CET 6, which is seen as a prerequisite for finding a desirable job. For those who plan to study abroad, successful performance in tests such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language, the International English Language Testing System, the Graduate Record Examinations, the General Management Admission Test and the Public English Test System is essential. The chance to work in a well-paid foreign enterprise or joint venture is largely dependent on a good command of English, and job promotion is one of the most common reasons given by adult students for studying English. In the civil service, English is a prerequisite for many posts. People also learn English for other purposes, such as doing business with foreign countries, going abroad on holiday or emigrating.

Major international events have turned learning English into a craze. These have included China’s entry into the World Trade Organisation in 2002 and China’s hosting of the 2008 Olympic Games and the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai. ‘Such an international outlook requires further openness to foreign learning’ (Lam 2002: 247) and English is suddenly no longer seen as a foreign language, but the main second language in China (Lo Bianco 2005). Everyone now wants to know English, especially in the big cities. Officers, police, taxi drivers, waiters and even 70-year-old grandmothers have learned to say ‘Hello, welcome to Beijing!’ (Xu 2006).

English teaching and learning in China has become a nationwide endeavour, and to meet the huge demand, private training centres have mushroomed, providing access to English, which was previously only available in universities where the teaching–learning process was controlled by the academy.

**Li Yang and Crazy English**

CE, as an English-learning method, was developed by Li Yang. When preparing for the CET 4, he found it effective to read texts as loudly as he could. He did this every morning and four months later his language skills had improved so much that he passed the exam and won the second-highest mark in his university. Encouraged by this success, Li Yang became more confident. He continued to practise his listening and oral interpretation skills, and gradually developed an English-learning method. When he practised English, he shouted and gesticulated and, because he looked crazy, his method was named Crazy English (Liu 2007).

CE is a very popular and untraditional English-training program for Chinese learners. Li (2000: 6) claims it has been developed in response to ‘the tragedy of traditional teaching’ in China. It has been called ‘English as a Shouted Language’ (Zhan 2002), a program that encourages learners to enunciate English as they study. It uses a series of radical teaching methods of which the core feature is to shout out sounds, sentences, dialogues and short passages repeatedly. Its founder believes that ‘[if you] shout out loud, you learn’ (Li 2006: 6). Texts centre on phonetics and are provided bilingually, in English and Chinese. Most CE textbooks (Figure 1) are filled with inspirational phrases, motivational stories and tips for successful English learning.

**Figure 1: Sample of textbook content**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part</th>
<th>Volume</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Part I</td>
<td>6 short articles in Chinese (17 pages)</td>
<td>Secrets of failure for Chinese English learners</td>
<td>To analyse the causes of failure of Chinese English learners and provide solutions to improve their English.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part II</td>
<td>10 chapters (119 pages)</td>
<td>Cracking standard American pronunciation</td>
<td>To master standard American pronunciation by practising 1000 sentences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part III</td>
<td>12 short dialogues (11 pages)</td>
<td>Authentic American dialogues</td>
<td>To learn how to use idiomatic expressions in authentic dialogues.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cont ...
In classes children and adults are encouraged to speak ‘as loudly as possible’, ‘as quickly as possible’ and ‘as clearly as possible’ (Li 2006: 6). Major classroom activities are characterised by a strong focus on pronunciation and intensive practice through translating, imitating, repeating and reciting, accompanied by the One-Three-Five method.

- **One** stands for one-breath training, whereby learners are trained to speak as much as they can in one breath. The purpose of this is to train the diaphragm to speak English. Li argues that this is the way native speakers articulate.

- **Three** refers to the *three-ly method* that requires learners to speak English as *clearly, loudly* and *quickly* as possible.

- **Five** stands for the five pronunciation tips: pronouncing long vowels/diphthongs exaggeratedly and fully and short vowels briefly and strongly, drawing in the lower abdomen, making liaisons, omitting sounds and attending to making dental fricatives fully.

In CE each phonetic sound is assigned a hand gesture to facilitate pronunciation. CE places heavy emphasis on practising English orally and claims to accommodate social change by teaching Chinese people how to speak good English.

A few studies have been conducted into CE (Adamson 2002, 2004a, 2004b; Bolton 2002; Shen and Gao 2003; Gao 2005; Woodward 2008). They all identify the patriotic message, which resonates with the historical voice of nation-building. Adamson (2004a) and Gao (2005) recognise CE’s psychological basis of addressing and tackling the problem of anxiety in language learning from a Chinese cultural perspective. Gao also views CE learning as essentially a process of increasing self-confidence and transforming identities, and Woodward (2008) places particular emphasis on its political ideology. While all these writers are dubious about the effectiveness of CE as a method of learning English, none has seriously investigated classroom activities over a period of time. In a telephone interview with New Yorker journalist Bob Adamson, an English-language specialist at the Hong Kong Institute of Education, Adamson said, ‘[t]he jury is still out on whether he [Li Yang] actually helps people learn English’ (Osnos 2008).

**Theoretical tools**

The motivation of CE learners is clearly central to the study outlined in this paper. According to Dörnyei (2001b: 7), motivation involves the choice of a particular action, effort expended on it and persistence with it. In second language (L2) learning, motivation has been the focus of consistent research. From the socio-psychological framework proposed by Gardner and his colleagues (eg Gardner and Lambert 1959, 1972; Gardner 1985; Gardner and Tremblay 1994) to the educational-psychological shift headed by Dörnyei, more and more researchers such as Brown (1990), Crookes and Schmidt (1991) and Dörnyei (1990, 1994, 2001a, 2003), to name just a few, have highlighted the significance of motivation in the L2.
classroom environment. As well, the dynamic and temporal dimensions of learning motivation have drawn the attention of some researchers (e.g., Williams and Burden 1997; Dörnyei and Ottó 1998; Dörnyei 2003; Norton 1995, 2000; Kanno and Norton 2003). In this study of CE, two theoretical tools were employed: Dörnyei’s (1998, 2003) process-oriented approach and Norton’s (1995, 2000; Kanno and Norton 2003) theory of investment, identity and imagined community.

**Dörnyei’s process-oriented approach**

Dörnyei and Ottó (1998) note that most previous studies have been exclusively concerned with motivation at a given moment in time rather than tracking developmental changes in motivation over time. Even during a single language-learning course, motivation shows a certain amount of changeability. Thus, he suggests that an adequate description of language-learning motivation will need to include a temporal dimension. In 1998 Dörnyei and Ottó proposed the *process-oriented approach*, marking a shift in emphasis from viewing motivation as a product to viewing it as a process. Dörnyei argues convincingly that motivation is not static but dynamic in nature. He points out that learners tend to demonstrate a fluctuating level of commitment during the learning process and that even within a single lesson the variation and the ongoing changes of motivation can be dramatic.

Inspired by Heckhausen and Kuhl’s (1985) *Action control theory*, Dörnyei and Ottó (1998) propose their process model of motivation, aiming to synthesise various lines of research on L2 learning motivation within a unified framework. The essence of this model:

breaks down the overall motivational process into several discrete temporal segments organised along a progression that describes how initial wishes and desires are first transformed into goals and then into operationalised intentions, and how these intentions are enacted (leading to the accomplishment of the goal) and then concluded by ‘the final evaluation of the process’ (Dörnyei 2003: 18).

The motivated behavioural process is divided into three stages, which are linked causally and sequentially: the preactional stage, actional stage and postactional stage (Figure 1). The key tenet of the process-oriented approach is that each of the three stages is associated with different motives affecting the motivational process.

**Figure 1: Simplified version of Dörnyei’s 1998 Process Model of L2 Motivation (Dörnyei 2005: 85)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preactional stage</th>
<th>Actional stage</th>
<th>Postactional stage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Choice Motivation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Executive Motivation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Motivational Retrospective</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Motivational functions:  
  • setting goals  
  • forming intentions  
  • launching action  | Motivational functions:  
  • generating and carrying out subtasks  
  • ongoing appraisal of one’s achievement  
  • action control (self-regulation)  | Motivational functions:  
  • forming causal attributions  
  • elaborating standards and strategies  
  • dismissing the intention and further planning  |

Cont …
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Choice Motivation</th>
<th>Executive Motivation</th>
<th>Motivational Retrospective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Main motivational influences:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Main motivational influences:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Main motivational influences:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• various goal properties, eg goal relevance, specificity and proximity</td>
<td>• quality of the learning experience – pleasantness, need significance, coping potential, self and social image</td>
<td>• attributional factors (eg attributional styles and biases)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• values associated with the learning process itself, as well as with its outcomes and consequences</td>
<td>• sense of autonomy</td>
<td>• self-concept beliefs (eg self-confidence and self-worth)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• attitudes towards L2 and its speakers</td>
<td>• teachers’ and parents’ influence</td>
<td>• received feedback, praise, grades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• expectancy of success and perceived coping potential</td>
<td>• classroom reward and goal structure, eg competitive or cooperative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• learner beliefs and strategies</td>
<td>• influence of the learner group</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• environmental support or hindrance</td>
<td>• knowledge and use of self-regulatory strategies (eg goal setting, learning and self-motivating strategies)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The preactional stage, as Dörnyei explains (2001a: 87), concerns the process of choosing a course of action to be carried out. Learner experience proceeds from goal setting to forming intentions. These occur sequentially or sometimes simultaneously. To realise the intention, Dörnyei suggests that some action-launching impulse is needed – the availability of means and resources and the condition to start an action.

The actional stage refers to the stage where learners have translated their intentions into actions. Three basic processes come into effect during this stage: subtask generation and implementation, appraisal and action control. Dörnyei emphasises the importance of motivating strategies in the process of subtask generation and implementation, which refers to the learning activity proper. Appraisal is a complex ongoing process in which learners evaluate the stimuli from the learning environment and the progress they have made towards the learning outcome. The action control process involves self-regulatory mechanisms that learners apply to monitor and manage learning to ensure satisfactory outcomes are achieved.

The postactional stage refers to the retrospection and evaluation of learning outcomes. During this stage, learners evaluate what they have accomplished by comparing their original goals to their actual achievements and form causal attributions about the extent to which they have achieved their intended goals. Dörnyei comments that such evaluation will not just lead to effective learning, but enable an individual to develop a stable identity as a successful learner. Dörnyei points out that once the evaluation process is over, a new cycle of motivated actional process will begin.

**Norton’s concepts of investment and imagined community**

Norton (1995, 2000; Kanno and Norton 2003) challenged the conventional concept of motivation and introduced the concept of investment to capture the complex relationship of the learner to the changing social world. According to Norton, the qualitative nature of motivation might be captured in the dynamic learning process. An investment in the target language is also an investment in the learner’s own identity and finally the learner desires to join an ‘imagined community’ (Norton 2001: 159), which the teaching
procedures and resources create or foster. Norton (2000: 10) sees investment as signalling the ‘socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language’. In this relationship between the language learner and the social world, the former is seen as a multi-dimensional being with a complex social history and equally complicated prospects for the future. Borrowing from social exchange theory, Norton (2000: 10) describes investment in terms of the exchange of ‘symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of cultural capital’. She explains that language learners invest personal resources such as time and energy in learning the target language in order to receive a benefit including social approval and material resources (for example, better employment, more money and better opportunities for their children). Norton’s notion of investment can be regarded as complementary to Dörnyei’s understanding of motivation (Ryan 2006).

In her attempt to critically conceptualise the research into motivation, Norton had earlier argued that research on motivation and second language acquisition (SLA) drew an artificial distinction between the individual and the social world, leading to only partial understanding of why some motivated learners fail to achieve their language-learning goals. She was also critical of much SLA research for viewing individuals as static beings. Rather, she claimed that ‘affective factors are frequently socially constructed in inequitable relations of power, changing over time and space, and possibly coexisting in contradictory ways in a single individual’ (Norton 1995: 12). Through the stories of five immigrant women subjects, Norton (2000: 11) argues that while motivation is unitary and static, a learner’s investment in the target language ‘may be complex, contradictory and in a state of flux’ and closely related to the learner’s identity and the social world. She also suggests that teachers should analyse the cause of learner failure from the perspective of their social identity, rather than attributing it to less motivation.

An extension of interest in investment led Norton to the notions of identity and imagined community. She claims that an investment in the target language is best understood as an investment in identity, which represents ‘how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how the relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future’ (Norton 2000: 5). Learning the target language is also viewed as a means of investing in the imagined community to which the learner aspires (Kanno and Norton 2003; Norton 2006). Kanno and Norton (2003) argue that a conception of imagined communities should be understood on both temporal and spatial dimensions, with imagination ‘a way to appropriate meanings and create new identities’ (Pavlenko and Norton 2005: 590). Kanno and Norton (2003) also point out that language learners’ actual and desired membership in imagined communities affects their learning trajectories and influences their investment and learning outcomes. Thus, investment in such imagined communities offers intriguing possibilities for social and educational change.

The concept of imagined community was first developed by Benedict Anderson (1991), who saw nations as socially constructed and ultimately imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of the group. Imagination is presented as a social process in Anderson’s analysis. Borrowing from this idea of nation-states through imagination, Kanno and Norton (2003: 241) propose that this vision of nation helps individuals to ‘feel a sense of community with people … not yet met’. The notion of an imagined community is thus conceptualised as ‘groups of people, not immediately tangible and accessible, with whom we connect through the power of the imagination’ (Kanno and Norton 2003: 241).

The place of imagination in Norton’s work owes much to situated learning theory (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998), which complements Anderson’s perspective by presenting imagination as an individual and social process. To Wenger, learning is part of changing participation in communities of practice, rather than a simple accumulation of skills and knowledge. It takes place in conjunction with learner engagement in a tangible, accessible community. Kanno and Norton (2003: 242) expand this view of learning to connect learners’ future affiliations and their current learning – from the perspective of L2 learning, they argue that learners have images of the communities in which they want to participate in the future, which are ‘no less real than the ones in which learners have daily engagement’. These imagined communities have a great impact on their current learning. How close learners see themselves to be to their imagined communities influences their investment in learning the target language, which is not merely an effort to improve a skill, but an attempt to establish their identities within an evolving community and to reach out to wider worlds (Pavlenko and Norton 2005).
An imagined community may also be based on a past experience or a combination of the past and future (Norton 2000; Kanno and Norton 2003). Some of Kanno and Norton’s (2003: 242 – 3) subjects identified with imagined communities of their past history and experiences. For example, Katarina had been a teacher in Poland and an English as a Second Language student in Canada. When the teacher told her that her English was not good enough to take a computer course, Katarina left the class and never returned. The authors argue that the teacher’s comment positioned Katarina as a ‘mere immigrant’ and that the comment ‘denied her greater access to her imagined community of professionals’. They point out that a problem will occur when a student’s imagined community is inconsistent with the classroom community.

Norton’s notion of an imagined community is important for language education because it challenges the traditional definition of the language learner in the global village. Norton defines the language learner as complex and as one who invests symbolic and material resources in order to invest in multiple identities. Language learning is always influenced by the context, which will in turn affect learner behaviour in the classroom. The classroom includes not only the physical classroom in which learning takes place, but also the social context that goes beyond the four walls. ‘It has great potential for bridging theory and praxis in language education and for informing critical and transformative language pedagogy’ (Pavlenko and Norton 2005: 589).

In this paper, the data is first viewed through Dörnyei’s approach, focusing on the development of learner motivation during the learning process, and three case studies are then considered from the perspective of Norton’s imagined communities.

The study

As discussed earlier, Crazy English is a complex method and, in order to investigate it, a qualitative approach is the most suitable. The study sought to identify the source and nature of learner motivation and learning outcomes, which are related to CE pedagogical principles and classroom activities. It sought to address the following questions:

1 Why do learners choose CE?

2 What do learners think of the outcomes from their CE experiences?

Pedagogical principles may be realised in practice using techniques derived from a number of approaches. There can be a gap between what people espouse and what they actually do, and so practitioner views need to be gathered and actual teaching observed. Learner motivation involves both the choice of an action and the effort made to perform it. To examine this, it is necessary to examine how the teacher arouses learner interest, as well as how the learner sustains that interest and invests time and energy and makes the necessary effort to achieve certain goals. Moreover, learner motivation is not static during learning, but changes over time and at different stages in response to different motivational influences. There are two ways to access this kind of information: by asking teachers and learners about their views of teaching and learning English using CE and what they perceive to be the outcomes, and by undertaking first-hand observations of actual behaviour in class.

Data collection in this study was undertaken in two stages. The first stage involved document analysis and interviews with senior administrative and teaching staff in Guangzhou, where the CE head office is located. The second two-month stage involved a case study of teacher–student experience throughout a typical adult program in Beijing, using the five methods following. This range of methods was necessary to capture the complexity of the research topic and to provide insights into the multi-faceted context.
1 Analysis of the documents identified in Table 2 was undertaken to gain information on CE pedagogical values and beliefs.

2 The questionnaire in Figure 2 was administered to gather bio-data about the learners. This provided basic information needed to select participants for subsequent interviews and information about overall perceptions of English learning and CE, which formed the basis for later interview questions.

3 Observation was used as a way of gathering information about the teaching in a CE classroom, rather than as a way of evaluating the teaching.

4 A series of semi-structured, in-depth interviews was conducted with Li Yang, the CE Director, three teachers and three learners. The aim of the interviews was to identify the essence of CE in terms of its pedagogical principles, as espoused by the founder and those who have adopted the teaching approach. The three learners were interviewed to document their learning motivation, their intended outcomes and their feelings about the CE experience. All the interviews were guided by themes designed beforehand and conducted in Chinese, so that the participants were able to express their ideas freely and fully. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed for analysis. The transcripts were first translated into English and then edited for clarity and grammar.

5 I kept a reflective journal throughout the period of data collection as a means of capturing thoughts and personal insights about the research process.

Parts of interviews with the three CE learners are presented below, together with some observations, to examine what motivates students to choose CE. The students were chosen because they share a number of characteristics with the whole class, including the range of their responses to the survey questions, their regular attendance, their willingness to cooperate in the study and their similar, yet different, stories.

Table 2: List of documents analysed in the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of documents</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CE textbooks</td>
<td>1999 – 2006</td>
<td>20 sets</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDs and videos</td>
<td>2000 – 2006</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertising brochures</td>
<td>2000 – 2006</td>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Articles from Chinese journals</td>
<td>2000 – 2006</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Articles from Chinese press</td>
<td>1994 – 2006</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Range: from 400 to 9000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chinese characters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Articles in Hong Kong and English</td>
<td>1996 – 2004</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Range: from 300 to 900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>language press</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>English words</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 4: Questionnaire

**Questionnaire**

Please complete the following by filling in the blanks, circling your choice of answer or answering the questions, as appropriate.

I  **Personal profile**

1. Name: ____________________________
2. Gender: __________________________
3. Age: _____________________________
4. Diploma: _________________________
5. Occupation: _______________________
6. Where are you from? I’m from __________ (City), __________ (Province).
7. My family and friends would describe me as a __________ person (personality).

II  **English**

8. How many years have you been learning English? __________
9. What English certificate do you have?
   - A CET 4
   - B CET 6
   - C Other, please specify
   - D None

10. The English I learnt is a kind of deaf-and-mute English because I cannot understand what native speakers say and cannot talk with them, either:
    - A Strongly agree
    - B Agree
    - C Uncertain
    - D Disagree
    - E Strongly disagree

11. Have you ever taken any other English programs besides CE and classes at the school or college/ university where you were a student?
    - A Yes (Please specify) ___________________________________________________________________
    - B No

III  **Crazy English**

12. Is it your first experience with CE?  
    - A Yes  
    - B No

13. Why does CE appeal to you? _______________________________________________________________

14. To learn a language means to learn to speak it!
    - A Strongly agree
    - B Agree
    - C Uncertain
    - D Disagree
    - E Strongly disagree

15. Multiple-choice questions are the most efficient instrument to test a learner’s language proficiency.
    - A Strongly agree
    - B Agree
    - C Uncertain
    - D Disagree
    - E Strongly disagree

    - A Strongly agree
    - B Agree
    - C Uncertain
    - D Disagree
    - E Strongly disagree

17. English learning is not a mental process, but a physical activity.
    - A Strongly agree
    - B Agree
    - C Uncertain
    - D Disagree
    - E Strongly disagree

18. Don’t take me as China. Take me as Asia!
    - A Strongly agree
    - B Agree
    - C Uncertain
    - D Disagree
    - E Strongly disagree

19. The English language can help a nation to be strong to compete against others.
    - A Strongly agree
    - B Agree
    - C Uncertain
    - D Disagree
    - E Strongly disagree

20. Good English can help to bring me a better future.
    - A Strongly agree
    - B Agree
    - C Uncertain
    - D Disagree
    - E Strongly disagree
Results and discussion

The results are presented in Dörnyei’s three phases.1

Preactional phase

**Student 1 profile**

Xiao was a 35-year-old woman. She called herself an old Beijinger (lao Beijing), having been born and bred in Beijing. She graduated from a university in Beijing with a Bachelor of Arts. She was working as a project manager in a tour company in Beijing.

I had three interviews with Xiao, at the beginning, middle and end of the study, each lasting for about an hour. Xiao had joined the CE program for two reasons.

1 She is an English addict, with English as her favourite subject. She particularly loves speaking English, enjoying its pronunciation, rhythm … and everything. She admires anyone who can speak good English, and even considers them as being born with a silver spoon in their mouth.

2 She was learning English to increase her international quality.

Although she has never stopped learning English, she had not found an ideal and effective method to learn to speak until one day a CE television commercial aroused her attention. I identified with Li Yang’s beliefs about language learning. That’s how we learned our mother tongue, she said. She initially bought a book of CE, but found it hard to teach herself and so she decided to enrol in a course.

**Student 2 profile**

Xu was a 26-year-old young man from the rural area of Hubei Province. He was vocationally trained, majoring in Chinese language. For better opportunities, Xu had initially left his hometown to seek work in Shenzhen and found a job at a bookstore. He now works as an administrative assistant in a technology company in Beijing.

I had three interviews with Xu, at the beginning, middle and end of the study, each lasting for about an hour. He had not mastered English at school and, on leaving, he felt that his proficiency was almost nil. He said that he was only able to recite the alphabet, label simple objects and form very simple sentences like ‘I love you’ and ‘How are you’. Xu’s first contact with CE started with video tapes played at the bookstore where he worked and Li Yang’s public lecture in Shenzhen. There are six reasons why Xu chose CE.

1 He was attracted by CE’s integrated concept of English learning with the pursuit of success.

2 He admired Li Yang and took him as a role model.
He had a strong desire for social mobility. Xu stated that he was learning English to be promoted to an upper level, as he believed that those with a good command of English usually have more choices and chances.

He hoped to get better pay and to change his destiny.

Filial piety was another driving force, which refers to respecting, caring for and loving your parents, especially when they are ageing. He no longer like[d] his parents bending over to the soil with the back to the sky all their lives.

Patriotically, he hoped to learn good English to do something for the country.

I had two interviews with Zhang, at the beginning and end of the study, each lasting for about an hour. He was initially brought to a CE class by a colleague. Shortly after what he called this different experience, he enrolled in a two-month program for three reasons.

1. He was attracted by CE’s promise of good spoken English with authentic American pronunciation. He needed to improve his spoken English, as he hoped to go abroad as a research fellow and to be promoted to a higher position in his hospital.

2. He admired Li Yang’s promotion of positive thinking, as he believed that one takes on the colour of his company [jinzhuzhechi jinmozhehei].

3. He identified with the CE value of making money while also being a patriot. He stated candidly that he wanted to make more money internationally, as the CE brochures suggested. By going abroad, he could earn money while also accumulating advanced clinical experience. He said he admired Li Yang’s courageous, realistic and honest concept of patriotism combined with personal development. If one could learn good spoken English while accepting ultra-modern ideas, why not?

The close study of these three learners showed that they came to CE with different initial wishes and desires. Despite their different educational backgrounds, social status and particularly their English proficiencies, they shared a common instrumental motivation to learn spoken English and they chose CE for social mobility, self-improvement and better pay. Xu stated that he was learning English to be promoted to the upper level of society, Zhang hoped that improving his spoken English would enable him to gain in both wealth and fame [mingli shuangshou] and Xiao joined the program for an increase in her international quality. However, unlike Xu and Zhang, Xiao also chose CE for her longstanding interest in learning English, for its intrinsic value. Their motivation fitted with Dörnyei’s facets of goal relevance and expectancy of success (Figure 1). However, these long-term goals do not directly determine action and CE seemed to also serve as the short-term means to help them launch action.

For all three learners, the choice motivation also accorded with some of CE’s values and beliefs, but some of the important influences energising their motivation did not fit into the components as proposed by Dörnyei (that is, international quality for Xiao, filial piety and patriotism for Xu, and money and a new concept of patriotism for Zhang). Xiao attempted to improve her international quality by learning good spoken English from CE, in contrast to satisfying the domestic duties expected of traditional Chinese women. Xu attached importance to filial piety because he thought his parents have experienced too many hardships in their lives and he hoped to improve their lives. Beyond this personal boundary, he hoped to learn good English to help to make China more widely known. Zhang articulated that he admired Li Yang’s courage to publicly talk about making money as it was against Chinese conventions. He was also
inspired by Li Yang’s combination of patriotism, self-improvement and making money, which are viewed as conflicting values in China.

**Actional phase**

The actional phase is the stage when learners start their classroom learning to pursue their goals. In the CE program, it is at this stage that learner executive motivation is first created, and then actively maintained and protected. The motivational factors in this phase include both pedagogical and affective constructs and the motivating strategies CE applies in its classroom practices.

Xiao supposed that she had benefited from CE on three levels.

1. Some classroom practices enabled her to improve. *Rote learning*, as she called it, *just repeat again and again*, had produced positive learning outcomes. She told me about a recent experience in which she had spoken English to a foreigner after parking her car in front of a restaurant. The foreigner was standing there looking at her as if she *had done anything* [sic] wrong. She checked that she was allowed to park in the space and that her car was not too close to his. However, the foreigner was still looking at her. She gathered her courage and spoke to him in English — *I hope you don’t mind my parking here.* He said, *No*, and something she could not understand. She was too nervous to hear clearly what he said. When she told her CE teacher about it, the teacher said she should have said *Thank you* but at that particular moment she *didn’t really think much but just blurt [sic] out*. Xiao explained that her statement was informed by a sentence learned in class — *I hope you don’t mind my smoking*. One of the substitution exercises included *I hope you don’t mind my parking here*. This experience was so encouraging that she was determined to keep trying to speak to foreigners. Another practice Xiao thought helpful was the three-ly training method. She found it very effective to speak English as quickly as possible and she could speak more fluently now. *Otherwise I would tend to think of the meaning of words when I slow down* … *My lips are getting flexible*, she said. She also thought that speaking English loudly was a good practice, as she felt it helped to improve memory. However, she did not think it necessary to yell as it *hurts my ears*.

2. Xiao believed that the time commitment and a certain amount of pressure helped her make progress. She had come to realise the real meaning of *no pain, no gain*. It made a difference whenever she spent time practising after class *even if just for half an hour every day*. She told me that the teacher would scold her when she did not practise after class. She assumed that an appropriate degree of pressure was necessary and could generate a drive to work harder without feeling stressed — *I like experiencing tension alternating with relaxation*.

3. Xiao emphasised the value of persistence and the fact that she was enlightened by the practice of setting goals. She thought the goal-setting activity awakened her. Born into a well-off family, she could get nearly everything she wanted and had never thought about goals or the future. Now she realised that she *can no longer live from day to day*. Xiao appreciated the CE experience that urged her to set goals but she understood that she had to persist to achieve the goals and that CE enabled her to sustain learning. She explained *how much I want to stay in bed on a Sunday morning, but I have to force myself to get up to come to class*. The CE class helped her to persist, which, in turn, inspired her to persist.

Xu stated that two of the central pedagogical practices of CE that kept him highly involved were repeating and shouting. He identified with Li Yang’s belief that *even the pig by the temple is able to patter* [simiao pangbiande zhu douhui nianjing] and thus the only way to successful learning was to repeat, repeat and repeat. Xu said, *practice makes perfect … if you didn’t know my background, you wouldn’t believe I am not an English major … the most primitive method is often the most effective*.

Xu also told me that he loved shouting in English because it helped him remember things better and longer, on the one hand, and it made him feel great, on the other. The evidence of this came one day when class was over. With both hands raised, he shouted to no one in particular, *It’s terrific to shout English!*, and continued shouting English when he went to the toilet. In addition to English, Xu asserted that he had learned self-confidence and persistence from CE. He recalled that he felt *a sense of inferiority* when he
came to Beijing, as it is so big and has an abundance of talented people … I suddenly feel that I am nothing … I feel lost and even depressed. Quite often, Xu drew inspiration from the CE class, from the posters of Li Yang and from the CE slogans on the walls and this helped him to no longer feel insignificant.

However, Xu claimed that he experienced ups and downs with his CE learning when he felt tired from work or came across learning difficulties. Sometimes he even wanted to escape the class. This motivational fluctuation was observable in that he sometimes, although not normally, did look quiet and inactive in class. He claimed that he could often be pumped by the value of persistence proposed by Li Yang and this sustained his study. He would recite Li Yang’s poem, which he recited for me:

\[
\text{No matter how}
\]

- No matter how bad my pronunciation is, I will keep on improving!
- No matter how terrible my memory is, I will keep on repeating!
- No matter how many people give up, I will keep on working hard!
- No matter how many people laugh at me, I will keep on speaking!
- No matter how many mistakes I make, I will keep on practising!

No matter how many obstacles I meet along the way, I will keep on striving until I reach my goal! (Li 2006: iii).

He told me that some people may take it as just big slogans, but I think those are the moments I have experienced in my English learning.

Zhang asserted that his greatest achievement in learning CE was that he could now speak some English in public. He amusingly described his previous incompetence with the name of a song – *English, I Love You More Than I Can Say* [aini zaixin kounankai]. He attributed this improvement to three CE class activities.

1. He thought he had benefited from shouting English – shouting together is really effective in breaking through the psychological barrier. It also helps me to concentrate on the task.

2. He supposed that his pronunciation had improved a lot. As a non-English major, he used to have no knowledge of phonology, such as the shape of the mouth, the position of the tongue and so on, but now this gap is filled.

3. To practise speaking in front of the class worked for him – The teacher always asks us to come to the front to show off our English. Like cures like [yidu gongdu]. It is most effective to train our courage. So I am now getting used to speaking English in front of others. But I think gestures are unnecessary, decorative and distracting. This comment is in line with the observations of this student. He did not gesticulate as much as the other learners did, but he often volunteered to recite or to role-play in front of the class.

Zhang assumed that he was too introverted to speak much, even in Chinese, let alone in English. However, Zhang spoke of changes in his personality as byproducts of his CE learning. He was becoming more positive, making fewer complaints and being less silent. He had not recognised this change until one day his wife teased him that she would invite Li Yang for dinner. Zhang felt he did not have enough persistence or sense of responsibility for self-directed study and saw the dynamics of the classroom environment as pivotal to his improvements and changes – Here, nobody knows who I am. So I can put my face aside and shout with them. High involvement will result in gain. To Zhang, the class was like a training field to athletes with the teacher as his coach. The other learners were like his training partners and the extravagant training methods were like a stimulant. It was exactly the environment he had been seeking to reproduce orally the input accumulated at university. His improvement in English had been tested on a trip to Japan when he successfully interpreted all the way and won praise from his boss. In spite of this, Zhang’s enthusiasm did not last long and he was absent from the class during the middle part of the program. He explained later that he was not used to the style of a new teacher. However, he returned because, without the class atmosphere, he lost his interest and feel for the language.

The three learners commented on how their executive motivation was actively maintained and
protected, with positive learning results, despite brief fluctuations. Xiao claimed that she had benefited from CE in two general ways. The first was related to CE learning activities and the other was the strategy of goal setting. She was convinced about the effectiveness of constant repetitive practice, which had enabled her to speak English appropriately in a communicative situation. She also believed that one of the three-ly intensive training techniques, to speak as quickly as possible, helped develop her fluency. Moreover, she was enlightened by the CE value of persistence, which had sustained her throughout the process.

What motivated Xu lay in the quality of his CE experience on two levels. Pedagogically, he improved through constant repeating and by constantly shouting in English. Affectively, he believed that his self-image had changed as his self-confidence increased. Like Xiao, he was invigorated by Li Yang’s quality of persistence. Zhang appeared to share more common executive motives with Xu than with Xiao. In the affective domain, he experienced a similar path to Xu, undergoing some changes in his personality. He was also inspired by CE values and enjoyed shouting, gaining a lot from the crazy atmosphere in the classroom. These helped make his landmark improvement in speaking English in public. The students’ comments on the classroom atmosphere match Dörnyei’s (2001b: 41) idealised classroom climate where there is no tension in the air but the CE classroom did not entirely match Dörnyei’s (2001b: 92) other attribute of an anxiety free zone. Xiao appreciated the balance in the CE class atmosphere where there was an appropriate degree of anxiety, which she found prompted learners to work hard.

It should be pointed out that the pedagogical practices that these learners benefited from reflect traditional and modern approaches, as well as distinctive CE training methods and techniques. The constant repetitive practices in the CE classroom are typical of traditional audio-lingual activities, and language use in real-life situations reflects a modern communicative approach. At the same time, practices such as the three-ly were developed from Li Yang’s personal learning experience.

Observations during the study showed an evident increase in the learners’ self-confidence. This is a crucial component of CE’s motivational force. For example, as a farmer’s son from a remote area, Xu felt a sense of inferiority and was even depressed when he first came to Beijing. He started CE with a very low sense of self-efficacy. Inspired by various facets of the CE class, such as shouting in English, and stimulated by some CE values, in particular, the quality of persistence, he no longer felt insignificant. Despite a few fluctuations, Xu exhibited a strong sense of self-efficacy and an evident increase in self-confidence, which had enabled him to sustain his learning and achieve progress. Zhang’s accounts of psychological barriers and courage also suggest enhanced self-confidence, which led to successful learning. These developmental changes match Dörnyei’s conclusion that a strong sense of self-efficacy enhances achievement behaviour, as it helps people to approach tasks with confidence, to maintain involvement, and to heighten and sustain effort in the face of failure. However, sometimes motivational impetus cannot be maintained over a long period. When the executive motivation is insufficient, the ongoing work of CE learning fluctuates and may even lead to brief drop-outs, as in the case of Zhang.

The student accounts show that the immediate learning context provided by CE affects the actual learning process within the classroom and exerts motivational influences on the overall dispositions of the students (Dörnyei 2003), and vice versa. This ongoing process seems to lead them to something qualitatively beyond the classroom setting, which was well elaborated when they reflected on their overall CE experience.

**Postactional phase**

In this last phase, when learners reflected on their overall CE experiences, the data reveal that CE had nurtured their imaginations and fostered in them the desire to pursue their dreams. Norton’s notion of an imagined community in the mind of the learner is strongly evident in these CE learners. Reflecting on their experiences, all three students praised the agreement, which is signed between learners and teacher at the beginning of the program, as a positive reason for the outcome of the learning process. The agreement is a contract in which learners have to establish short-term sub-goals in terms of English learning and long-term goals that they aim to achieve in the future.

In her final evaluation, Xiao claimed that her CE experience had opened a window through which she saw herself in the future. This was the greatest benefit from the CE class, in addition to learning English.
To fit into the new century, Xiao was determined to mould herself into a modern Chinese woman, with international qualifications like Yang Lan. Good English, she thought, was an essential qualification – I want to be a second Yang Lan: with intelligence, beauty and wealth ... speaking fantastic English. Also, she won honour for China in bidding for the Olympic Games ... I want to be such an international Chinese woman.

One of the most valuable things Xu got from CE was its belief that we are what and where we are because we have first imagined it (Li 2004: 28) – just like a saying in our countryside, people are much more productive boldly fenyun duodan diyou duodachan; How can you achieve anything if you don’t have the courage to first imagine it? He said that he longed to join Li Yang’s army of international Chinese in the age of globalisation – I admire Li Yang’s view of the 21st century as one for China and for Chinese people ... so we have to shape and reshape ourselves to fit into the new century ... I feel a kind of pressure that I can’t sit back, but take immediate actions to join the world. He imagined using his expertise in Chinese language in the future – I am interested in cultural exchange, teaching foreigners Chinese and transmitting our Chinese culture and history, making China widely known ... and I will bring my parents here [Beijing]. He said that this dream came into being during his CE experience, which nurtured his motivation. He confirmed that he was going to enrol in another CE program.

In his retrospection, Zhang admitted that the game-like piece of paper (that is, the agreement) did work in some way as a sort of psychological suggestion – What is said cannot be retracted [junzi yiyan sima nanzhui] ... After all, I signed my name there. What he had put down in the agreement was to be a famous, first-class, scholarly physician with rich clinical experience and highly-developed research ability who could conduct academic communication in English without an interpreter. Zhang added that this goal had broadened after his CE experience, inspired by Li Yang’s concept of international Chinese. He now had further knowledge about Norman Bethune, his hero from childhood, who came to China to offer his medical expertise – My dream is to be a Chinese Bethune to offer my expertise abroad, as China will be more powerful then. Meanwhile, millions of Bethunes will come to China to learn traditional Chinese medicine. Till then, they will have to learn Mandarin as I am now learning English. Zhang believed that he was on the right path and working hard to fulfil the agreement by going abroad.

The students’ experiences indicate that CE can lead learners to their imagined communities and that they are getting more than they had expected from their CE learning. As Norton (1995) suggests, it may be more relevant to ask what is the learner’s investment in the target language rather than asking what motivates a learner. While investing time, money and energy in CE, Xiao, Xu and Zhang also invested in the intangible communities of practice in their imaginations, which resonated well with Norton’s assertion that our identities are shaped by combinations of participation and non-participation in communities of practice. As identity constantly changes across time and space, the identities of the three learners underwent, and are continuing to undergo, significant changes. When they worked in the CE classroom, their imagined communities extended beyond the four walls. As Norton reminds us, different learners have different imagined communities. In the window that CE opened for her, Xiao seemed to see herself as an international Chinese woman ... with intelligence, beauty and wealth ... speaking fantastic English ... winning honour for China. In his imagined community, Xu positioned himself both as an international Chinese like Li Yang, transmitting Chinese language and culture in English, and as a filial son earning enough money and bringing his parents to Beijing. In his panorama, Zhang pictured himself as the Chinese Bethune demonstrating his medical expertise to developed countries as well as teaching millions of Bethunes [foreigners] traditional Chinese medicine in China. Their imagined communities were invented by themselves with encouragement from CE in the cases of Xiao and Zhang, and projected by CE in the case of Xu.

Three common elements can be found in these different dreams. First, it is evident that imagination is ‘the red thread’ (Chambers 1999: 37) permeating learners’ reflections on their past experiences and their futures. It is also evident that their imaginary new state was not wild fantasy, but realised goals, encouraged and nurtured by their CE experiences. Their imaginations served them as a means of reaching out beyond their immediate environments and experiences (Ryan 2006: 33). Thus they had begun to build relationships with particular communities, drawing on past and present experiences as they pursued future opportunities (Kanno and Norton 2003).

Second, all three learners had dreams they believed could be achieved through learning English. Though
not yet real, private visions may provide strong impetus for language learning (Norton 2000). The learners invested in English learning for its symbolic and material gain, revealing an instrumental motivation for their language learning. However, on the other hand, the accounts of Xu and Zhang suggested a development in motivation, from an instrumental orientation in the preactional phase to an integrative orientation by the postactional phase. Their imagined communities revealed their attempted identification and integration with the L2 community, L2 culture and L2 people. This captures the qualitative nature of language-learning motivation and suggests that CE provides possibilities and conditions for learners to bring about qualitative change.

The final common feature in the learners’ imagined communities was the link to family and country. This was a path encouraged by Li Yang’s aim of accomplishing four missions in one lifetime. Xu echoed the longstanding Chinese ideology of fulfilling obligations to the self, the family, the country and the world. On the other hand, it indicates the complexity of the language learner’s identity, as one investing symbolic and material resources in order to invest in multiple identities (Norton 2000). The data suggest this may have been the case for these three CE students, who were not untypical of their whole class.

Conclusion

Results of the study revealed that CE applies an eclectic combination of theoretical approaches in its classroom activities. It pays great attention to learner motivation, encouraging an idealised view of self to sustain learning and adapting specific motivational influences to the stage of learning. As they work at their English, learners make progress and, at the same time, it seems that CE nurtures learners’ imaginations, offering them a receptive community of practice and introducing to them ‘new images of possibility and new ways of understanding one’s relation to the world’ (Norton 2001: 163).

The reported research is small scale (that is, the study of a single CE program and the close examination of only three learners). While this has benefits for understanding a new phenomenon, both factors limit the possibility of extending the findings about CE as a whole. In a future study, greater exposure would bring new comparisons, new insights and no doubt show new strengths in certain aspects of the approach. While realistically this was not feasible for the current study, in which data gathering had to be completed within a limited timeframe, there are a number of tasks for future research. For example, although both teachers and learners claimed the three-ly training technique, which is a major component of CE practice, to be effective, it has yet to be validated as a learning method. It would also have been useful to test how much the learners, in fact, did make progress in their English, which would have necessitated pre-course and post-course testing. It was felt, however, that this would have negative consequences on trust and therefore the primary goal remained simply to observe the CE phenomenon in close detail. The sophisticated knowledge and conscious application of motivating strategies at different stages of the CE program is an important finding of this study. Analysis also revealed that learners experienced motivational fluctuation during the ten-week program. How to lessen and shorten the flux and how to develop other motivating strategies, adding to the dimensions or even opening up new dimensions, could be the concern of future research.

As noted earlier, CE has become ‘a subculture’ (Shen and Gao 2003) and ‘a social phenomenon’ (Wang 2002) in China and its social impact warrants further investigation. Li Yang’s personal experience and some of his radical claims reflect the transformed social values and beliefs of a rapidly developing China. Some CE concepts and practices challenge social conventions, whereas others strongly suggest a return to tradition. The exaggerated training methods of CE are designed to enable learners to overcome low self-confidence and the psychological barriers to speaking out in English. While identifying this point as one of CE’s appeals, it is necessary to recognise and further research the gap it makes apparent in the moulding of student character within the education system. For the three learners in this study, affect evidently played an important role in their CE experiences. To consider the association of the affective with the social, following the work of Patricia Clough (2007) would also add another dimension to understanding CE student narratives.
Notes

1 Names of students have been changed.

2 One of the most well-known television hostesses in China, she’s dubbed China’s answer to Oprah Winfrey and has also been voted China’s most beautiful woman. She has an estimated fortune of hundreds of millions of dollars. Acting as China’s image ambassador, she was instrumental in winning the Olympic bid for China in 2008.

3 A Canadian physician. He came to China to aid the Chinese in the anti-Japanese war (1938–39), and is a hero to Chinese people, old and young. Chairman Mao Zedong published an essay to call on the whole population to learn from the spirit of absolute selflessness from him, to be noble-minded and pure, a man of moral integrity and above vulgar interests, a man who is of value to the people.

References


