



A Tentative Exploration into the Features of the English Corner at Renmin University of China

Tiping Su (Corresponding author)

Foreign Language School, Huaiyin Normal University

Huai'an 223300, Jiangsu, China

E-mail: sue6415@126.com

Jun Wu

Foreign Language School, Huaiyin Normal University

Huai'an 223300, Jiangsu, China

Abstract

This paper has investigated the distinctive features of the English Corner at Renmin University of China. The popularity of the English Corner at RUC is firstly attributed to its physical advantage: the location of the university ensuring convenient transportation; the location of the English Corner easy to be found; and the timing on Friday evening without duration limit. And its weak points and problems include: participants have difficulties in finding an ideal matching partner and suitable topics to discuss; though seemingly more than other English Corners, the foreigners joining it are still fewer than the participants have expected.

Keywords: English corner, RUC, Participants

1. Introduction

English, in the past fifty years, has become a global language. From the worldwide perspective, 0.32—0.38 billion people have English as their mother tongue, while 0.75-1 billion people study English as a foreign language, among whom Chinese people are the major contributors. In the past 20 years, there has been a national fervor in China for English, especially for American English. After China's entry into WTO, instead of cooling down, this fervor is becoming even increasingly more heated while considered by some scholars to be unreasonably overheated.

One good reflection of this national passion for English is the large amount of English corners, spontaneously formed or purposely organized, in the cities in particular. The English Center of University Students of Hunan Province in Hunan Normal University, for instance, one of the most famous and sponsored the authority, has been benefiting a lot of people. According to the investigation carried out by www.52en.com, with the small-scale ones excluded, there are more than 60 famous and popular English corners in the big cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Dalian, Hangzhou, etc. In Beijing, the most famous five are those at Renmin University of China (RUC), Tsinghua University, Peking University, Beijing Foreign Studies University, and Chaoyang Cultural Center, among which the one at RUC is the most popular and reputable.

This paper attempts to explore the distinctive features of the English Corner at RUC favorable for its popularity, and the existing shortcomings as well, for the sake of offering references for its further development.

2. Literature Review

Though English seems to be profoundly spread in China, the proficiency levels of different people vary greatly, especially in their listening and speaking skills, the two most difficult barriers, considered by the scholars, for students and other English learners to surmount. Take students as an example. During the classroom education, more attention is attached to improve students' reading and writing ability, thus having "dumb English" become its natural product. With the gradual awareness of the importance of listening and speaking ability, scholars are probing efficient strategies to make up for this misstep, developing various classroom and extra-curricula activities on campus (Zhou 2003).

However, while the students attract most of the concerns, the need of the non-student English learners seems to be marginalized, thus they try to keep closer to the students to learn from them some strategies. When various forms of English corners are organized by schools, from primary school to universities, those non-student English learners try to join the students or even set up their own English corners following the suit (Gao 1999). English corners are so popular that we can even find it in the prison. (Shi 2009) So people are also like to discuss how to build English corners, in

polytechnic and vocational colleges, in the colleges of ethnic minority and remote areas, in private colleges and in libraries for children. (Wang 2008; Li 2008; Gu 2008 & Li 2005) With the development of information technology, some begin to study how to build online English corner. (Gao & Xu 2008)

In addition, many scholars and teachers try to study the functions of English corners and many of them place high hopes on it. Some explored the help of English corner to college English teaching, (Fu Peili 2008) some probed into the application and development of English corner in second-class English teaching in the vocational college, (Zhou & Wu 2007) and some explored its role in improving the speaking ability. (Li 2004) Others researched the communication strategies or English acquisition in English corner. (Chen & Tu 2006; Chen 2006)

Popular as English corners are, there are some descriptions about their general situations or new developments and their functions in newspapers and periodicals, but few investigations in the reasons behind the apparent attraction. As a most extraordinary member, the English Corner at RUC is no exception. It also draws extensive attention from the society. The most recent report about its newest development is “English Corner at RUC: New Destination for White-Collars” on April 18th, 2005 (www.sina.com.cn). In spite of these concerns over its apparent popularity, it is still a virgin land for exploration into its distinctive features. This paper attempts to explore this virgin land, discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the English Corner at RUC, and stimulate further researches.

3. Research Methods

The data collection procedures of this research included written questionnaire and personal interview as case study.

The questionnaire included 18 items in all, the first four about basic information, like sex, age, occupation, and education background, and the other 14 are relative questions, such as why they studied English, why they came to the English Corner and the frequency, the mode and topic of conversation, the biggest problem they met, and the most efficient way of improving English proficiency. 20 valid questionnaires were conducted with the subjects randomly selected from the participants in the English Corner on June 17 (the date was also randomly chosen).

4 most representative subjects were chosen for the follow-up personal interview: a 19-year-old sophomore majoring in International Economics and Trade from Beijing Institute of Technology; a 24-year-old postgraduate majoring in Electronics Engineering from Beijing Transportation University; a 25-year-old postgraduate majoring in English from Renmin University of China; a 35-year-old employee of a state-owned company. These face-to-face interviews helped to collect further and more detailed information.

4. Research Analysis and Findings

According to the questionnaire, 75% of the subjects are satisfied with this English Corner with 35% thinking highly of it and 40% fairly satisfied (See Table 14 below). All of the interviewed consider the English Corner at RUC as their first choice among all the English Corners in Beijing. 85% of the subjects admit that they have benefited from joining it: 40% of them have their English polished, 25% have their horizon widened and 20% have made new friends as is shown in Table 15 below.

Insert Table 1 about here

Insert Table 2 about here

To stand out among so many “competitors”, the English Corner at RUC has its own distinctive features the others lack or fail to match: in addition to the physical advantages, it not only provides favorable conditions for English learners, but also creates a good environment and atmosphere for people to make new friends and relax.

4.1. Physical Advantages

The popularity of the English Corner at RUC is firstly attributed to the special location of the university: its closeness to the third ring road ensures terrific convenience of transportation, with the bus lines outside the east and west entrances heading for different destinations while the last bus at about 11:30; this advantage particularly facilitates it in attracting students from the universities around it.

Besides the overall geographical convenience of the university, the location of the English Corner itself at the small square near the east entrance makes it easy to be noticed and found. Its encirclement by the small garden makes it an independent lot free from the intervention or interruption of the heavy transportation, and a relatively quiet place without much influence from outside noise.

The time of this English Corner on every Friday evening also contributes to its large population. With the prospect of the coming weekend, people, students and non-students, are willing to come. Besides, there is no time limit in this English Corner, i.e. the participants are free to choose the coming and leaving time. This allows the students to come after class and non-students to come after work, enjoying flexible time frames.

4.2. Favorable Conditions for Practicing English

Apart from the physical convenience it promises, as a gathering first of all for English learners, it provides the participants with favorable conditions for practicing English: the different aged participants having varied English

proficiency, with different education backgrounds and of various occupations; the presence of quite a few foreigners from English-speaking countries; and the alternative activity of Mass English.

According to the questionnaire, the age range of the participants is quite broad: from children less than 10 years old to the adult at about 50 (see Table 2). It is convenient for people to talk with partners at different ages: the peers who have more common experiences and common concepts, thus easier to communicate with and understand each other; the seniors who have more life experiences and a more sophisticated mind; and the juniors from whom one can feel the energetic youth and passion for life as well as future.

Insert Table 3 about here

As regards to the English proficiency, one can find here new-starters, amateur English fanciers, English majors, returnees from overseas, and also friends from English-speaking countries (one of the most important attractions for the participants, to be discussed later). Statistics from the questionnaire show that 50% of the subjects want to chat with people having a better English proficiency, 25% are willing to talk with partners at similar spoken English levels, while 15% show their preference of speaking to those holding a relatively inferior position (see Table 10). These varied favoritisms can be satisfied by the extensive inclusion of this English Corner of participants at different English capacity levels.

Insert Table 4 about here

From the perspective of occupation, 70% of the participants are students, among whom 83% are undergraduates, masters and PhD candidates, ensuring a relatively good educational level of the participants and more commonplace as well; they are from different universities and colleges, study various majors of sciences and arts, and have interests and specialties in diverse fields. The rest are teachers, civil servants, and, employees in state-owned enterprises and multinational corporations, who all have to use English in their work (see Table 3). This complication of occupation offers a good chance for the participants to get in touch with partners of different educational backgrounds and with different life experiences. As a result, they can have their horizon broadened, which is considered as the most important benefit this English Corner assures the participants by 25% of the subjects (see Table 15).

Insert Table 5 about here

Insert Table 6 about here

As is considered by www.52en.net, the presence of foreigners is the most distinctive feature that makes the English Corner at RUC more popular than other “competitors.” These “attractive” foreigners include the overseas teachers and students, and the visiting scholars of RUC, and the guests living in Friendship Hotel as well. To talk with these natives from English-speaking countries is counted by 45% subjects as the most efficient way to improve spoken English (see Table 13). Asked what they will do when a foreigner joins the big gathering and is surrounded by many Chinese people in most cases, 40% choose to join the group and listen while 10% choose to go up and try to talk with him or her (see Table 18).

Insert Table 7 about here

Insert Table 8 about here

Another characteristic of this English Corner is its new brand activity—Mass English. It was a society first organized by a teacher of RUC 3 years ago, with as its objective helping the members (English lovers, mostly non-English major students) to improve their overall English capability: the members take turns to be the hosts of the activity, selecting topics, preparing detailed, abundant materials, and organizing the participants to join the discussion. The topics chosen are mostly the hot issues ordinary people are interested and have insight in. Participants can freely voice their opinions, debate with “opponents” and reach some common understanding. When discussing the favorite mode of conversation, Mass English has been the first choice for 20% of the subjects (see Table 9).

Insert Table 9 about here

All these favorable elements melt together and make the English Corner at RUC the first choice for the English lovers, assisting them to realize their aim of bettering their English. 90% of the subjects of the questionnaire affirm the help from it in the improvement of their listening and speaking skills: 30% of them show their appreciation by claiming that the participation in it has marvelous influence on their English proficiency; 60% indicate that they have some progress after taking part in this gathering (see Table 17).

Insert Table 10 about here

4.3. Suitable Circumstance for Relaxing and Making Friends

Nowadays, with the acceleration of life pace and material enrichment, the burden and pressure on ordinary people are also increasing: students are overburdened with their study or are under great pressure from the coming future of entering the fierce job markets; career-men and -women, after having five weekdays’ hard work, need to refresh

themselves by some leisure activities. Then, the need of unloading and relaxing becomes one of the common parts in modern life. English Corner caters to this need by furnishing a quiet place for them to let out their mood through chatting with strangers about some leisure topics, like hobbies, movies, new happenings on the pop stars, etc., about the hot issues of the state, about English study and cultural phenomena, and even merely doing everyday greetings.

The investigation reveals that the most common topic in the English Corner is recreation and leisure, accounting for 35% of the total (see Table 12 below). Here one distinctive character needs to be mentioned: all these 7 subjects who have recreation and leisure as their favorable topic are students; it echoes the common social phenomenon of youth's increasing admiration and loyalty attached to the pop stars, buying albums and posters, joining fans clubs, and as is done here, communicating with peers about their idols. Therefore, topic of recreation and leisure can bring the students closer to each other, and hence become their first choice in conversation.

Insert Table 11 about here

Everyday Greetings also take up a large proportion, 30%. As is known that everyday greetings are important and useful in daily life, it makes little contribution to the perfection of English. Then why do a large number of students and even those career-men and -women come here just to do everyday greetings? Besides the possible restriction from their English ability, the most important reason, as is said by two interviewed subjects, is to feel the kindness of strangers and get oneself relaxed. In doing this, one need not think much of and temporarily forget their worries or unhappiness, thus have their mood justified to some extent.

As is mentioned above, making new friends is one of the most important benefits the participants get from this English Corner, approved by 20% subjects. 5% of the participants join this "English Party", holding making new friends in their mind (see Table 8) and having their objective reached. Though with no such intention, others also unconsciously have this unexpected result.

Insert Table 12 about here

4.4. Existing Problems

Though outstanding achievements have it made, the English Corner at RUC is still not 100-percent satisfactory. Some problems are revealed in the questionnaire and case study: most of the participants are new comers who have a short history of attendance for less than one year; only 20% find no difficulty while 80% have different problems in finding a matching partner, choosing a proper topic or female participants' embarrassment by those "over-kind" males.

75% of the participants first came to the English Corner within one year: 35% within 6 months and 40% between 6 months and one year; only 25% persist in coming for more than one year (see Table 7). Two elements give rise to its failure to keep its participants: the reason why the attendees learn English and the developing mobility of the society.

Insert Table 13 about here

65% of the subjects confess that they learn English out of "instrumental motivation," a concept introduced by Gardner and Lambert, in which the learner is motivated to learn another language for utilitarian purposes, such as furthering a career, improving social status or meeting an educational requirement. Only 35% learn English out of their personal interests, i.e. integrative motivation, in which the learners wish to identify with another ethno-linguistic group (see Table 5). According to Gardner and Lambert, an instrumentally oriented learner can be as intensively motivated as an integratively oriented one; however, they hypothesized that the latter orientation would be better in the long run for sustaining the drive necessary to master the language (Larsen-Freeman 2000). The survey finds that those learn English out their own interests visit English Corner more frequently and persist in participating for a relatively longer time, taking up 60% of the "senior" participants who have attended the English Corner for more than one year. When their need becomes less urgent, those instrumentally motivated will stop or withdraw for sometime until they once more need to practice English. Just as the subject from Beijing Transportation University has said, the first time he came here was 4 years ago before the oral examination of CET 6; then after the examination, he seldom visited the English Corner; a month ago he restarted to join it, because he found his vocabulary has been on the decline for long-time unemployment. This accounts partly for the failure of the English Corner at RUC in keeping its "customers."

Insert Table 14 about here

Another reason for the constant change of the participants is the increasing mobility of the whole society. As is shown above, the main participants are students, who may no longer remain in this university or in Beijing; when they graduate, their relationship with the English Corner may be cut off. Besides, the non-students even have more mobility: the shift of their working place, the duty of going on business in other places and even working overtime may interrupt their regular contact with English Corner.

The biggest problem the participants meet here is, as 40% of the subjects have put it, finding matching partners to talk with (see Table 16 below). Though the wide range of age, occupation and English proficiency seem to have created affluent chances for seeking an ideal partner, the random choosing without knowledge of the chosen strange partner

ahead of time makes it time consuming to pick up a satisfactory one. Though the foreigners here have already been much more than other English corners, the number of foreigners is still dissatisfactory for the participants' ideal as is indicated by the following phenomenon and data from the questionnaire and interview: one foreigner is always surrounded by a large group of Chinese; though 45% of the subjects agree that talking with a foreigner is the best way to improve English, 25% of them disapprove the others' joining the large group around the foreigner merely to listen or even talk, insisting that this merely listening and occasional cut-in have no contribution to polish one's English; most of the interviewed hope that RUC can invite more foreigners.

Insert Table 15 about here

The remaining problem is more restricted to the female participators, that is, the over-kindness shown by the strange males. As is discussed earlier in this paper, some people come here with the specific purpose of making friends, including those with hopes of finding a boyfriend or a girlfriend. When asked about the sex of their preferred partners, both of the male interviewees choose to talk with females. They explain that the female has a better inborn aptitude for learning languages and thus has a better English proficiency. That's why they have preference for female partners. In the meantime, only one female interviewee admits that her partners are mostly males. The other utters frankly her vexation of the males' continuous attempt to get her personal information. On behalf of the female participants, she expresses her expectation that RUC can help form a potential regulation, asking the participants to more respect others' privacy and not to annoy others while embarrass themselves as well.

5. Conclusion

With new ones organized now and then in universities, high schools and social communities, English corners have attracted increasingly more social attention and participation. Though aware of the great popularity and wide involvement of participants, people seldom look into the reasons for this phenomenon in the deeper level. In view of this, this paper has investigated the distinctive features of the English Corner at Renmin University of China, the most popular and representative one in Beijing, for the sake of giving references for it and others in their future development to enhance the existing superiorities and overcome their shortcomings.

The popularity of the English Corner at RUC is firstly attributed to its physical advantage: the location of the university ensuring convenient transportation; the location of the English Corner easy to be found; and the timing on Friday evening without duration limit. As a circumstance for practicing English, it is favorably conditioned for that purpose: the wide range of age, English proficiency, education backgrounds, and occupations, assuring the participants with satisfactory partners and various topics; the presence of quite a few foreigners from English-speaking countries, serving as the most attractive element for the participants; and the alternative activity of Mass English which can, besides practicing spoken English, create chances for the participants to train their English thinking and critical reasoning. It also meets the need of the participants who attempt to seek relaxation, make new friends and broaden horizon as well.

However famous and welcomed it is, the English Corner at RUC also has some weak points to be strengthened and problems faced by the participants to be solved: participants have difficulties in finding an ideal matching partner and suitable topics to discuss, which are the two crucial elements of a conversation; though seemingly more than other English Corners, the foreigners joining it are still fewer than the participants have expected. These problems are merely raised in this paper without any suggested solution.

As regards the research itself, since the questionnaire and case study are conducted in a small scale—20 questionnaires and 4 interviews, the results may not fully applicable to all the participants or other English Corners. Further researches covering wider ranges are needed to investigate deeper into the phenomenon and put forward feasible solutions to the problems raised above.

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Table 1. Comment on English Corner

Excellent	Good	All Right	Room for Improvement
7	8	5	0
35%	40%	25%	0%

Table 2. Most Important Benefits Received

English Proficiency Improved	Horizon Widened	New Friends Made	No Benefit
8	5	4	3
40%	25%	20%	15%

Table 3. Age

≤ 10	11-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	≥ 60
1	2	14	2	1	0	0
5%	10%	70%	10%	5%	0%	0%

Table 4. English Proficiency of Partner

Better	Weaker	Similar	Care not
10	3	5	2
50%	15%	25%	10%

Table 5. Occupation

Student	Teacher	Employee of State-owned Enterprise	Employee of Multinational Corporation	Civil Servant
14	1	3	1	1
70%	5%	15%	5%	5%

Table 6. Most Important Benefits Received

English Proficiency Improved	Horizon Widened	New Friends Made	No Benefit
8	5	4	3
40%	25%	20%	15%

Table 7. With the Presence of a Foreigner

Listen to him	Talk to him	Pay no Attention	Disapprove A&B
8	2	5	5
40%	10%	25%	25%

Table 8. The Most Efficient Way to Improve English

Fixed Partner	Fixed Topic	Talk with Foreigners	Constantly Changing Partners and Topics
3	1	9	7
15%	5%	45%	35%

Table 9. Mode of Conversation

One-to-One	Group Discussion (Free Topics)	Mass English	Depending on Situation
9	5	4	2
45%	25%	20%	10%

Table 10. Influence of EC on Improving the Participants' English

Marvelous Help	Some Help	No Help	Negative Influence
6	12	2	0
30%	60%	10%	0%

Table 11. Topic of Discussion

Everyday Greetings	Politics & Economics	Recreation & Leisure	Language & Culture
6	3	7	4
30%	15%	35%	20%

Table 12. Reason for Participating English Corner

Practicing English	Making Friends	Out of Curiosity	Passing-by
14	1	2	3
70%	5%	10%	15%

Table 13. History of Participation

≦ 6 months	6 months- 1 year	1-4 years	≧ 4 years
7	8	2	3
35%	40%	10%	15%

Table 14. Reason for Learning English

Compulsory Course	Job-Facilitating	Personal Interest	Following Trend
8	5	7	0
40%	25%	35%	0%

Table 15. The biggest Problem

Finding Matching Partners	Finding Proper Topics	Meeting "Over-Kind" Strangers	No Difficulty
8	4	4	4
40%	20%	20%	20%