



Received: 17 November 2017  
Accepted: 28 October 2018  
First Published: 1 November 2018

\*Corresponding author: Jinjin Lu,  
Institute for Research in School  
Education, Faculty of Education,  
Masaryk University, Brno, Czech  
Republic  
E-mail: [helen820919@sina.com](mailto:helen820919@sina.com)

Reviewing editor:  
Benaouda Bensaid, Effat University,  
Saudi Arabia

Additional information is available at  
the end of the article

## CURRICULUM & TEACHING STUDIES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# University students' preferences and experience: Is there a role for the CLCOEL?

Jinjin Lu<sup>1\*</sup> and Paul Throssell<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** Despite the development of English teaching pedagogies in schools and universities, many concerns are raised regarding the tensions between teachers' practices and effectiveness of students' learning have on students' academic achievements. The aim of this study is to explore university students' preferences and experiences in English learning and teaching process. Based on their preferences and experiences, an innovative concept model of the Communicative Language Community of English Learners "CLCOEL" was introduced for the benefit of learners in both real learning environment and virtual environment. The findings not only provide recommendations for policy decision makers and practice in China but also for those who are teaching and learning English with Confucian-heritage cultural backgrounds in a similar context.

**Subjects:** Curriculum; Applied Linguistics; English Language

**Keywords:** preference; EFL teaching and learning; CLCOEL model

### 1. Introduction

After China reopened the door to the world in 1978, English language education has gained increased attention in Chinese formal education (Lu & Ares, 2015). English has become one of the compulsory subjects from Grade 3 in primary schools to higher education (Ministry of Education, 2013). That is, every Chinese university student has received at least nine years' English language formal education. Though they have learnt English for a long time, Chinese students' English language proficiency has been regarded as "limited, dumb-and deaf", which

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr Jinjin (Helen) Lu completed her PhD study at University of Tasmania in Australia. She worked as a full time research fellow in Charles Sturt University between 2015 and 2017 in Australia. Currently, Dr Lu is a research fellow in the Institute for Research in School Education at Masaryk University in Czech Republic. Dr Lu's research interest is in ESL Education, Online Education and Cultural Studies.

Dr Paul Throssell is an Adjunct Lecturer in TESOL at the University of Tasmania in Australia. His research interest is in Lifelong Learning, Language and Culture.

Dr Paul Throssell has extensive research and teaching experience in Australia and Asia. He is an adjunct TESOL lecturer in the University of Tasmania. His research interests include language education, lifelong learning and cultural studies.

### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This paper highlighted the tensions between EFL teachers' practice, Chinese students learning and academic achievement in a tertiary context. It explained the gaps between learning and teaching theories and teachers' practice in EFL classrooms. The research findings will make a significant contribution to decision-makers and EFL educators from a similar Confucius cultural background.

refers to the fact that many Chinese students focused on scoring in English language examinations, drilling on English grammatical usage and reading instead of communication skills (Cai, 2017). In this case, Chinese graduates' English proficiency are not able to satisfy their employers. To address these challenges, the Chinese Ministry of Education has taken [made?] a series of reforms in terms of teaching methods, curriculums, and materials to exert effort in improving Chinese students' English language communication.

English language teaching pedagogies have been developed rapidly in the last three decades due to the top-down reforms initiated by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in China. During the 1980s, English teachers were encouraged to follow a traditional English teaching method: Grammar-Translation method (GTM) to teach in high schools and university. That is, the routine of the English teaching process was text revision-new text explanation—text translation from English to Chinese-grammar drills-exercise. The most frequently used tools in English teaching were English textbooks, exercise books, and tape recorders. At that time, teachers monitored the whole teaching process in the classrooms; while the students had to take notes carefully and listened to the teachers attentively. From the 1990s, with the introduction of diverse western pedagogies and their adoption in national curriculum documents, such as the Audio-Lingual Method (ALM), Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Approach (TBA), the MOE gradually recognized that the function of the language was to communicate rather than train students to be only readable language learners (Wen, 2016). Since the early twenty-first century, “learning autonomy” as a key concept has been introduced to China and been emphasized in English teaching and learning pedagogies (Benson, 2013). Most importantly, it has been emphasized as one of the most important goals for developing Chinese life-long education in the national English curriculum requirement since 2004.

However, although impressive progress has been made in English teaching in China over three decades, a host of issues in English language education deserves much attention. This includes the gaps between the English teachers' practice and the requirements in the national English curriculum (Cai, 2017; Hu, 2018); rapid spread of western English teaching pedagogy approaches and qualified teachers (Zhang & Wang, 2011), and the widening gap between teachers' and students' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of English teaching in China (Wen, 2016). A more recent study shows that student and teachers' perceptions of a good teacher are divergent in an Omani EFL context (Al-Mahrooqi, Denman, Al-Siyabi, & Al-Maamari, 2015). As Cortazzi and Jin comment, “there are significant differences in language teaching developments between the major cities and small cities, between towns and countryside, between coastal and inland cities, between the North and South, between key and non-key schools and universities” (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996, p. 61). Hence, students with different learning experiences and backgrounds need to be focused upon as a mean of enhancing support and understandings between students and teachers in China.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Students are in the center of learning and teaching

After three decades' of the development of English language pedagogy in China, researchers have gradually developed an understanding that students' learning improves when they are switched from being “receptive” to “active”. In other words, teachers have to change from imparting knowledge to assist students in acquiring knowledge and completion of transition. Scholars believed that students should be always regarded as the agent in the center of English teaching and learning (Cai, 2017; Wen, 2016). This was supported by the MOE in the recent English Language Curriculum Reform in both schools and universities. The Ministry of Education (MOE) (2013) emphasized that developing students' individual learning is essential as it essential for students to enhance their learner autonomy ability. As a consequence, it is vital for students to develop life-long education.

These perceptions are based on Social Constructivism developed by Lev Vygotsky and Learner Autonomy (Benson, 2013). The constructivists assume that although the world objectively exists,

the understanding of the world and the attachments of meanings to it are all determined by individuals. In this way, the students are brought to a central part of the teaching process. Similarly, learner autonomy is defined as “the capacity to take charge of, or responsibility for, one’s own learning” (Benson, 2013, p. 58). From this perspective, students are considered as the main agent in the learning and teaching process. However, to develop students’ individual learning ability does not mean students have to learn by themselves, Lewis (1978) argues that:

To approve ‘autonomy’ as an ideal for students is one thing: to commend ‘autonomous’ methods of learning is another-however ‘autonomy’ is defined. If, for the purposes of argument, we gloss it as independence, it is not quite obvious that independent methods of learning promote independence-auxiliary casual relationships must be established (p. 152)

From the above perceptions, it can be viewed that autonomy cannot be pursued without assistance from others. Anyone who is isolated from the social context could fail to be an autonomous learner (Chickering, 1969). Therefore, developing students’ autonomy cannot ignore guidance and interdependence.

## **2.2. English teaching methods**

Underpinned by these theories, English teaching methods and teaching models have developed at a fast rate in China as well. With the development of digital devices and high technology, traditional teaching methods have not been able to satisfy students’ learning needs. In the past 10 years, an increasing research trend is to investigate students’ academic achievement by using different English teaching methods, such as “Flipped classroom” and online courses. The flipped classroom approach has received its popularity by using a blended teaching model (Berrett, 2012; Brame, 2013). Brame (2013, p. 1) defines that “flipping the classroom” means that students gain first exposure to new material outside of class, usually via reading or lecture videos, and then use class time to do the more difficult and complex work of integrating that knowledge, perhaps through problem solving, discussion, or debates”. In the process of using this method, students have been required to study all the learning materials before the class. Positive assessment of using this method was found by Mazur and his colleagues, who indicated that there were significant learning gains when compared to traditional instruction in the Physics class in Harvard University (2001). More recently, Tian (2015) undertook a large scale empirical study to investigate the influence of students’ academic achievement by using the flipped classroom approach and online courses in China. The findings showed that students’ learning motivation, interest and academic achievement have improved to some extent, but not significantly.

However, in a Chinese EFL context, although Wen (2016) believed that innovative English teaching methods might be able to stimulate students’ learning interest and improve students’ motivation, she argued that innovative teaching approaches introduced from the West does not mean that Chinese scholars have to receive and incorporate them without critical thinking. Lv (2016) critically claimed that using online courses caused an increased amount of final expenses in rural schools in China. Compared with flexible learning methods in the West, all Chinese students have to receive a face-to-face teaching in schools and universities (Lv, 2016). As such, more expenses will be allocated in providing the Internet, purchasing infrastructure and training qualified teachers. Meanwhile, low economic status families would increase their burdens in purchasing expensive digital appliances to complete online courses (Lv, 2016). In this regard, to find out whether students’ preferences and experiences are beneficial to explore a more suitable English language teaching method for a tertiary context.

## **2.3. Learning style and learners’ preferences**

Learning styles have a close relationship with learners’ preferences. Stewart and Felicetti (1992) define learning styles as those “educational conditions under which a student is most likely to learn” (p. 15). They believed that it is essential to study students’ preferences in the English teaching process. “Evaluating students’ learning styles provides knowledge about their particular

preferences” (Brown et al., 2009, p. 525). This awareness can be used by teachers to further develop their teaching designs, formats and to stimulate students’ ability to acquire knowledge and apply it in an attempt to individualize instruction. “Understanding styles can improve the planning, producing, and implementing of educational experiences, so they are more appropriately compatible with students’ desires, in order to enhance their learning, retention and retrieval” (Federico, 2000, p. 367). In this regard, enhancing understandings of students’ preferences not only can improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning but also might be able to provide more suggestive support to vulnerable students.

Reid (1987) undertook a research on Asian ESL students’ learning style preferences, and asked 1338 students to identify their perceptual learning style preferences. The research outcomes showed that Korean students preferred the most to use visual methods to learn English as their learning style preferences; also, Chinese students were positive in adopting visual methods too. Similarly, Chinese and Korean students chose auditory learning as a major learning style. However, Chinese students did not prefer kinesthetic and tactile learning styles. Additionally, Chinese students enjoyed individual learning more than group learning. Willing (1988) and his team members investigated students’ learning preferences among 517 second language learners in Australia. They found some differences among students’ features: concrete learning style, analytical learning style, communicative learning style, and authority oriented learning style. By contrasting two German learners in a case study, Ellis (1992) reports that the differences of learning styles between learners in two aspects: active learning style versus passive learning style and studial learning style versus experiential learning style. In his research, the findings showed that a student who was inclined to adopt a studial learning style (a preference for accuracy and grammatical explanation) appeared to be a more successful learner than the student who adopted an experiential style (a tendency for fluency and engaging in real communication).

In the Chinese EFL context, apart from teaching methods, learning styles are important factors to influence students’ academic achievement while the learning environment receives little attention in previous studies. Krashen (1982) points out that a non-anxious learning environment is the first core element in second language learning. He believes that learners who learn a language in a beneficial learning environment will have a low threshold for anxiety. Although studies on teacher-pupil relationships have been undertaken in China and the West, students’ perceptions are little addressed in the EFL context in China. Therefore, as this would appear to be a critical element in improving students’ learning experiences, there is an urgent need for EFL teachers and policy makers to have a better understanding of students’ preferences and experiences. Additionally, the previous traditional teaching model that emphasizes the central role of teachers was not effective in improving students’ English proficiency. All these concerns led the paper to explore the following research questions:

1. What is the teaching method students prefer in English learning and teaching?
2. What is the learning style students prefer in English learning?
3. What is the learning environment students prefer in English learning and teaching?
4. What is the perception of a good EFL teacher?

#### **2.4. The research**

The methodological principles underpinning this study lay in using a mixed method paradigm. It adopted both qualitative and quantitative methods to collect and analyze data, which were expected to strengthen the merits and make up for the weakness for both sides. “The type of purposive sample chosen is based on the particular research questions, as well as consideration of the resources available to the researcher”<sup>1</sup> (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 45). In this study, 500 university students who joined in the survey and 20 of them took part in the semi-structured

interviews, ranging from 18 to 23 years old in eight major departments (19 schools) in the subject university. Data collection methods were in the form of questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, which were designed according to the research aims and conducted in relation to the English learning and teaching experiences based on participants' views. The data collection process was divided into two stages: a quantitative stage and qualitative stage. The research tool in the quantitative stage was a questionnaire, which was valid and reliable in the pilot study.<sup>2</sup> Data gathered in this stage was analyzed through the statistical software: PASW (formerly SPSS Statistics) version 21. Afterwards, the second stage, semi-structured interviews were organized to get a further detailed understanding. The participants' views were analyzed using a mixture of thematic analysis, a constructivist grounded theory approach and its three step coding process (Sarantakos, 2005). The qualitative data analysis was conducted using NVivo software version 10.

The questionnaire was designed in three parts: Background information, questions items and an open-ended question. The first part asked students' information, such as their disciplines, and their previous English score in the College Entrance Examinations. The second part of the questionnaire was composed of 12 questions by using a five-Likert scale, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". The questions items covered the current popular teaching and learning strategies used in EFL teaching and learning in China. Apart from the Likert scale questions, the questionnaire had one additional open-ended question, asking the participants to provide their experience on their EFL teaching and learning.

After the completion of the questionnaire, the invited semi-structured interview was constructed to get a further understanding of students' views regarding their preferences and experiences in the previous and current EFL teaching and learning context. There were 20 voluntary participants involved in the semi-structured interviews, including 17 female students and 3 male students across six main academic faculties. Of all the interviewees, two thirds were the third and fourth year students and all of them had more than 12 years' EFL learning experiences. The interview was conducted in English as the participants had an interview plan for their preparations. All the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed into analysis.

### 3. Findings

After the numeric analysis, students' preferences regarding their favourite teaching methods, learning styles, learning environment and perceptions of a good EFL teacher was shown in the following table:

The descriptive and frequency analysis show that the participants have made agreements to a large extent on these question items in this part. It can be seen from Table 1, the participants held a positive view on all the question items. A majority of questions' mean values indicated that students agreed to the questions items stated. Besides these questions, the participants strongly agreed that developing independent learning ability is important (Median = 1), English communication is an important goal of English teaching and learning (Median = 1), and a good teacher should be a good communicator (Median = 1) and have a warm personality (Median = 1). Particularly, about 91% of the participants held a rather positive view on Q8, which shows that English communication is far more important for EFL teaching and learning in China. As the median values of the participants' views on this part show that the participants have reached a high level of agreement, there is no need for further tests.

#### 3.1. Preferences of teaching methods

The qualitative data confirm the centrality of the result obtained from the questionnaire. After the rigorous coding process by using the Nvivo 10, the Communicative Method received the largest number of responses so that it was regarded as the most popular teaching method than others; while the GTM was the least popular. A large number of responses from the participants stated that they would like to speak English with their foreign teachers and friends from overseas but they still lack communicative language skills even though they have learnt English for more than 10 years. A student

**Table 1. Questionnaire analysis**

Question items	SA	A	NS	D	SD	Mean	Std. Deviation	Total
1. Interactive class is important.	218 43.6	233 46.6	34 6.8	13 2.6	2 0.4	1.696	.7434	500 100
2. Group learning is important.	170 34.0	247 49.4	64 12.8	18 3.6	1 0.2	1.866	.7831	500 100
3. Students should develop independent learning ability.	279 55.8	196 39.2	18 3.6	7 1.4	0 0	1.506	.6378	500 100
4. Different kinds of assessment should be used.	191 38.2	243 48.6	55 11.0	10 2.0	1 0.2	1.774	.7348	500 100
5. Teachers should pay attention to students' different learning styles.	201 40.2	232 46.4	54 10.8	10 2.0	3 0.6	1.764	.7678	500 100
6. Teachers should provide different learning activities.	201 40.2	253 50.6	38 7.6	5 1.0	3 0.6	1.712	.7000	500 100
7. Computer-assisted learning should be provided.	174 34.8	232 46.4	74 14.8	18 3.6	2 0.4	1.884	.8148	500 100
8. English communication is an important goal of English teaching and learning.	287 57.4	186 37.2	23 4.6	3 0.6	1 0.2	1.490	.6346	500 100
9. Teachers should be flexible in treating individual students.	242 48.4	218 43.6	33 6.6	6 1.2	1 0.2	1.612	.6829	500 100
10. A good teacher should be a good communicator.	272 54.4	197 39.4	21 4.2	9 1.8	1 0.2	1.540	.6822	500 100
11. A good teacher should have a warm personality.	276 55.2	184 36.8	37 7.4	2 0.4	1 0.2	1.536	.6675	500 100
12. A good teacher should have a sense of humor.	243 48.6	203 40.6	43 8.6	9 1.8	2 0.4	1.648	.7465	500 100

from the Faculty of Education expressed that she felt so excited when she knew that exchange students from overseas would come to stay in her dormitory this year. She believed that it was a great chance to improve English communicative skills with them. Apart from these two methods, the researcher found that an increasing number of university students have been using computers to assist their learning, as well as going to the English Language Self-Access Learning Centers by themselves frequently while this research was undertaken. Interestingly, despite holding a positive attitude towards the importance of group learning, participants in the interview regarded that learning from friends and classmates were not an easy and favourite way. A sophomore participant from the Faculty of Arts raised concerns upon the group learning strategy:

I really like using computer-assisted learning method to improve my English speaking and listening skills. It is not easy to make friends in the university as they came from different backgrounds and their previous English proficiency has a significant difference. To gather in a group is very different for me at this moment. (Interviewee 2)

It was also interesting to see that these difficulties were found in those who received secondary education in rural areas. The participants reflected due to these huge differences between the two levels of education, that they found learning English seemed more difficult for them. This remark to the open-ended question was reflected in the following comment:

I received my primary and secondary education in countryside, which was a remote village in the Province. When I came to the capital city to receive the higher education, I found it was difficult for me as I did not have any chances to access web-based technology when I was in schools; however, I needed relevant skills to monitor my own English learning in the self-access learning center. Also, the school teachers never required us to finish any assignments related to listening and speaking, but now, I needed to find some partners to complete these assignments. Due to my poor spoken English, few friends would like to be my partners, which usually made me in trouble

Open-ended question of the questionnaire

Although interviewees had reservations on the importance of the group learning strategy, students' preference of using the CLM was associated with a previous study undertaken by Wen (2016) who advocated enhancing students' communicative skills so that they are able to use the target language more in a practical way. Also, this has strengthened the evidence based resources that are required in the MOE documents.

### **3.2. Preferences of learning styles**

Students' preferences of their learning styles were clearly substantiated from the interview. A large number of participants viewed that they were rote-learners in schools as they were highly driven by College examinations. A participant still felt much stressed when talking about the English examinations she had taken in schools. She commented that "I followed teachers all the way though the learning process, from primary schools to high schools. I depended heavily on my English teachers when I was at schools". However, this participant felt more interested and happier to discuss her English language learning at the university: "I would like to study by myself in the library as there is a large amount of digital and printed resources". A majority of participants viewed that they would have more opportunities and spare time to develop their communicative skills by attending various English activities at the university. They reflected that learning by doing and active participation in the activities were helpful for them in their English language learning. Only a small number of students who majored in Technology believed that they preferred being taught and following the textbook as he did not think English is useful for his future employment.

### **3.3. Preferences of the learning environment**

Elements of the learning environment at the university that were strongly advocated by students include a relaxed atmosphere and the freedom to choose learning materials that benefitted the individuals. Attributes, such as these benefitted students' motivation and focus in their life-long education.

The frequent references to the preferences of the learning environment in the participants' responses were from the open-ended question in the questionnaire and their answers in the interviews. The university environment is considered by the participants as an attribute to the effectiveness of learning and teaching. The participants believed that the learning and teaching environment was quite free and relaxing in the university, which has been strongly indicated in the participants' conversations. A participant from the Faculty of Science reflected that "Learning environment is unrestricted and free that makes me passionate to learn English. I could choose what I would like to learn and how I learn it". Another student majoring in English said that she felt relaxed to learn English in the university as lots of Chinese and foreign teachers provided her with a friendly learning atmosphere. These two participants both claimed that they had a stronger motivation to learn English in this relaxing and free learning environment. However, some students responded shortly to the open-ended question mentioning that their previous learning environment was not very positive in schools. The common adverse issues raised were: the restricted resources, strict class schedules, high pressure of the examinations.

### **3.4. Perceptions of a good EFL teacher**

The personalities and characteristics of the students' favourable EFL teacher were further confirmed by the fact that 20 participants in the enquiry provided perceptions and understandings of their preferences of a good EFL teacher. "Optimistic and patient" as the most favorite personality, received the largest number of responses from students' perceptions of a good EFL teacher, following by "Humorous" and "Paying attention to individual" was noted in the second and third preference rank. According to students' opinions, without patience and optimism, teachers were unlikely to be regarded as a good English teacher. Some students argued that "If the teachers are not patient, students would feel coward and fear seeking help from them when student have difficulties in learning". Although the "Humorous" received the second largest responses in the coding process, not so many English teachers in China were thought to incorporate a sense of humour into their lessons; neither were they thought to pay much attention to the individual student. For example, a student from the Faculty of Education disclosed the reason why they liked teachers and who utilized a sense of humour in their lessons:

I think humorous teachers will be more popular among students in general rather than those who are of coldness. Since humorous teachers could create a better classroom atmosphere than those who are not, it is believable that English learning is likely to be more efficient in this relaxed environment than stuffy one. However, the reality is very few English teachers use a sense of humour into English lessons (Interviewee 18).

The second example was from a participant who answered the question in the open-ended question section in the questionnaire. It reflected his experiences and some common phenomenon that is evident in Chinese universities and schools. The participants mentioned that most EFL teachers always paid more attention to top students than others as this group of students could bring them a good reputation, rewards, and benefits in professional development. The Chinese test-driven system could be a potential reason for this issue to be highlighted.

## **4. Discussions and recommendations**

Within this study, the students believed that they preferred English teaching and learning in an informal and unrestricted environment. When involved in an informal learning environment, students felt less stressed and more motivated by their preferences. In this environment, students are more likely to have control over the learning procedure and its outcomes, which could increase the effectiveness of learning and teaching. Furthermore, by using various teaching methods, such as the CLT and collaborative teaching methods, students' independent learning ability would be enhanced by increased motivation in the learning and teaching process.

Data from this research positively indicated that the use of online language teaching motivated students to learn and join in more English activities on campus. In particular, the adoption of

computer-assisted learning and web-based learning approaches was utilized as a compliment in the university English class. For example, self-access learning centers involve a substantial number of online learning resources and the learning systems that are equipped based on utilizing of Web 2.0 tools, which aims to develop students' independent learning ability and to increase their learning interest. Students who have access to the Internet on campus are likely to have more chances to access online learning activities. With the help of these advanced Web 2.0 tools, the students can choose the extent to which they can exert efforts to achieve benefits. This result supports the research findings found by Tian (2015) who believes that through using recent technologies, there is a shift from initial online "teacher-centered" approaches to a more "student-centered" approach where students participate and collaborate actively in constructing knowledge themselves. Also, the study result was in agreement with Lewis (1978) who believes that autonomous learners need assistance and collaboration with others. But the study findings have not shown any preference of using a flipped classroom approach based on students' opinions. Meanwhile, students' comments of the learning experiences in schools was associated with Lv's (2016) research result, which indicated that English teaching resources and teaching quality is significantly different from urban and high ranking schools in China.

In identifying different learning styles and students' preferences, the finding of this study showed that students lack confidence in using group learning methods. This was evidenced in a previous study undertaken by Reid (1987). But the finding of this study adds new knowledge to the literature in the field related to the Chinese context. The research found that the students were more likely to be passive learners and utilize a studial way to learn English when they were in schools, but when they came to the university, most students were more likely to exhibit learning styles that were more active in learning. This difference was a literature gap in previous Chinese studies, and thus it is here that a major value of this study resides. However, interestingly, there was also a small number of students with a Science background who continued to be passive in their learning process. This might be due to much less requirements and use in their future job places.

The other major difference is that the students were more likely to be visual learners when they were in schools; while most of them were more likely to be audio learners in the university. This change probably was caused by different learning and teaching methods adopted in schools and in the university (Lin, 2008), rather than by changes in their preferred learning styles. Students at university had a more unrestricted learning environment than they experienced in schools. Subsequently, the students would be more likely to make personal learning choices, in effect to be "student-centered", and demonstrated their interest in English learning via using online learning. Thus, they became more active and unrestricted in learning English. For example, the students had access to learn English in the English Language Self-Access Learning Centers. In this relaxing and unrestricted learning environment, the students enjoyed learning English more autonomously. From this point of view, their success is achieved by their own efforts rather than relying on the teachers.

The data in the study highlighted a preference among students for their concept of a good teacher to be characterized by kindness, to be easy-going, passionate, patient, and interactive directly with students and was likely to demonstrate a sense of humor in the classroom. Similar attributes are suggested by Sutkin, Wagner, Harris, & Schiffer (2008), who argues a good teacher is characterized by "inspiring, supporting, actively involving, and communicating with students" (p. 452). The students believed that a positive relationship between teachers and students is supportive to them as they can be provided with a comfortable and favorable learning environment (Sutkin, Wagner, Harris, & Schiffer, 2008). However, Chinese students' perceptions were not totally supported by previous research undertaken by Al-Mahrooqi et al. (2015), who found out that "having a sense of humour" was the least important characteristic of being a good EFL teacher in the Omani context.

Based on students' preferences and experiences in the study, the implications of practices could be explored in the development of individual learning ability so as to enhance students' learner

autonomy and the improvement of students' English communicative learning competence. As learning autonomy does not mean learning by individuals, communicative interaction is essential. However, traditionally students could only be able to communicate between students (Ss-Ss), and teachers (Ss-Ts). Students have not been provided broad opportunities to communication with a wider community of learners (Ss and Ts-Os).

As such, the researcher developed and constructed the Communicative Language Community of English Learners (CLCOEL) model (Lu, 2014).

The CLCOEL model needs to be prominently highlighted in the practical applications for English learners and teachers as it is essential to create a harmonious and effective atmosphere in English learning and teaching for both students and teachers. Moreover, it creates more opportunities to assist students to be immersed in an authentic English learning environment and is essential to improve communicative language skills. Virtual learning and teaching could be realised by using various online teaching applications, such as MOOCS, APPs and social media tools.

Besides the university, the concept of a CLCOEL is also highly likely to be applicable to schools as most students believed that their early English language learning experience was highly driven by examinations. In order to improve students' communicative language competence, this model suggested that students and students, students and teachers, and students, teachers and communities should improve interaction on all aspects related to English teaching in various levels.

The teacher's role is more likely to be a facilitator to support and assist students to respond independently to difficulties in learning. In accordance with student preferences referred to earlier, teachers are able to display characteristics of student perceptions of a good teacher. In particular creating the atmosphere of support, encouragement and in reduction of anxiety. Compared with the traditional restricted classroom community, the community in the model could be both a real community and a virtual community; that is, students could interact with native English speakers and other EFL learners both in and out of English classes. Also, they can acquire authentic learning materials to develop their communicative language competence. Most importantly, this model is also suitable for those who learn English in a virtual learning and teaching environment. This environment is able to be constructed by using social Web 3.0 tools and potentially expand on applications on learners' digital and mobile devices so that more learners could be involved in this community. From this point of view, the use of the model of CLCOEL would be beneficial to both full-time students at schools and universities, as well as adult learners who are part-time students taking any university courses or completing their pathways to earn degrees.

## 5. Conclusion

This mixed research study found that students had an increased awareness of the importance of English language communicative skills than those in the schools. Generally, students felt that learning was beneficial to them when they felt exposed to a more open and relaxing environment at the university. Students reflected that ESL teachers who were supportive, facilitative, and having a sense of humour would become more beneficial to their English language learning. The development of CLCOEL in response to the needs of students which highlighted that communicative skills were essentially driven by participants' preferences, the perceptions of the students related closely to the concept of the CLCOEL which provides insights for the model construction of key learning elements in line with student perceptions of teaching and learning.

As the research has not investigated teachers' perceptions and their preference regarding the English teaching methods, teaching models, and teaching environment, future researchers could expand in these fields. Additionally, the CLCOEL model is still under an exploratory conceptual stage, and would benefit from longitudinal studies.

### Funding

The authors received no direct funding for this research.

### Author details

Jinjin Lu<sup>1</sup>

E-mail: [helen820919@sina.com](mailto:helen820919@sina.com)

ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8193-4160>

Paul Throssell<sup>2</sup>

E-mail: [Paul.throssell@utas.edu.au](mailto:Paul.throssell@utas.edu.au)

<sup>1</sup> Institute for Research in School Education, Faculty of Education, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic.

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Education, University of Tasmania, Launceston, Australia.

### Citation information

Cite this article as: University students' preferences and experience: Is there a role for the CLCOEL?, Jinjin Lu & Paul Throssell, *Cogent Education* (2018), 5: 1542953.

### Notes

1. Nine Year compulsory education is also called a basic education in mainland China. It covers a six-year primary school education and three-year Junior high school education.
2. In the pilot study, the reliability analysis showed that the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was 0.943. If the coefficient value is above 0.8, it indicates that the instrument has higher inner-consistency reliability (Nunnally, 1978). The construct validity was examined by using the KMO test, which yielded a KMO statistical value of 0.644. As suggested by Kaiser (Kaiser, 1974) KMO values greater than 0.5 are barely acceptable.

### References

- Al-Mahrooqi, R., Denman, C., Al-Siyabi, J., & Al-Maamari, F. (2015). Characteristics of a good EFL teacher: Omani EFL teacher and student perspectives. *SAGE Open*, 1–15. doi:10.1177/2158244015584782
- Benson, P. (2013). Learner Autonomy. *TESOL Quarterly*, 47(4), 839–843. doi:10.1002/tesq.134
- Berrett, D. (2012). How 'flipping' the classroom can improve the traditional lecture. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/flipping-the-classroom/>
- Brame, C. (2013). Flipping the classroom Retrieved August 1, 2017, from <http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/flipping-the-classroom/>
- Brown, T., Zoghi, M., Williams, B., Jaberzadeh, S., Roller, L., Palermo, C., ... Holt, T.-A. (2009). Are learning style preferences of health science students predictive of their attitudes towards e-learning? *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 25(4), 524–543. doi:10.14742/ajet.1127
- Cai, J. (2017). Gaoxiao waiyu jiaoxue linian de tiaozhan yu dianfu. *Foreign Language Education*, 38(1), 6–10.
- Chickering, A. W. (1969). *Education and identity*. San Francisco, Cal: Jossey-Bass.
- Cortazzi, M., & Jin, L. (1996). English teaching and learning in China. *Language Teaching*, 29(2), 61–80. doi:10.1017/S0261444800008351
- Ellis, R. (1992). *Second language acquisition and language pedagogy*. UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Federico, P. A. (2000). Learning styles and student attitudes toward various aspects of network-based instruction. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 16(4), 359–379. doi:10.1016/S0747-5632(00)00021-2
- Hesse-Biber, S. N., & Leavy, P. (2011). *The practice of qualitative research*. London: Sage.
- Hu, G. (2018). Questioning and responding in the classroom: A cross-disciplinary study of the effects of instructional mediums in academic subjects at a Chinese university. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 1–19. doi:10.1080/13670050.2018.1493084
- Kaiser, H. F. (1974). An index of factorial simplicity. *Psychometrika*, 39(1), 31–36. doi:10.1007/BF02291575
- Krashen, S. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. New York: Pergamon.
- Lewis, H. A. (1978). A teacher's reflections on autonomy. *Studies in Higher Education*, 3(2), 149–159. doi:10.1080/03075077812331376209
- Lin, C. (2008). *The necessity and feasibility of accommodating learners' learning styles in EFL teaching* (Master). Qufu Normal University, Qufu.
- Lu, J. (2014). *English language learning and teaching in China – Students' perspectives*. New York: Untested Ideas Research Center.
- Lu, S., & Ares, N. (2015). Liberation or oppression?—Western TESOL pedagogies in China. *Educational Studies*, 51(2), 112–128. doi:10.1080/00131946.2015.1015348
- Lv, C. (2016). Dui fanzhuang ketang de liduan fenxi. *Zhongguo Xiaowai Jiaoyu*, 6, 360.
- Ministry of Education. (2013). Jiaoyubu guanyu shenhua gaige yijian. Retrieved August 1, 2017, from <http://www.moe.gov.cn/HLFtiDemo/search2.jsp>
- Nunnally, J. O. (1978). *Psychometric theory* (2nd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Reid, J. M. (1987). The learning style preferences of ESL students. *TESOL Quarterly*, 21(1), 87–111. doi:10.2307/3586356
- Sarantakos, S. (2005). *Social research* (3rd ed.). New York: Macmillan.
- Stewart, K. L., & Felicetti, L. A. (1992). Learning styles of marketing majors. *Educational Research Quarterly*, 15(2), 15–23.
- Sutkin, G., Wagner, E., Harris, I., & Schiffer, R. (2008). What makes a good clinical teacher in medicine? A review of the literature. *Academic Medicine*, 83(5), 452–466. doi:10.1097/ACM.0b013e31816bee61
- Tian, A. (2015). Muke jia fanzhuang ketang de shizheng yanjiu. *Open Education Research*, 21(6), 86–94.
- Wen, Q. (2016). The production-oriented approach to teaching university students English in China. *Language Teaching*, 1–15. doi:10.1017/S026144481600001X
- Willing, K. (1988). *Learning styles in adult migrant education*. Australia: National Curriculum Resource Centre.
- Zhang, Y. F., & Wang, J. (2011). Primary school English language teaching in South China: Past, present and future. In A. Feng (Ed.), *English language education across greater China* (pp. 151–168). Bristol: Short Run Press Ltd.

## Appendix

### I Interview questions

- (1) What do you think of the methods you used in your English learning in the university? Do they help your English learning or not? If yes, to what extent?
- (2) Which aspects do you want to improve (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) in English learning? Why?
- (3) What do you think of English teachers' teaching in the university?
- (4) In your opinion, what kind of teaching methods are helpful to your English learning?
- (5) In your opinion, what kind of the personality should a good teacher of English have?

### II Thematic codes

Learning and teaching in English in the university	responses
<b>Themes:</b>	<b>575</b>
• Learning and teaching methods in the university	277
Sub-themes	45
• Audio-Lingual Method	8
Doing presentations	106
Listening to English news	26
Listening to English songs	9
Watching English films	33
• Collaborative learning	77
Learning with friends	3
• Communicative Method	7
Dialogue practice in English	
Doing duty report	
Doing English speech	
Doing role-plays	
Online chatting	
Talking with foreigners	
Group work and group discussions	
• Computer-assisted Method	
Online learning	
Using computers for learning English	
Using the Internet to learn English	
Using PowerPoint	
• Grammar-Translation Method	
Translating from textbooks	
• Individualized learning	
Learning English by myself	
English final examinations and tests	
Reading English magazines	
Reading English newspapers	
• Teaching model used in the university	73
• “Student-centered” model	73
English self-access learning center	
Learning English by myself	
Online learning	
Self-conscious	
Self-discipline	
Using computers for learning English	
Using the Internet to learn English	
• Learning and teaching environment in the university	47
Freedom	
Relaxed	

(Continued)

Learning and teaching in English in the university	responses
<b>Themes:</b>	<b>575</b>
• English learning and teaching problems in the university Lacking confidence to speak English Limited time in the English class No partners to practice	36
Characteristics of a good English teacher	responses
Themes:	81
• Optimistic and patient	23
• Humorous	18
• Paying attention to individual students	18
• Being like a guider	12
• Interacting with students	12
• Understanding and communicating with students	9
• Responsible and easy-going	8
• Passionate	5
• Strict	4
• Kind	3
• Respecting students	2
• Friendly	1
• Warm-hearted	1



© 2018 The Author(s). This open access article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license.

You are free to:

Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format. Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially.

The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms.

Under the following terms:

Attribution — You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made.

You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.

No additional restrictions

You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.



**Cogent Education (ISSN: 2331-186X) is published by Cogent OA, part of Taylor & Francis Group.**

**Publishing with Cogent OA ensures:**

- Immediate, universal access to your article on publication
- High visibility and discoverability via the Cogent OA website as well as Taylor & Francis Online
- Download and citation statistics for your article
- Rapid online publication
- Input from, and dialog with, expert editors and editorial boards
- Retention of full copyright of your article
- Guaranteed legacy preservation of your article
- Discounts and waivers for authors in developing regions

**Submit your manuscript to a Cogent OA journal at [www.CogentOA.com](http://www.CogentOA.com)**

