

## **Summer English Camp in China: Importance of Relationships in English Language Learning**

**November 2023 – Volume 27, Number 3**

<https://doi.org/10.55593/ej.27107a4>

**Helen Lepp Friesen**

University of Winnipeg

[h.leppfriesen@uwinnipeg.ca](mailto:h.leppfriesen@uwinnipeg.ca)

### **Abstract**

With business relations and international travel on the rise between China and English-speaking countries, the need for English teachers in China has also increased. One method of teaching English in China occurs through summer English camps. The research presented here examines the teacher, camp coordinator, student, and parent experience with a three-week summer English camp for kindergarten through grade eight students hosted by an international school in China. The objective of the study is to describe the lived experiences from the perspective of the various partners to examine whether the curriculum adequately meets their needs, whether children are improving their English skills, and whether the teachers are sufficiently prepared for their experiences. Findings suggest that all participants indicate a high level of satisfaction with the summer camp, especially the importance of relationships in English language learning. Some of the expressed concerns lead to recommendations for improvements. In this study, the practice of the summer English camp is linked to the current English as an additional language research, making this research relevant to a broad international audience. Not only are summer English camps in high demand in China, but in other countries around the world as well.

**Keywords:** China, culture, EAL curriculum, learning styles, summer English camp

Education is highly valued in China and since entrance to Chinese universities is very competitive, Chinese families look to extracurricular evening and summer classes to enhance English skills for increased opportunities at universities abroad that require English fluency (ICEF Monitor, 2023). Therefore, parents have a strong vested interest in summer English camps because they help prepare their children for a study abroad experience. Since the Chinese government recently announced a change to the one child policy, the education system has tried to relieve the stress on families by decreasing school hours and required homework (Pak, 2021). According to Pak (2021), the culture of high expectations and educational anxiety is slow to change with “an estimated three-quarters of China’s students from kindergarten to grade 12 attend extracurricular classes” (p. 1).

The otherwise anxious educational settings impact the English camp's environment where some students' English language skills are less fluent than others and Western teachers lack understanding about the cultural differences in behavior and milieu.

## **Context**

The context of this research is a three-week summer English camp at an international school that provides quality education from kindergarten to grade 12 in a large Tier 1 city in northern China. The purpose of the summer camp is language instruction for students wanting to attend an English-speaking international school and or eventually to study abroad. This study examines teacher, coordinator, student, and parent experience with the camp. The purpose of this study is to explore what the goals of the summer English camp are and whether the camp is meeting those goals. The objective is to describe the experience from the perspective of the various representatives to examine whether the curriculum adequately meets the needs, whether children are improving their English skills, and whether the teachers are adequately prepared. The questions that guide my study are: How does the camp meet the expectations of students, parents, teachers, and administrators? What skills are students learning at the camp and are they commensurate with the expectations? What teaching methods did teachers implement and how did they use the curriculum? Strategies and tools were gathered for future development and improvement of the summer English camp at the international school.

The following section looks at different methods of language instruction based on disparate worldviews and philosophies. Next, the multimodal study conducted with the representatives involved in the summer English camp is presented, and its findings and results analyzed and discussed. Finally, limitations and recommendations are presented.

## **Literature Review**

With the prevalence of international travel and business relations between China and English-speaking countries, the use and learning of English in China has been increasing with about half the population capable of a basic level of competence (Crystal, 2008). English as a global language and its acquisition impacts policies regarding age of instruction, methods of instruction, and preparedness of teachers to teach the curriculum (Nunan, 2003). The traditional Chinese method of teaching English, based on a philosophy and worldview, was in predominantly a rote memorization, translation, textbook oriented, and test-based system (Yang, 2000).

### **Culture that Impacts EAL Teaching and Learning**

Educator Yi Yang (2000) says that "language teaching is never conducted in a vacuum" (p. 4). A teacher-centered approach in China has its roots in Confucian philosophy (Jiang, 2011; Jiang 2018), which may make it difficult for Chinese teachers to embrace new methods. Respect for authority, age, rank, and seniority are all a part of Confucian values (Luchini, 2004). Students also are influenced by Confucian ideology where passivity and strict adherence to authority are expected (Scollon, 1999; Jiang, 2011). Chinese culture, institutional cultures, class sizes, examination pressures, and teachers' pedagogical choices all influence English language learning in China (Stanley, 2013). Teachers are caught in a difficult place because their role is to prepare students for the College Entrance Examination (CEE) and the College English Test (CET) (Stanley, 2013). Teaching to the test leaves teachers little room for working on communicative skills that students need when going abroad to study. Large class sizes also restrict teachers'

abilities to work on communication skills. Many local teachers themselves have limited competency in communicating in English since they also learned to the test and have little training in how to teach communicative English (Stanley, 2013). The examinations focus on grammar, not communication (Stanley, 2013). Learner and teacher motivation depend on the social situation and expectations.

### **EAL Teaching Opportunities and Ideological Clashes**

To meet the increasing demand for English teachers in Southeast Asia, institutions and governments have provided favorable opportunities for teachers from English speaking countries to travel and teach English as an additional language (EAL) (ICEF Monitor, 2023; Reed, 2002). Importing teachers who are unfamiliar with the differences in worldview that impacts practice and pedagogy even in a three-week summer English camp can be problematic. The practice of communicative language teaching (CLT) and Chinese traditional learning represent very different styles where CLT is a process approach and Chinese language learning is a product approach (Stanley, 2013; Yang, 2014). Chinese methods of language instruction usually do not lead to fluency, but researchers wonder whether CLT is appropriate for the Chinese context (Hu, 2002; Hu, 2005; Stanley, 2013). Changing a language teaching style comes with much wider societal implications (Ouyang, 2000). Initial resistance can be expected to a change in traditions but also a sense of exploration to discover new ways (Jiang, 2018; Wighting et al., 2005). Even though the system strives for the CLT approach, traditions are difficult to change. Hence, memorization and grammar-centred instruction remain a common practice in Chinese classrooms (Wighting et al., 2005). In addition to traditions being slow to change, teachers' beliefs also impact their pedagogical decisions and practices as Nyamayedenga and de Jager (2020) indicate. Not all teachers understand exactly what CLT means, how to implement it in the classroom, and whether they even believe it is a viable method.

### **Summer English Camps and EAL Teacher Preparedness**

Some English camps may be aware of the ideological and social dilemmas, and others remain unaware of the wider parameters within which they operate. Some EAL teaching situations prepare non-native English speakers for an international context in an exam-oriented manner that may not necessarily achieve the desired outcome of communicative fluency (Sifakis & Fay, 2011). Abrar-ul-Hassan and Nassaji (2023) claim that “our current understanding of L2 learning has also been influenced by postmodern perspectives that characterize L2 learners as potent social agents than merely as individuals reliant on the environment” (p. 243). Learning has become a dynamic relationship between learners and their environment where individuals have a greater sense of agency and control over their learning process. When culturally responsive teachers appropriately challenge and then scaffold learning to address students' diverse needs, then students gain a greater sense of agency (Nguyen & Penry Williams, 2019). Unfortunately, not all summer English camp teachers come prepared with an awareness of the situation let alone pedagogical tools to navigate the uncertain terrain.

### **Demand for EAL Teachers**

Today teaching English in China is still a billion-dollar industry (Gamlam, 2021). Nearly 400 million people in China are English learners and the number are increasing (Gamlam, 2021). Since postsecondary education in China is very competitive, most parents invest heavily in their child's early years education to hopefully ensure a spot in university. To alleviate financial pressure on

parents and social pressure on students, the Chinese government implemented legislation to regulate the time and amount of outside tutoring, as well as who would conduct the classes. For a while, teachers outside of China were no longer allowed to teach for online teaching companies (Mackenzie, 2021). Since the demand for English teachers has not abated, regulations have changed again to welcome foreign English teachers to teach online and even to enter China without the traditional visa previously required (Hired China, 2023).

### **Who are the EAL Teachers?**

Who are the English teachers? Stanley (2013) says that a Google search for the keywords “teaching English overseas” generates 68 million hits. A Google search for the same keywords in 2023 generates 124 million results. English proficiency continues to be important in China due to international business and Chinese student mobility to study in international locations (Yang, 2022). This need for English proficiency has created opportunities for English teachers worldwide to offer their services, and one of those services is through summer English camps. Many of the camp teachers come with EAL credentials, but some of the summer camp EAL teachers are students who are taking a gap year attracted by the perk of being paid often without teaching credentials. To simplify the process for foreign teachers to teach English in China, Hired China (2023) states that the Chinese government has now announced visa-free entry.

### **Summer English Camps in China**

There are many different ways summer English camps are run and operated in China. From “Spend an Incredible Summer at Camp in China” (Adventure China, 2023) to the BSG Summer Camp (The British School of Guangzhou, 2023), English-speaking teachers are encouraged to sign up for a summer of English teaching. The English lessons are marketed as “fun in a structured environment” (The British School of Guangzhou, 2023). The curriculum is designed to facilitate English learning through arts, crafts, science, drama, and sports with children being grouped into age and ability levels. Similar to the host school’s summer English camp, many camps provide bussing for the campers and charge camp fees. Adventure China recruits teachers to fly in for the summer, but unlike the host school’s camp, the BSG camp employs its own school faculty to run and teach at the camp during their summer holidays. Teacher preparedness would vary depending on the organization of the camp. Teachers who fly in for an adventure may not even have teaching credentials, whereas an international school that hires its own faculty would know what credentials and experience the teachers bring to the camp.

Because teachers, administrators, and students arrive at the camp with different teaching, they may not all get out of the camp what they were hoping to achieve. Challenges are to be expected when sometimes unprepared and unqualified teachers fly in from outside of China for a three-week teaching experience in a new country. Different expectations impact the curriculum, pedagogy, and practice. Therefore, it is important that everyone involved is clear on expectations and strategies for achieving the set goals.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

Using a phenomenological approach with a multimodal method of data collection, this research examined the lived experiences of the teacher, camp coordinator, student, and parent experience

at a summer English camp. Creswell (2007) defines a phenomenological study as describing a single life experience, but also the shared lived experience of a group. The participants in this study all shared an experience at a summer English camp at an international school in China (host school not mentioned here to protect identity). To understand a phenomenon, it is necessary to describe it first (Creswell, 2007; Giorgi, 2009; Groenewald, 2004; Moustakas, 1994; Stewart & Mickunas, 1990; Van Manen, 1990; Van Manen, 2016). Therefore, the setting and milieu for the summer English camp were described above. Since it was a new experience for me, I was able to observe the phenomenon for the first time.

## **Participants**

During the teacher orientation before the commencement of the camp, I was given time to explain the study, its purpose, what it would involve, and to then invite all the teachers to participate in the study. For the student and parent participants, purposeful sampling was used. A parent from each of the dominant ethnic groups was recruited based on availability for an interview during the day. Korean and Chinese translators were available for the parent interviews since some of the parents did not speak English. The camp coordinator recommended the students and parents based on English ability, availability, and interest in talking about their experience with the researcher. Research participants included one camp coordinator, six teachers, two students, and two parents who participated in the individual in person 15-30-minute interviews, which were voice recorded. Refer to Appendix A for the interview questions. Eight teachers responded to the qualitative survey that went out to all 14 teachers. Since the surveys were anonymous, the teachers who completed the survey could be the same as the ones interviewed in-person. Refer to Appendix B for the survey questions. The study, conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, received ethics permission from the researcher's university and permission from the host school. All participants had the capacity to give free and informed consent. Names are not used here to protect the identity of participants. Adult participants and parents of minors signed consent forms.

## **Data Analysis**

I tried to take an outsider perspective by listening to the research participants without judgment and preconceived notions as Moustakas (1994) suggests. Immersing myself in the subject was intentional since my goal was to learn along with the research participants. By listening to participants' experiences in the summer English camp, common themes appeared. I used the process of horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994) where every interview data was given equal value. As Miles and Huberman (1994) propose, qualitative research requires a reiterative process with many passes over the data to avoid missing any important aspects. The analysis here was iterative with many passes at the data allowing for a shaping and reshaping of themes.

## **Findings and Discussion**

In describing the camp experience, I looked at the student and teacher demographics, the price, the goals of the camp, teaching methods, the curriculum, and a narrative about the camp experience. Findings revealed that although there was a need for improvement in curriculum, behavior management policy, and training during orientation, there was overall enthusiasm and support for the program. In the following discussion of the results, I also link the practice of the summer English camp to current EAL research, making this research relevant to a broad international audience (Abrar-ul-Hassan & Nassaji, 2023; Jiang, 2018; Nguyen & Penry Williams, 2019; Nyamayedenga & de Jager, 2020; Yang, 2022).

## **Summer English Camp Conditions**

A total of 76 students enrolled in the three-week summer English camp in the summer of the study. Of those, 43 were girls and 33 were boys. The ethnic demographic of the students was 42 Chinese, 32 Korean, and two Japanese. Of the enrolled students, 35 were attending international schools like the international school in this study, 25 were previous international school students, and 41 did not attend an international school. Nine of the 41 students who did not attend an international school, attended bilingual English Chinese schools, five were Korean children who were visiting China and attended Korean schools, and 27 attended local government schools. The ages of the children ranged from 5-15 and were enrolled in kindergarten to grade eight. All children were tested with the screening version of the Woodcock-Muñoz Language Survey® which looks at seven areas of language proficiency: oral language, reading, writing, broad English ability, applied language proficiency, listening, oral expression, and language comprehension. Based on their English proficiency, students were divided into three categories: 20 true beginners, 14 low intermediate, and 42 high end intermediate.

The 14 teachers who worked in the summer English camp were volunteers; 11 were women and 3 were men. Teacher nationality included: 12 Americans, 1 Chinese, and 1 Korean. Of the 12 American teachers, 2 lived and worked in China. The others flew in from the United States for the summer camp. The school covered airfares and lodging for the duration of the three-week camp. The educational background of the teachers ranged from recent high school graduates, college students, teachers with a few years of experience, teachers with a master's degree with experience, a principal, and a Ph.D. college professor. Three of the teachers were professionally trained and had TESOL endorsements. The age of the teachers ranged from 18-64. The teacher student ratio was 1:5 or 1:6 in all classes.

The full price of the summer English camp was 9888 RMB (\$1470 US) including bussing and 9288 RMB (\$1380) without bussing. Buses picked up students in five different city locations, some of which were an hour away. Families were granted a 10% discount for multiple children attending camp, repeat attendance, and a 5% discount for early bird registration. Eleven students were repeat camp attendees. The fees collected for this program covered airfares for language teachers, housing, the fee to use the school building, air conditioning, extra housekeeping, bussing, lunches for students and teachers, workbooks, and all other materials. The summer English camp students were divided into nine homeroom classes, each with a homeroom teacher. There were four pull-out classes where other teachers worked with the students on reading, writing, grammar, and phonics exercises.

## **Summer English Camp Goals**

The summer English camp served to fulfill multiple goals and purposes. For the students and parents, the goals were to build students' communicative language, to introduce students to a Western education system, and subsequently to enhance their chances of studying or working abroad. The summer English camp also served to recruit eligible students to the host international school. Besides recruiting students, the summer English camp served to recruit volunteer teachers as full-time staff. Even if the teachers did not return as staff, the experience offered teachers an opportunity to gain empathy for EAL learners.

**Gain familiarity with the Western education system.** Since the Western and Chinese educational systems differ substantially, a goal of the summer English camp was to introduce students and parents to a different style of education. The camp gave the students exposure to the

Western style of education for the purpose of preparing them for the international school experience or future studies abroad. The camp coordinator suggested that the summer camp was a way:

of getting used to Western schools so when students enter the school, they are more comfortable. Western teachers interact with kids, which is a very different situation in Chinese schools. We don't have ranked lists of [students] so it's more difficult to get the parents used to the education system than the kids.

Wighting et al. (2005) ascertained that even though China has accepted the communicative language teaching approach since the mid-1980s, traditional memorization and grammar-based instruction are still heavily practiced in Chinese classrooms. The camp coordinator is aware of that discord in practice and ideology and added that parents often transfer the expectations they have of teachers onto the Western system, which confuses them at first but once they understand the system and see that their children are often more relaxed, they appreciate it. One student's mother was grateful for the encouraging environment the camp provided:

Because the last time at the end of the summer school [her child] cried. (The child cried because he was sad the camp had come to an end.) Maybe it is a little joking, but the mom thinks it really really good to encourage because at home she thinks [her child] is a little shy, not very good at speech. I think Chinese we are not really good at encouraging others. If you are so good, we just say it's okay. Every day [her child] comes home and he is so happy. He really can get knowledge from the different classes, and his mom thinks what is the more important that he can learn something. It's so different from the Chinese teacher (parent through translator).

The teaching style that the mother was talking about in the child's regular school fit the description of "exam-oriented" education (Sifakis & Fay, 2011, p. 287) since children taught by Chinese teachers were frequently tested on their proficiency in isolation from communicative practice. Although the parent evidenced the initial resistance to change that Jiang (2018) and Wighting et al. (2005) indicated, the mother's goal for her child was English fluency and she realized the benefits of a more relaxed learning style void of the usual intense pressure. The mother realized that feeling comfortable aided language learning in EAL classes. Reed (2002) maintains that CLT promotes a "realistic use of the English language; both the activities employed, and the materials used aim to be as authentic as possible" (p. 30). The CLT style that the children were exposed to in the summer English camp was non-threatening, safe, and as authentic as possible. The mother observed and articulated the difference the pedagogical styles had on her child's wellbeing.

**Improve English to study or work abroad.** Besides gaining familiarity with the Western style of education, parents sent their children to the summer camp to enhance their English skills and make connections with the faculty. The Korean and Japanese families who sent their children to the camp were usually in China on business; they wanted their children to attend additional classes to work on their English language skills in the summer. The Chinese students who had the required documentation to be admitted to international schools were at a summer camp to improve their English to increase their chances of being admitted to an English-speaking international school, which would require familiarity with the culture of English-speaking universities. The Chinese students who did not have the documentation, like a foreign passport, to be admitted to an international school were in an English summer camp to improve their English skills to perhaps go abroad to study in university or to "improve their business opportunities when they are older if

they are bilingual” (camp coordinator). A student’s parent concurred that her hope for her son was that one day he would be able to study abroad:

I hope my child can go to America some year to high school or university, and it would be really good for him because his dad and grandfather, some of them to go to university and very famous to Columbia University. I hope my child can maybe talk with the foreigners and can get to know the culture from the western country. They have a plan about that (parent through translator).

A student indicated that his goal for the camp was to “improve my English and well I think I want to go to America. My grandparent’s brother lives in America in Washington, so I always wanted to go visit them.” Parents were especially interested in establishing connections with English-speaking foreigners to learn about future opportunities for studies or visits to English-speaking countries. Besides improving their English skills, parents wanted their children to make connections for future reference.

**Student and teacher recruitment to host school.** The summer camp was additional work for the school staff living in China, but the incentive was to recruit both students and teachers to the host school. Many students who attended the summer camp returned as students at the host school in the fall. The camp coordinator indicated that getting to know students in the summer and seeing them again in the fall was beneficial to the students’ integration. Because they had learned the culture and pedagogical style of the school in the summer English camp, their transition was more likely to be smooth. Another goal of the camp was to recruit teachers to come back to teach at the host school on a contractual full-time basis. The camp coordinator indicated:

Teachers get to come here, and our hope is that they get their feet wet and say hey, well like I could teach overseas. This is not as scary as I thought it was. Also, word of mouth, letting their friends know I did this. We have some staff who have moved back to the States but have come back for the summer. They love China. They love this work (camp coordinator).

Recruiting teachers to teach in China is challenging since it requires an extensive application process to ensure optimal success in a non-Western environment and relocation to a different country. Introducing the possibility of a teaching experience in China through a three-week summer camp makes it more attractive. Teachers can then imagine making the move to China since they have a brief introduction to what life is like in China. The school’s prior experience is that some teachers come completely unprepared for a cross-cultural experience and do not stay long, which means a high turnover rate, which in turn means a higher cost to the organization. Paying for a short-term teaching experience to gauge interest and success is less costly to the organization than hiring a teacher full-time and then losing the faculty member shortly after because the cultural transition is too challenging.

**Potential for further employment.** Not only did the summer English camp serve as a recruitment tool for the host school, but also an exploration of future employment for the teachers. Reed (2002) talks about the anxiety, loneliness, and resentment individuals go through when they are separated from their familiar lifestyle at home. Although three weeks is different than a year or two, being immersed in a new culture even for three weeks gave the teachers a good introduction to what life in China would be like and what teaching at an international school is like. The teachers got to experience the culture, as well as a classroom setting similar to what their future jobs would



require. They also got to know the students and gained some experience in navigating a cross-cultural environment.

**Empathy for EAL learners.** Teachers were not only teaching English, but they were language students as well; they learned about communication challenges. The camp coordinator said, “So they are being fully immersed in a different culture, so I think it creates empathy. Whatever job they have, when they meet a second language person, ‘oh yeah, I remember what it was like to not be able to...’” (camp coordinator). Being immersed in a different culture and language other than English was an educational experience where empathy was required and was a transferable skill not only to other classrooms but to all life interactions. Teachers expressed empathy for their non-native English-speaking students in their home classrooms.

### **Teaching Methods**

Teachers employed various methods to achieve the goals as they understood them. Because not all the teachers came with equal preparedness, their methods and interactions with the students varied. Some tried to make the curriculum work and others innovated. The methods that teachers talked about included practice, repetition, and fun games.

**Practice speaking.** The communicative language teaching approach was evident in teachers encouraging students to speak. Because class sizes were small, students had ample opportunity to practice speaking. One teacher said, “Every morning I have them take their chairs in the back, and we start talking about what they did the night before. They talk about their academy classes they took the night before.” The academy classes the students talked about were the additional summer classes they attended in the evening, often in their first language.

Another teacher said: “In this school they are pretty good at writing but not necessarily interacting in the language and the more you get them to talk. When they think they can trust you, they seem to open up and talk a lot more.” Teachers saw communication as key to learning the language. I did not observe teachers being taught about the differences in language teaching styles. They gathered the differences from conversations with their students and parents who told them about how the school otherwise operated. Teachers were sometimes unaware of the pedagogical culture clash they were helicoptered into where the teaching to the test and communication that Stanley (2013) talked about were in direct opposition.

**Repetition.** Repetition was another method in the teacher’s toolkit as part of CLT. Although repetition sounded like rote learning here, the repetition that this teacher encouraged was for the students to respond to similar questions every day where the answers varied. “I used repeating. Lots of recitation. Trying to get them to talk if possible. Every morning when they come in, I ask them what they did last night and they need to respond to me in sentences as best they can,” a teacher said. The goal of the repetitive questions was for students to anticipate a routine and prepare their contributions. Rote learning and repetition were the most similar to what the students experienced in their non-Western classrooms.

**Fun games.** Some teachers used games and interactive fillers to engage students in learning English. They used the fillers to enhance English learning, build social skills, get to know each other, and enjoy the process. Turning language learning into a conversational game lightened the environment and provided the opportunity for students to relax and learn without realizing they were acquiring language competency. Games also gave students and teachers the opportunity to develop relationships with each other. With enthusiasm, a teacher said:

Because the class size is small, we are able to practice a ton. We'll play a lot of games to keep them interested, ESL oriented games. Generally, at Academy and school, students are just sitting there, not necessarily bored, but it's just information, writing it down and going home and studying it.

## **Curriculum Challenges**

The camp coordinator made all the curricular plans well in advance of the summer camp. She looked at previous curriculums, evaluated their merit, and made decisions based on availability and price. Preparing a curriculum for many different levels and teachers with varying degrees of experience had its unique challenges. Some of those curricular challenges included teachers being unfamiliar with the curriculum, and improvisation was necessary because the curriculum was sometimes repetitive and boring. In the survey, when asked how they would rate the curriculum, the teachers mostly indicated that it was good but not exceptional.

**Unfamiliarity with the curriculum.** Some teachers did not feel adequately prepared. Even teachers with experience found it challenging to walk into a new teaching experience with no familiarity with the curriculum. Teachers were expected to have the skills to be flexible with an unfamiliar curriculum in a classroom where the abilities of the students varied. Even though students had been tested and put in similar competency groups, there were still significant differences in abilities. One teacher indicated:

I didn't know the curriculum at all walking in. Nobody did I don't think. That was a little hard. You don't take and use it word for word. You have to make it yours. As the time has gone on, I am getting better at what I want and how to do it and I can pull this in and use this and those kinds of things, but I think that's been difficult - the curriculum.

Some teachers struggled with the expected style of delivery because they were personally not adequately prepared. Some of the volunteers were placed in teaching roles without expecting to have that much responsibility for the students' learning. One teacher said, "I personally struggle with centers because, as you know, I am not really in the field yet. I am still learning. My colleagues are helping me so that's a good success so far."

**Improvisation necessary.** Although the teachers found the provided curriculum somewhat useful, a curriculum is usually developed based on a uniform level of knowledge. Even though the students had been tested by the Woodcock-Muñoz Language Survey®, there still existed substantial disparity in abilities. Therefore, the teachers found the curriculum useful when the children were all at the same level but in the classes where there was a lot of disparity in ability, the curriculum that was provided was less useful. In the classes with disparate levels of preparation, the teachers were expected and required to use improvisation and creativity that experienced teachers were adept at. Less experienced teachers had a more difficult time with making the curriculum work for their unique situations. A teacher explained:

I don't use it a ton just because they are at so many different levels so when I do use it, I have to differentiate it so much. I have four kids that finish it in four minutes and one kid that hasn't written the first letter. Another kid that didn't understand the directions and he's lying on the couch. A lot of improvisation.

The experienced teachers used the curriculum as a starting block but those that had taught writing, combined and integrated the provided material with their own strategies that they had used in their classrooms back home. One teacher used the curriculum to gather ideas but had the expertise to

pivot in the last minute, “I didn’t do a ton of planning because no matter how much planning I do, my kids won’t be at that level. I did a little bit of planning that could be changed in the last minute if it didn’t work.” Bringing activities along that teachers knew would be effective worked for experienced teachers, but those without experience found it challenging to improvise because they lacked the tools.

### **Highlights/Rewards**

Although the teachers expressed their frustrations with the curriculum and lack of preparedness, they also talked about the highlights of their experience. Overall, their experience was positive. Some of the highlights included celebrating student progress, seeing the enjoyment of learning, building relationships with students, and seeing students make friends.

**Enjoyment of student progress.** Seeing students make progress and open up to the learning environment was satisfying. “I really like when at the beginning obviously struggling with something and maybe a week in and we do the same thing again and it is super easy for them so that is one thing nice to see,” a teacher said. Another teacher enjoyed watching students make decisions and be creative:

I really enjoy seeing the students decide for themselves how they want to go about their project and see their creative juices flowing and expressing themselves in writing and illustration. I love that because I can see them working, especially when they are working with a partner discussing.

Teachers appreciated the students’ desire for learning, their ability to focus, and their ability to take their studies seriously. In the classrooms where joyful dynamic learning was happening, learner motivation was not an individualistic action as Abrar-ul-Hassan and Nassaji (2023) claimed but a social process that included everyone. The social process was a joy for the teachers as much as it was for the students.

**Building relationships.** All teachers indicated that forming relationships was an important aspect of their teaching methods. A teacher stated, “So language is a much more important entity when forming friendships and close relationships. I make relationships with the kids.” The camp coordinator agreed, “Just getting to know the kids in a very more relaxed situation. When you have a class of eight is different than when you have a class of 22 so the kids become well known to us, more relationship building.”

A parent also indicated that the summer English camp gave her child “a great opportunity to communicate with the teachers.” Another parent talked about the value of the multicultural classroom, “The environment might be helpful to connect or communicate and relate with each other. By doing activities in the multicultural classroom. I think it’s helping. This is a more natural not forced” (parent through translator). Besides the students being able to relax in a less stressed learning environment, parents also began to see the benefits of CLT style.

**Friendships.** Not only did the teachers build relationships with the students, but friendships between students were established. Friendships between the kids of different ethnicities struck the teachers as important. “This morning I saw these three girls holding hands – two were Chinese, and one was Korean, and that doesn’t always happen.” Because evidently it was unusual, teachers noticed the cross-cultural relationships, “Actually we went to the library for a while, and it was fun the three were reading an English book together.”

Parents wanted their children to build relationships with all children, “I want my child to make friends in school. She still is enjoying learning but more than that are the friends” (through translator). The importance of the social context of learning that Abrar-ul-Hassan and Nassaji (2023) indicated was apparent in the desire that everyone had to establish relationships. Language learning was not an individualistic task, but dependent on the community.

The students concurred that building friendships was a highlight of their experience. One student said, “You get good food and the teaching and good friends. The last time I came here, we got WeChat, and we connected after summer school. I make a lot of friends. Chinese friends, Korean friends. Everybody is getting along.” Another student said, “Summer camp is very good experience. This camp will memorize in my head, special memories.” Although cross-cultural friendship was not an objective of the camp, those interactions enhanced language learning because English was the common language, and children had to put into practice their learning outside of the classroom.

### **Challenges**

Although the summer English camp ran smoothly, it came with its expected challenges. Teachers were expected to be innovative with the curriculum and manage behavioral issues in the classroom in an environment that was new to them. Some of the challenges that the camp coordinator, parents, and teachers experienced included: student behavior issues, unclear expectations, and exclusivity of the children of different ethnicities.

**Behavior issues.** Teachers talked about behavior issues that impacted their ability to successfully manage the class. Lack of understanding and English comprehension may have been one of the reasons for behavior issues. The short camp made it challenging for teachers to assess the problems and address them while also working on teaching a curriculum. A teacher talked about her frustration:

It’s hard for me to do like behavioral procedures all the time. It takes time. I think the most challenging is the set-up of the routines. At first, I was yelling at them. I felt really bad. Either way they don’t listen to you. It’s like I don’t know if you are expecting me to teach English. Or fix the behavior? I think it’s a combination of both. Like my first three days I got so frustrated. The first Friday that they got here like everybody was acting out, and I don’t have a helper, so basically my kids refused to do things. They were like this is so boring. I don’t like you. Then I am so done with this class.

Another teacher concurred that discipline was an issue. They were frustrated about students not listening. Discipline got in the way of learning:

Biggest challenge is discipline. Half the time I am reprimanding them to sit in their chair or talk you know. It’s hard to balance that so it seems like I am doing more disciplining than teaching so it’s frustrating.

The teachers did not have access to support mechanisms unless they reached out for them. Teachers who had little to no experience teaching faced challenges that left them feeling frustrated and unfulfilled. Disruptive behavior deprived both teacher and students of an environment that promoted motivation since “self-regulation, autonomy, and agency” (Abrar-ul-Hassan & Nassaji, 2023) was absent.

**Unclear expectations.** Besides not being familiar with the curriculum, expectations were also unclear to for the teachers that came with little to no classroom experience. “At first my vision is not really clear because I am not in the field, so I don’t really know what they expect me to help them to achieve, and then as I don’t have a class before, so it doesn’t help me to picture exactly how I am going to set it up.” Another teacher indicated, “I thought I was going to be like a teacher’s aide for the kids that needed help. I didn’t realize that I was going to be actually teaching. A little different than what I expected.” A more experienced teacher suggested, “I think the writing part of this program needs to be clearer.” Because some teachers came with experience, they were able to navigate the unclear expectations more adeptly but those without experience felt unprepared and inept. Preparation in the curriculum is one aspect of teacher preparedness, but pedagogical and cultural orientation may have mitigated the teachers’ sense of unclear expectations.

**Exclusivity based on ethnic differences.** Besides behavior issues and unclear expectations, the children lacked skills for cross-cultural interactions. The ethnic demographics of the students that came to the camp was diverse including Chinese, Korean, and Japanese students who all had varying levels of English proficiency. Disparity in English fluency caused challenges in the interaction between the different groups. Although cross-cultural friendships were a highlight, there were also instances of exclusion. At times, students of one ethnic group bonded together and did not let other students into their group. Speaking their first language also prevented students from practicing English. In the short amount of time, teachers felt inept in knowing how to break those ethnic barriers. A teacher said:

I have one Chinese student and there aren’t any other Chinese boys. Two Korean boys – Fine at the beginning. They could talk in English. A new Korean kid came in and he doesn’t speak any English. Now these three kids talk in Korean, and the Chinese kid feels left out.

## **Limitations and Recommendations**

Although this study revealed important knowledge about a summer English camp, it also has its limitations. Firstly, the ability to generalize is limited since the sample size is small and context specific. Secondly, purposeful sampling based on the camp coordinator’s suggestions may have limited the data pool. In addition, participants may not have been representative of the entire population. Basing the analysis on the collected data, which has its above-mentioned limitations, then further impedes generalizability and transferability. Thirdly, using translation to collect data could impede what was meant, which could affect the content of the data. Fourthly, since classroom observations were not made, the collected data was self-reported which has its limitations as being subjective recounting. Observing classroom activities, pedagogy, and student behavior would add depth and context to what the participants said. Finally, although having a researcher conduct a study about a camp, school, and culture they have limited familiarity with has its advantages as explained in the design, it also has its limitations. Familiarity with the system would aid the researcher in understanding where the students, parents, and teachers are coming from. Spending more time in the environment would be beneficial in making a more informed analysis. While this study is small and context specific, much of the knowledge produced by the study may be transferable to other international schools that host summer English camps.

Recommendations for further research could include a comparative analysis of two or more summer English camps in the same host city or country, or camps in other international locations that host similar language learning camps. Future research could also focus on the different aspects of the language learning camp, such as teacher preparedness, student and teacher emotional

response to the environment and how it impacts language learning, motivation for students and teachers to participate in the camp, or effectiveness of the CLT style from both a teacher and student perspective. The recommendations here are gleaned from the conversations with parents and teachers, which include the following suggestions for action.

### **Behavior Management Policy**

Teachers indicate frustration with discipline issues that inhibit the classroom learning experience for all. To equip teachers with tools and procedures, it would be beneficial to put a camp wide behavior policy in place before the classes start to ensure uniform behavior expectations in all classes and to alleviate behavior issues that could arise. The policy would provide training and tools for teachers to follow. Students and parents would sign a behavior agreement to be able to participate in the camp. The agreement would include actionable consequences if they do not behave accordingly.

### **Clarify Expectations**

To prevent the teachers' frustration with unclear expectations, it would be beneficial if the procedures and expectations would be clearly outlined and defined before teachers even sign up for the experience. The camp coordinator could develop a brochure that would include all the essential information that teachers would need to know before they commit. The guidelines and procedures could be emphasized again during the teacher orientation, always leaving room for questions. It would also be beneficial for the camp coordinator to regularly meet with the teachers to address ongoing concerns.

### **Curriculum and Training**

Teachers acknowledged the effort and time the camp coordinator took to choose a curriculum. In addition to the curriculum, teachers suggested a toolkit of filler activities that can be used for all levels such as games, songs, or activities that teach a specific task. Although speaking practice and repetition did seem to be effective for some teachers, a scaffolding approach that Nguyen and Penry Williams (2019) suggest, could have been more effective to maximize learning. The curriculum could include those scaffolding activities. Introducing teachers to language games during the orientation would also be beneficial. The teachers attended only a very brief orientation to their work. Not all teachers were familiar with the communicative language teaching style, and even if teachers were aware of the CLT style, different interpretations affect its execution as expanded in Nyamayedenga and de Jager's (2020) research. Active learning and creativity promote language learning, but not all teachers came with equal preparedness to implement language games.

### **Cross-cultural Awareness Workshop**

Additional training along with intentional supports for cross-cultural interactions would benefit both teachers and students. Teachers new to the country would benefit from a workshop on Chinese culture and what the expectations are to live and teach in China. Not only is Chinese culture new to some of the teachers, they are also working in an environment where some of the students are new to China. Since the students come from different ethnic groups, it would be beneficial to equip the teachers with tools to not only navigate cross-cultural dynamics in the classroom, but to help students do the same.

### **Weekly Newsletter**

Some parents requested regular communication about the camp. For parents to have more confidence in the camp, they want more details about the curriculum and what their children are learning in the classroom. Since they want regular communication about the learning, a weekly newsletter would be beneficial.

### **Survey for Parents**

Since the camp's goals are to recruit more students to the host school, it is crucial for the host school to consider the needs and expectations of the interested parties. Upon the completion of the camp, it may be beneficial to send out a survey to the parents as a way to constantly improve programming and management. A brief, open-ended survey could include questions such as: Were your expectations met? What suggestions do you have for improving the experience for your children? Future camps could use these suggestions to improve its program.

### **Parent Orientation and Closing Ceremony**

Before the camp started, the camp coordinator hosted an orientation for the teachers, but not for the parents or students. Another way to connect with the parents would be to host an orientation meeting with parents and students before the beginning of the camp and a closing ceremony at the end of the camp where the parents would be invited to the school and into the classroom. At the orientation, parents could meet the teachers, tour the school and classroom, and familiarize themselves with the curriculum and expectations.

At the closing ceremony, children could showcase their achievements in a program or gallery format where parents would listen to what the children learned. Parents could walk through the classrooms and see the student work on display. Since the host school uses the camp as a recruiting method, recruiting could be maximized at the closing ceremony by Admissions giving a brief presentation on admission criteria with a discount for applying onsite. Both orientation and closing ceremony could have a refreshment time where parents and teachers could mingle over tea and snacks. Since the importance of building relationships is a theme that emerges from this study, both the orientation and closing ceremony could be events that might encourage relationship building between parents as well, which seems to be integral to the success of the camp.

### **Music**

Music is a great way to learn a language. Adding a music class to the camp would be very beneficial. Recruiting a music teacher to the summer staff would appreciably enhance the program and English language learning experience.

### **Fieldtrips**

A parent suggested adding alternatives modes of learning such as fieldtrips. Students could have the opportunity to explore the city, which could be beneficial for students that are new to the area. Since many of the students' families are there for business reasons, they are not always familiar with their surroundings. "I would like to suggest a kind of a fieldtrip to experience China. I think most of the Korean students are new to China. Summer school could be a good experience for the students to learn about China," (parent through translator).

## Conclusion

Using multimodal research methods, this study examines teacher, camp coordinator, student, and parent lived experiences in a summer English camp at an international school in China. Findings reveal that although there is need for improvement in logistics, such as preparatory work and curriculum, there is enthusiastic support and enthusiasm for the camp. Teachers express their gratitude for the coordinator's organization and preparation. They confirm that the coordinator provided suitable tools and encouraged improvisation.

Highlights and benefits of the experience include celebrating student progress and the enjoyment of learning, teachers building relationships with students, and students establishing cross-cultural friendships. The relationships did not end once the camp ended and students were enthusiastic about developing those friendships and keeping in touch with each other beyond the summer. Maintaining friendships encourages students to continue their English communication skills.

Some of the expressed concerns include student behavior issues, unclear camp expectations, and exclusivity based on ethnic differences. Whether teachers were aware of the underpinning philosophy behind their teaching style or not, the predominant pedagogical style seems to be more in keeping with the CLT that Stanley (2013) discusses. Communicative language teaching appears to be an effective pedagogical tool to reach the specified goals of the camp. While parents were initially surprised by the absence of intense homework and the traditional rote learning commonly found in local schools, they came to realize that their children were less anxious and stressed, and appeared to genuinely enjoy themselves, leading to intrinsic learning

## About the Author

**Helen Lepp Friesen** teaches in the Department of Rhetoric, Writing, and Communications at the University of Winnipeg. Her research interests include cross-cultural interactions, multicultural education, and teaching writing in correctional institutions. ORCID ID: 0000-0002-3890-3948

## To Cite this Article

Friesen, H. L. (2023). Summer English camp in China: Importance of relationships in English language learning. *Teaching English as a Second Language Electronic Journal (TESL-EJ)*, 27 (3). <https://doi.org/10.55593/ej.27107a4>

## References

Abrar-ul-Hassan, S., & Nassaji, H. (2023). Extending the L2 motivational self-system to the global EAL classroom. *RELC Journal*, 54(1), 241–251. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00336882211009314>

Adventure China. (2023). *Explore Ancient China*. [Www.adventurechina.com](http://www.adventurechina.com). <https://www.adventurechina.com/ca/>

Creswell, J. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design. Choosing among five approaches, 2nd Edition*. Sage.

Crystal, D. (2008). Two thousand million? *English Today*, 24(1), 3–6. <https://www.davidcrystal.com/Files/BooksAndArticles/-5394.pdf>

Gamlam, R. (2021, October 6). *How the ESL Industry in China is Changing, Go Overseas*. [Www.gooverseas.com](http://www.gooverseas.com). <https://www.gooverseas.com>



- Giorgi, A. (2009). *The descriptive phenomenological method in psychology: A modified Husserlian approach*. Duquesne University Press.
- Groenewald, T. (2004). A phenomenological research design illustrated. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 3(1), 42–55. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690400300104>
- Hired China. (2023). *HiredChina安仕达国际*. [www.hiredchina.com](http://www.hiredchina.com).  
<https://www.hiredchina.com/what-are-the-new-rules-for-foreign-teachers-in-china-2023#>
- Hu, G. (2002). Potential cultural resistance to pedagogical imports: The case of communicative language teaching in China. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 15(2), 93–105.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07908310208666636>
- Hu, G. (2005). ‘CLT is best for China’ – an untenable absolutist claim. *ELT Journal*, 59(1), 65–68. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/cci009>
- ICEF Monitor. (2023, February 8). *More signs of rising demand for study abroad in China this year*. ICEF Monitor - Market Intelligence for International Student Recruitment.  
<https://monitor.icef.com/2023/02/more-signs-of-rising-demand-for-study-abroad-in-china-this-year/>
- Jiang, X. (2011). Challenges for college-level learners of academic English writing in China. In M. S. Plakhotnik, S. M. Nielsen, & D. M. Pane (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Tenth Annual College of Education & GSN Research Conference* (pp. 95–100). International University.  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343135863\\_Challenges\\_for\\_College-Level\\_Learners\\_of\\_Academic\\_English\\_Writing\\_in\\_China](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343135863_Challenges_for_College-Level_Learners_of_Academic_English_Writing_in_China)
- Jiang, X. (2018). Exploring young English learners’ perceptions of the Picture Word Inductive Model in China. *TESOL International Journal*, 13(1), 67–78.  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326989973\\_Exploring\\_young\\_English\\_learners%27\\_perceptions\\_of\\_the\\_Picture\\_Word\\_Inductive\\_Model\\_in\\_China](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326989973_Exploring_young_English_learners%27_perceptions_of_the_Picture_Word_Inductive_Model_in_China)
- Luchini, P. L. (2004). Developing oral skills by combining fluency with accuracy-focused tasks: A case study in China. *Asian EFL Journal*, 6(4), 1–20. [http://asian-efl-journal.com/Dec\\_04\\_PL.pdf](http://asian-efl-journal.com/Dec_04_PL.pdf)
- MacKenzie, E. (2021, August 24). *Changes to the online teaching market in China*. The TEFL Org. <https://static.tefl.org/blog/changes-to-the-china-online-teaching-market-2021/>
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. Sage.
- Moustakas, Clark E. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. SAGE Publications.
- Nguyen, M. H., & Penry Williams, C. (2019). A preservice teacher's learning of instructional scaffolding in the EAL practicum. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 42(3), 156–166. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03652035>
- Nunan, D. (2003). The impact of English as a global language on educational policies and practices in the Asia-Pacific region. *TESOL Quarterly*, 37(4), 589–613.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3588214>
- Nyamayedenga, M. S. & de Jager, L. (2020). Teachers' beliefs of the implementation of communicative language teaching at primary school level in Zimbabwe. *Per Linguam: A Journal*

- of Language Learning*, 36(1), 59–70. <https://doi.org/10.5785/36-1-888>
- Ouyang, H. (2000). One-way ticket: A story of an innovative teacher in mainland China. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 31(4), 397–426. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aeq.2000.31.4.397>
- Pak, J. (2021, June 9). *Chinese students, parents stressed by demands of extracurricular classes*. Marketplace. <https://www.marketplace.org/2021/06/09/chinese-students-parents-stressed-by-demands-of-extracurricular-classes/>
- Reed, J. (2002). The pedagogical challenges for western English teachers in Asia. *Contact*, 28(4), 1–8. <http://contact.teslontario.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/ContactFall2002.pdf>
- Scollon, S. (1999). Not to waste words or students: Confucian and Socratic discourse in the tertiary classroom. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Culture in second language teaching and learning* (pp. 13–27). Cambridge University Press.
- Sifakis, N. C. & Fay, R. (2011). Integrating an ELF pedagogy in a changing world: The case of Greek state schooling. In A. Archibald, A. Cogo & J. Jenkins (Eds.), *Latest trends in ELF research*. (pp. 285–298). Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Stanley, P. (2013). *A critical ethnography of 'Westerners' teaching English in China: Shanghai in Shanghai*. Routledge.
- Stewart, D., & Mickunas, A. (1990). *Exploring phenomenology: A guide to the field and its literature* (2nd ed.). Ohio University Press.
- The British School of Guangzhou. (2023). *BSG Summer Camp*. [www.nordangliaeducation.com](http://www.nordangliaeducation.com). <https://www.nordangliaeducation.com/bsg-guangzhou/outstanding-experiences/bsg-summer-camp>
- Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience*. The Althouse Press.
- Van Manen, M. (2016). *Phenomenology of practice: Meaning-giving methods in phenomenological research and writing*. Routledge.
- Wighting, M. J., Nisbet, D. L., & Tindall, E. R. (2005). Exploring a summer English language camp experience in China: A descriptive case study. *Asian EFL Journal*, 1–26. [https://www.academia.edu/5882833/Exploring\\_a\\_Summer\\_English\\_Language\\_Camp\\_Experience\\_in\\_China\\_A\\_Descriptive\\_Case\\_Study](https://www.academia.edu/5882833/Exploring_a_Summer_English_Language_Camp_Experience_in_China_A_Descriptive_Case_Study)
- Yang, P. (2022). China in the global field of international student mobility: An analysis of economic, human and symbolic capitals. *Compare*, 52(2), 308–326. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2020.1764334>
- Yang, Y. (2000). History of English education in China (1919–1998). In ERIC. *Harvard Graduate School of Education*, 1–31. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED441347.pdf>
- Yang, Y. I. J. (2014). The implementation of speaking fluency in communicative language teaching: An observation of adopting the 4/3/2 activity in high schools in China. *International Journal of English Language Education*, 2(1), 193–214. <https://doi.org/10.5296/ijele.v2i1.5136>

## **Appendix A**

### Interview Questions

#### **Interview questions for camp coordinator**

Who are the students?

Are they already attending English international schools?

Age?

Grades? K-12

English proficiency?

How many students?

Students' goals

Who are the parents?

What goals do they have for the program?

What are their expectations?

How do we measure whether their expectations were met after the completion of the program?

Do they pay for the program? If so, how much?

#### **Interview questions for teachers**

##### **Background**

Tell me about your teaching experience.

Do you have previous experience with the summer English camps?

What is your reason for participating in the summer English camp?

##### **Curriculum and Teaching**

What teaching methods did you use?

What did you think about the curriculum?

##### **Experience**

What was your experience like?

What were your expectations?

Were your expectations met?

What are some highlights of your experience?

What are some challenges?

What are some things you would change if they could?

### **Interview questions for parents**

What goals do you have for the program?

What are your expectations?

### **Interview questions for students**

What were your goals for the summer English camp?

Did it meet your expectations?

What part of summer English camp helped you learn the best?

## **Appendix B**

### Survey

I invite you to participate in a 5–10-minute survey to help me evaluate the summer English camp at host international school.

Please note that your participation is voluntary, and you may decline to answer any question(s) you would rather not address.

1. In what country do you currently reside?

- China
- United States
- Other

2. What is your age?

- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65-74

3. What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?

- High school or equivalent (GED)
- Some college but no degree
- Associate degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Graduate degree like MA or MSc
- PhD

4. Which race/ethnicity best describes you?

- Native American
- Black or African American
- Chinese
- Hispanic
- Korean
- Indian
- White/Caucasian
- Multiple ethnicities

5. How well prepared did you feel coming to the summer English camp?

- Very well prepared
- Somewhat prepared
- Not at all prepared

6. Overall, how would you rate the summer English camp curriculum?

- Excellent
- Very good
- Good
- Fair
- Poor

7. To improve our services and your teaching experience, please provide us with your feedback about the camp. What went better than expected?

8. What improvements would you suggest?

**Thank you very much for your feedback.**

Copyright of articles rests with the authors. Please cite TESL-EJ appropriately.