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**READABILITY IN READING MATERIALS  
SELECTION AND COURSEBOOK DESIGN FOR  
COLLEGE ENGLISH IN CHINA**

**Volume I**

**By**

**ZHONGSHE LU**

Thesis submitted to the University of Nottingham  
For the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, September 2002



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## **Volume II**

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## Abstract

This thesis studies the application of readability in reading materials selection and coursebook design for college English in an EFL context in China. Its aim is to develop rationales which coursebook writers can utilise in selecting materials as texts and as a basis for designing tasks.

This study, through a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods, argues that readability is applicable in the EFL Chinese context, and readability plays an important role in determining the selection of materials and the task design for college English. As the term readability is used in a more comprehensive sense which includes text factors as well as reader factors, existing measures of readability should be critically examined. Objective and statistical measures such as readability formulae need to be refined in line with recent research into the relationship between lexicogrammar and discourse organisation, and with recent research into second language/foreign language acquisition. Ease of reading can be manipulated by highlighting the use of discourse signals in the text, and by raising high order questions. It is argued that high-order-tasks such as "thinking skill" activities facilitate students' interaction with the text and the development of language awareness.

The application of three highly regarded formulae and the analysis of language features of the chosen texts indicate that word difficulty and sentence complexity are significant in materials selection. However, the findings in the questionnaires and interviews show

that readability formulae in use today ignore the critical functions of discourse signals and organisation. Nor do they consider cognitive processing factors such as exercise design, readers' interest, motivation and prior knowledge which play an equally important part as word difficulty and sentence length. Consequently, the suggestion is that both objective and subjective research methodologies are necessary in setting up new criteria. Objective statistics gained from appropriate readability formulae serve as an index to the difficulty of a text in terms of language. However, subjective opinion from experienced teachers on reader factors functions as an aid, and exercise design functions as an adjustment to students' comprehensibility. Among the three, exercise or task design deserves more exploration and experimentation from coursebook writers.

Process-based and activity-centred approaches are suggested in raising questions and designing tasks, because they focus on the reader and emphasise developing students' interpretation of the relations between forms and meanings. It is argued that they lead students into the process of learning - learn to learn, which is the ideal goal of English teaching, to which coursebook writers of college English have so far paid insufficient attention.

Therefore, new criteria for materials selection and coursebook design for college English are proposed:

- The textbooks have to meet the requirement stated in the National English Syllabus.
- The chosen passages have to be authentic.
- The chosen texts have to be interesting in topic, and substantial in content.

- The texts have to be right in difficulty level from the linguistic point of view.
- The tasks designed should provide students with opportunities to make use of their prior knowledge to interact with the text.
- The exercises should lead the students to deeper, more personal engagement.

It is hoped that these criteria will function as basic guidelines for future coursebook writing in college English.

**To my daughter**

for her companionship and love...

## Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been accomplished without the comments, suggestions, encouragement as well as patience from my supervisor Professor Carter. No words can convey my gratitude to him. I am also grateful to Professor McRae who in the early stages provided me with valuable advice and generous help.

I wish to thank Dr. Valerie Durow for her efficient administration support for all the research students in the School of English Studies.

I greatly appreciate the support from my colleagues in the Revising Team of the 1999 version of the National English Syllabus for permission to use some data in a needs survey in revising the syllabus.

I wish to acknowledge the participation of those who undertook my data collection, including Chinese visiting scholars, Chinese students from Nottingham University as well as students and teachers from Tsinghua University. It is their comments and opinions that make the findings of the study reliable and valid. To all of them I wish to offer a deeply-felt expression of my gratitude.

I appreciate the sincere friendship from both my Chinese friends and foreign friends who are always there for me, offering support and encouragement all the time. I gratefully acknowledge the assistance and support I have received from the staff in the

Institute of Contemporary Chinese Studies and the Language Centre of Nottingham University, my colleagues in the Foreign Languages Department of Tsinghua University. I offer thanks to my family for their tolerance and understanding. I owe a great debt to my daughter for her endless love and companionship.

Last, but most important, I would like to express my appreciation for the scholarship provided by the International Office of Nottingham University, which enables me to realise my dream of doing my PhD.



## **Abbreviations**

CELE: Centre of English Language Education of Nottingham University

CET: College English Test

GRE: Graduate Record Examination

ESL: English as a second language

EFL: English as a foreign language

TESOL: teaching English to speakers of other languages

ESP: English for specific purposes

WPM: word per minute

Int: intensive reading

Ext: extensive reading

SLA: second language acquisition

IELTS: International English Language Test System

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## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

### **1.1. Background of the study**

The stimulus for the present study derives from the view that coursebooks can be taken as a starting point in order to bring forward reform to college English in China (See 3.1.1). Many changes have taken place in students' English proficiency, interests and needs since 1980's (See 2.4.4) However, classroom teaching is still grammar-based dominated by the teacher (See 2.3). Currently used coursebooks were first published in 1980's. Though they all have their third editions, their pedagogy and content have not been fundamentally changed, which still focus on products rather than the process of learning (See 3.1.6). Against this background, a new version of the National English Syllabus was promulgated with a goal of developing students' ability of exchanging information, which puts weight on communicative competence as well as language competence to further improve college English (See 2.4.7). As is always the case, after the formulation and specification of objectives in a syllabus, new coursebooks are called to help both teachers and students achieve the goals and objectives set in the new version of the syllabus, since the major function of a coursebook is to implement a syllabus (See 3.1.1).

- "It is clear that coursebook assessment is fundamentally a subjective, rule-of-thumb activity, and that no neat formula, grid or system will ever provide a definite yardstick" (Sheldon, 1988: 245). This does not mean that coursebook writers and users do not need to pursue perfection. For academic and commercial reasons, coursebook writers have been trying hard to produce high-quality textbooks for specific groups of readers if not for all.

In the case of college English in the Chinese EFL context, when textbook composers intend to produce good quality coursebooks the first thing they do is to make decisions about issues such as targeted readers, their proficiency levels, their prior knowledge and the materials to be chosen as texts. The National English Syllabus will be of help in setting main principles (See 2.4). However, even under the guidance of the National English Syllabus, it is not easy to decide the criteria with which to select materials to be used as texts in coursebooks.

For more than two decades, college English coursebook writers have followed their perception and intuition about what is interesting and valuable to learners of a language. This procedure is both practical and easy to carry out, and in some cases perception and intuition lead to the development of good materials (3.3). Nevertheless, this is not always the case. Very often, the validity and reliability of even well-known writers' materials are under suspicion, as many factors are related to ease or difficulty in understanding reading materials, such as lexicon, structure, presentation, interests, attitudes, motives, cultural background etc. (Gray & Leary, 1972:95) (See 3.2.3; 3.2.4 and 4.2). Therefore it is suggested to introduce readability theory to help writers select texts and design tasks in coursebook writing (See 3.4).

The intention of the study has been motivated by the idea of producing high quality materials for college English for the textbook project between Nottingham University and Tsinghua University, in which the writer of this

thesis is one of the participants. For this particular reason, the study has to be practical as well as academic.

## **1.2. Objectives of the study**

This study is carried out to propose principles which coursebook writers can follow in selecting materials as texts and as a basis in designing tasks in producing new coursebooks for college English in China. Goals and requirements stated in the National English Syllabus (See 2.4.5; 2.4.6) and limitations of college English such as limited contact hours with students, traditional approaches in teaching and grammar-based exams etc. have to be considered (See 3.1.3). It is important therefore to choose the right level of materials to stimulate students, to use appropriate approaches in raising questions and to design tasks that will help students develop interpretative and inferencing skills. All these strategies are essential in encouraging enhanced language awareness, text awareness and cultural awareness. It is assumed that coursebook writers will benefit if the theory of readability is applied to materials selection and task design. As the limitations of existing measures of readability have been realised (See 4.3.2), the research will study the following hypothesis and questions:

### General Hypothesis:

Readability is a key factor in determining the selection of materials for college English students in China but existing measures of readability should be critically examined. Objective and statistical measures such as readability



formulae need to be refined in line with recent research into the relationship between lexico-grammar and discourse organisation.

Readability is also a matter of reader-text interaction and factors in the measurement of the respective ease and difficulty of a text need to be investigated in the light of more subjective, qualitative research methodologies.

Specific hypotheses:

- Ease of reading is facilitated by a greater use of discourse signals in the text.
  
- Ease of reading can be facilitated by pre-, post- and while-reading tasks, which promote thinking about the text, “a fifth skill”.
  
- Development of “fifth skill” activities is a key factor in materials design in general.

Research questions:

1. What factors are included in ‘readability’?
2. Is ‘readability’ applicable in materials selection and coursebook design for college English in China?
3. How to design tasks which help develop students’ language awareness and text awareness?
4. What are teachers’ and students’ responses to the three drafted templates proposed by the writer of this thesis?

Both the hypotheses and the research questions aim to devise appropriate rationale for material selection and task design. Materials selected as texts are suggested not only to be right in language difficulty but also to be interesting and substantial in content for students to explore. Task design should check students' comprehension as well as lead students to deep, personal engagement so that they will pay enough attention to learning process rather than product.

### **1.3. Scope of the study**

This study argues that readability is composed of two aspects: 'inside head factors' and 'outside head factors' (Zakaluk & Samuels, 1988). Materials selection should take account of readability, which is measured by readability formulae for text characteristics of linguistic difficulties. However, as reading processing is a reader-text interaction (Carroll, 1978; Alderson, 1984; Wallace, 1992a; Davis, 1995; Nuttall, 1996), there are other factors such as exercise design, readers' interest, motivation and prior knowledge which play as great a part as word difficulty and sentence length. It is suggested that both objective and subjective research methodologies are necessary in setting up new criteria. Objective statistics obtained from readability formulae function as an index to the difficulty of a text (Bentley, 1985), while subjective opinion from experienced teachers on readers' factor functions as an aid, and exercise design functions as an adjustment to more statistical and quantitative measures.

In exercise design 'some stimulus of cognitive and responsive processes' is needed, as they encourage students to bring their world knowledge, cultural background, personal experience and interest to the text (McRae, 1991;

Tomlinson, 1998). The level of a text depends largely on what the students are asked to do with it (McRae, 1991). Therefore, process-based and activity-centred approaches are recommended in raising questions and designing tasks. It is believed that these approaches help 'develop students' interpretive and inferencing skills, particularly interpretation of the relations between forms and meanings' by encouraging an enhanced language awareness and text awareness (Carter: 1996: 3-15). "In the era of mass communication... techniques of language teaching have tended to concentrate on how to communicate rather than on what to communicate about" (McRae, 1991: 1). This 'how to' approach emphasises the process rather than the finished product. Students are more likely to appreciate and understand texts if they are invited to actively participate in the process of meaning-creation. They enjoy constructing rather than simply responding to an already complete artefact (Carter: 1996: 13). Current research mentioned above focuses on the process of learning, emphasising how to learn, which is of great significance for coursebook writers for college English.

Limited research has been undertaken in connection with coursebook compilation of college English in China. There are not many books and papers published on the topic. However, the significance of coursebooks in College English has been increasingly recognised, as millions of books are sold every year and growth is increasing. This is due to the fact that the coursebook is an almost universal element of English language teaching, which serves as the most convenient means of providing the structure that the teaching and learning system requires (Sheldon, 1988; Hutchinson & Torres, 1994).

Despite of the increasing number of coursebooks sold in College English, the fact that traditional evaluation in materials selection and traditional approach to coursebook design are as dominant and essential as ever in currently used coursebooks.

At the present, what is good in College English coursebook writing is that almost all the writers are experienced teachers. After many years of teaching, they are capable of choosing texts with appropriate readability for their own students according to their instinctive intuition. Yet, as college English possesses a huge readership of 2.5 million students from a thousand universities or so each year, it would be more suitable and more sensible if the theory of readability could be employed in assessing the difficulty of texts in materials selection and task design. It is suggested that the National English Syllabus for college English and some popular readability formulae serve as criteria in selecting texts. Since the criteria provided by the syllabus and the readability formulae are only mechanical, 'interactive reading', 'language-based approaches' or 'task based approaches' are introduced and applied in both materials selection and coursebook design as they consider the role of the reader as a decisive factor in the reading process.

College English teaching in China is still very traditional, with teachers functioning as knowledge transmitters and students as recipients being passively fed by the teachers (See 2.3 and 3.1.3). Classes are teacher-centred and product-based, especially in the reading course. Reading competence involves mainly technical ability in multiple-choice exercises and in answering superficial

questions. Any degree of involvement or interaction with the text is not mentioned or touched upon. Coursebooks are the input knowledge to be transmitted and conveyed to the students, while students memorise and reproduce it mostly in objective questions in examinations (Harvey, 1985; Carter & Walker, 1989; Adamson, 1998). "Texts have not generally been selected for their potential to challenge. They are more frequently seen either as vehicles for linguistic structures... or as functional survival materials..." (Wallace, 1992b: 63-64). Such methods in English teaching have not done much to develop the students' skill in interactive reading, nor in learning to learn. "Reasoning, intuitive and deductive processes are not generally made to work very hard in reading comprehension - the thinking skill is left undeveloped" (McRae, 1991: 47). According to Wallace (1992b: 61): "Critical reading has not been generally encouraged in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom in either the wider or the narrower sense, whether we are talking of those with very limited English language proficiency or of quite advanced learners of English." As a result, students become dependent on teachers and books. They might be able to get high marks in examinations but not able to perform satisfactorily in real communication. To improve students' sensitivity to language and to enhance their cultural knowledge, necessary interactive reading is required in the development of such skills both in an engagement with the everyday language and in creative, process-oriented, activity-based methodologies. Those methodologies provide students with the responsibility to work out for themselves the meanings and significations of the texts (McRae, 1991; Carter, 1996), which is exactly the area in which coursebooks for college English need to be improved.

#### **1.4. Organisation of the thesis**

The thesis consists of six chapters. Chapter One gives a brief introduction to background, objectives and scope of the research and organisation of the thesis.

Chapter Two studies background, history and syllabus design of college English in the light of a survey of college English since 1977 and the revising of the 1999 version of the National English Syllabus.

College English, formerly called Service English, refers to English language courses taught to non-English majors in the universities and colleges all over China (Revising Team, 1985). College English aims to develop five different language skills to two different degrees of competence in which the top priority is given to reading, as reading has always been of prime importance in EFL in China. All the other skills of listening, speaking, writing and translating are labelled in the second category. The English learned should be regarded as a means of enabling students to exchange information in their fields of specialisation and as a solid foundation for further linguistic improvement (Revising Team, 1999). This background study reveals a fact that the National English Syllabus plays a fundamental role in the development of college English teaching in China.

Chapter Three introduces the key issues in the study of coursebooks and the development of coursebooks in college English. Reviews of the reading process and the significance of reading in college English are also discussed in this chapter.

At the present time there are four authorised coursebooks currently used in college English in universities throughout China. Though they are all in their second and third editions, their main frameworks have not been changed, and even their third editions appeared before the 1999 version of the National Syllabus. Since the major function of a coursebook is to implement a syllabus, and a coursebook is best seen as a source in achieving aims and objectives that have been set in a syllabus (Yalden, 1987), it is obvious that the existing coursebooks are unable to fulfil the requirements of the 1999 version of the National English Syllabus.

As to the nature and the process of reading, modern linguists such as Carrel, Devine & Esky (1988), Swaffar (1988) and Crandall (1995) argue that reading should be defined as information processing or as an interactive process in which a reader is actively involved in using available content knowledge and knowledge of the text structure to construct the meaning of the text. However, this is exactly what the currently used coursebooks lack.

Chapter Four focuses on a review of readability theory and readability formulae. Readability studies the factors that make a text readable. There are two types of factors involved in readability: 'outside head' factors and 'inside head' factors. The former consists of vocabulary, sentence length, organisation of a text and exercise design, while the latter is concerned with the readers themselves: their reading ability, interest, motivation and prior knowledge (Zukaluk & Samuels, 1988).

Readability should be of immediate concern to writers who need to assess the right level of their audience in order to get the most communication out of their books. Readability measures could save readers time and energy by providing information about the relative difficulty of texts.

All readers tend to lose heart if what they are reading seems to be too difficult or unfamiliar. The study of readability would seem to ensure that the right book reaches the hands of the right person at the right time (Gilliland, 1972). Since readability is widely used in English speaking countries, it is suggested to introduce readability in materials selections and coursebook design for college English. However, the term 'readability' has been expanded to both text factors and reader factors as this research is based on a text-reader model of readability.

The first part of Chapter Five is devoted to a close study of quantitative and qualitative research methods. Having compared the different characteristics between both methods, it was decided to employ both quantitative and qualitative studies but the weight is laid on the latter. In the second part of the chapter, three readability formulae are tried out as well as an analysis of the language features of the chosen texts. A questionnaire is also employed from which various enumerated results are obtained. Nevertheless, in order to elaborate and illustrate the various results obtained, four interviews are carried out. Questionnaire results and interviews are discussed in detail in this chapter.

Chapter Six proposes the criteria for materials selection and coursebook design based on confirmation of the hypothesis and positive answers to the research



questions given at the beginning of the thesis. As existing readability formulae can provide only mechanical analysis, attention should be given to other factors such as questions asked, task design and readers' interest, motivation and prior knowledge for they are as important as word difficulty and sentence complexity.

According to McRae (1991: 47) "... the level of text that can be used depends very largely on what the students are asked to do with the text, rather than on any inherent grading problems... Grading the tasks rather than the texts is vital" (McRae, 1991: 47). Melvin & Stout (1987) committed themselves to the same opinion. They commented that very often the success or failure of a text depends on the exercises accompanying it rather than on its apparent difficulty. Exercise design is regarded as an adjustment to comprehensibility, which provides coursebook writers with opportunities to experiment and explore. This chapter also discusses the strengths and the limitations of the research and possible implications for further research.

Many changes have taken place in college English since China carried out her 'open- door' policy in 1978. With the development of college English, and students' enhanced language proficiency and the change in their interests and needs, it is indisputable that new coursebooks have to be composed, and that methods and strategies for writing and designing them have to be changed accordingly.

A bibliography and an appendix are provided at the end.

## **Chapter 2. Background, History and Syllabus Design**

### **2.0. Introduction**

This chapter begins by defining college English in China, which has mainly developed after 1977. In its development, the revision of the National English Syllabus is considered the most important event, for the syllabus controls everything in college English teaching with as many as 2.5 million learners every year. The revision of the College English Syllabus merits careful consideration.

### **2.1. Definition of college English**

College English refers to English language courses taught to non-English majors in universities and colleges in China. The State Education Ministry requires every student to learn a foreign language in his university time. Every year there are approximately 2.5 million students taking the course. This is due to the fact that English plays a role as a gatekeeper to better jobs, and many people have realised the importance of English as the language of commerce, science, technology and communication at international level. Consequently, English has become the first choice for students, because there is so much written in English and so much connected with visual media in English.

### **2.2. A survey of college English since 1977**

China has a history of over five thousand years, but the People's Republic of China only celebrated her 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1999. Although English was taught in schools before 1949, it was limited to a very small scale, only in a few schools run by Christians and Catholics. In the 50's, Russian had priority because of the

close relationship between the Russian and Chinese governments. When the Cultural Revolution took place in 1966, foreign language teaching was stopped. The Cultural Revolution lasted for 10 years and it was not until 1977 that China started to have entrance exams for universities, and education resumed normal operation.

This section is devoted to the development of college English in China since 1977 with special regard to the revision of three versions of the National English Syllabus. They are a. the 1980 version; b. the 1985 and 1986 versions; c. the 1999 version.

The field of college English, like most other areas of intellectual inquiry, has made remarkable progress over the last two decades with the help of the government and the efforts of many college English teachers. To give a clear idea about the development of college English in these two decades, the writer of this paper has divided the whole period into 4 stages, namely: resurrection, improvement, advancement and making a step forward. People might have different opinions about this classification, but whether it is correct or not is not under discussion. The four stages are employed to introduce the development and the needed background, such as revising the syllabus, publishing textbooks, importing materials and methods, and other related history for further reference.

### **2.2.1. The stage of resurrection (1977-1982)**

In October 1977, the “gang of four” was overthrown, and the ten-year-long Cultural Revolution finally came to an end. However, because of its influence,

Chinese education, and especially foreign language teaching, had endured a tremendous disaster. Not many people dared to learn foreign languages for fear of being accused of “worshipping foreign things and toadying to foreign powers”. Foreign books, foreign broadcasting, and foreign equipment, anything that was related to foreign countries was forbidden. This resulted in the lack of foreign language teachers, students and textbooks - a total blank, which could hardly be filled in a few years. The State Education Ministry wisely adopted some important measures against this situation, which was of great help in resurrecting college English. For instance:

- **Including English in the entrance examination for universities and colleges:** In 1977, the subject of English in the entrance examination was only used for reference, yet, after 1980, English increased each year by 20-30 percent, and by the year 1983, English had gained the status of an independent subject.
- **Reinstating the Textbook Compilation and Censorship Board in its Post:** Enough attention was given to school textbook compilation. With the supervision of the Textbook Compilation and Censorship Board, three textbooks were published after 1978. They were by Dalian Marine Institute, Tsinghua University, and Shanghai Jiaotong University. Meanwhile, foreign books such as *English 900*, *New Concept English*, *Follow Me*, etc. were also imported.
- **Approving the 1980 version of the National English Syllabus for college English revised by Tsinghua University and Peking University:** This version of the National English Syllabus had many similarities with the one promulgated in 1962. For instance, “College English is a kind of practice

course with the purpose of training and developing students' language skills". "College English should have at least 240 hours". "College students are required to master 1400 words, to be able to read and translate articles of general science with the help of dictionaries". "Students' reading speed should be no less than 17 words per minute" (Sichuan Foreign Language Institute, 1993:176).

- **Encouraging college English teachers to use visual aids and to study teaching methodology:** Foreign equipment such as sound labs was imported as well as foreign materials and teaching methods. China Central Television even started to teach English on TV.
- **Employing Foreigners to train English teachers:** With the "Open-door policy", native speakers were recruited from overseas by Peking University, Tsinghua University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Fudan University, Zhongshan University etc. to help develop the language skills of teachers and in some cases, to introduce new pedagogical practices.

By April 1982, college English had finished its resurrection, with the foundation of the All-China Foreign Language Teaching and Research Association (ibid.).

### **2.2.2. The stage of improvement (1982-1986)**

The period from 1982-1986 is often viewed as the stage of improvement for college English. The main task of this stage was to revise the 1980 version of the National English Syllabus.

In the Conference on Foreign Language Teaching held by All-China Foreign Language Teaching and Research Association in Wuhan in April 1982, many representatives suggested the revision of the 1980 version of the National English Syllabus. In the following three years, the work of revising the syllabus became the key task for college English.

First, the State Education Ministry authorised the English Textbook Compilation and Censorship Board of Science and Engineering (later changed into the All-China Supervisory Committee for College Foreign Languages Education) to form a syllabus revising team composed of representatives from 10 leading universities. Based on the suggestions put forward at the conference, the representatives first made an investigation of 1979 university students' English proficiency, and on the demand of the society. By May 1983, they finished their first draft of the revised syllabus for undergraduates of science and engineering with four inventories (Vocabulary, Grammar, Functions and Notions, and Micro-skills) to be studied and examined unanimously by the members of the All-China Supervisory Committee for College Foreign Languages Education and the All-China Foreign Language Teaching and Research Association. After 6 changes, the revised syllabus, applicable to undergraduates of science and engineering, was approved and promulgated by the State Education Ministry of China in 1985.

As to the contents of the syllabus, please see the syllabus itself (Revising Team, 1985).

Compared with the previous syllabus, the 1985 version had the following features:

- a. It made some breakthroughs in reading and listening abilities. The reading speed was raised from 17 words per minute to 50 words per minute; while listening had, for the first time, a clear demand of 120 words per minute.
- b. The 1985 version of the syllabus also offered different objectives for different levels of students with an emphasis on the language foundation and the use of the English language.
- c. The 1985 version of the syllabus spelled out that different universities might have students with different levels of English. Even in the same university, students' English levels varied. It was impossible to set the same goal for all students.
- d. Specialised reading was a compulsory part of college English.
- e. A standard, unified test would be taken by 1987, referred to CET (College English Test) Band 4 and Band 6.

One year later, the National English Syllabus, applicable to undergraduates of Arts, was published (Revising Team, 1986). Since the latter is based on the former syllabus, and the two have a lot in common, the 1985 version is often used to refer to both.

Being a useful guide rather than an infallible directive for college English, the 1985 version of the National English Syllabus made its contribution to improving the quality and the situation of college English in that period of time.

### **2.2.3. The stage of advancement (1986-1994)**

Since the promulgation of the 1985 version of the National English Syllabus, all universities and colleges had been busy carrying out what had been stated in the syllabus. Comparing the results of CET Band 4 and Band 6 ten years ago with those of today, it is not difficult to tell the improvement in students' language proficiency.

For a long time, college English had only one objective: to develop a strong comprehension skill so that students could read and understand texts of a general nature, ignoring listening, speaking and writing skills. Learning English involved only reading texts, memorising words, phrases, and expressions, analysing grammatical structures and translating sentences. The 1985 syllabus suggested:

- To pay attention to the common core of English.
- To cultivate students' communicative ability.
- To develop students' listening, speaking, writing and translating abilities as well as their reading skill.
- To emphasise students' fluency in using English.
- To teach English in the English language.
- To use visual aids in the classroom.
- To develop extracurricular activities.

(Revising Team, 1985)

These proposals were widely accepted and the 1985 syllabus was put into effect for more than ten years. Textbooks, teaching methods and testing made considerable advances, which met the urgent need of "opening to the outside



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world”. However, in spite of all those achievements, there were always problems. For example, in the early 80’s, students read slowly, almost word by word. After 1987, the emphasis changed to fluency, while accuracy was ignored; speaking and listening have still not been given as much attention as they deserve. And because of the popularity of the multiple-choice-format in important examinations like CET Band 4, Band 6, TOEFL and GRE, test-oriented teaching and high marks were pursued, while the practical use of English was totally neglected. Many students were happy to achieve high scores by picking out the correct answer from the 4 multiple choices provided, and become keen on test-taking techniques. Very few students bothered to learn the practical use of English, because it took up too much time, though it was beneficial in the long term. To improve the situation, a further step in reforming college English teaching had to be taken.

#### **2.2.4. Making a step forward (1994 - )**

“To make a step forward” was brought up in the Conference on college English held in Daqing in 1994. College English teachers started to realise the existing problems and called for a further reform in English teaching. Besides, the 1985 syllabus had been in effect for more than 10 years. With the coming of the new century, the demand for English from society and employers was becoming increasingly strong. Both students and teachers developed a desire for further improvement of college English.

To improve the quality of college English teaching, a critical look at some existing problems is necessary:

- a. For many years, college English had concentrated more on students' receptive than productive abilities. **Receptive** refers to reading and listening; **productive** refers to writing and speaking (Cunningsworth, 1984:20). The average score of writing in CET could prove this: there was hardly any improvement. Mistakes in spelling and grammar indicated that students had a fairly weak foundation. "Deaf-and dumb English' had been improved, but not by much.
- b. Priority was given to fluency, which resulted in the fact that students were able to understand main ideas, but not details, while reading.
- c. Test-oriented teaching was seen everywhere. After all, testing is only the means, not the objective.

To solve the problems, revising the 1985 syllabus is strongly proposed for it is believed that the syllabus is the guiding principle, and that once the syllabus is revised, reform of college English will fall into place.

The syllabus issued in 1985 and 1986 had accomplished a great job. Twelve years later a new objective was to be set up to meet the demands and needs of the economic, social and educational development. In May 1996, on the conference of College English Teaching in Nanjing, the issue of revising the 1985 syllabus had reached an agreement. Representatives from 6 leading universities were nominated to undertake the job. They first investigated students' needs, interests, motivations and characteristics as well as their communication and occupational requirements. Information came from students, teachers and administrators of more than 20 universities. Over 40,000 people were involved. "The reason for all of this information gathering is to understand

as much about the students as possible prior to the beginning of the program, in order to establish realistic and acceptable objectives" (Yalden 1987: 101).

People expect a great deal of the new version of the syllabus. They hope the new syllabus can change the ideology of both teachers and students in that teaching reform involves both teachers and students. Students are the centres of learning. Teachers are responsible for instructing students in how to get knowledge instead of feeding them. The idea that English class is the only way to learn English is changing. More and more students are using computers, visual aids and other facilities in learning. Test-oriented teaching is anticipated to fade out. Productive exercises such as taking notes, writing summaries, paraphrasing and clozes which can reflect the actual English level of the students have to be more employed in classroom teaching and tests. New textbooks in achieving a balance between *knowledge about* the language, and *practice in using* the language are to be published after the revision of the syllabus.

In May 1998, a draft based on the 1985 and 1986 syllabuses was presented in the Conference on college English in Wuhan. Many changes have been made since then. At the end of December 1998, the revised syllabus with four revised inventories (Vocabulary, Grammar, Functions and Notions, and Micro-skills) was approved by the All-China Supervisory Committee for College Foreign Languages Education and the All-China Foreign Language Teaching and Research Association. In July 1999, the revised syllabus was approved and promulgated by the State Education Ministry. (For the features of the 1999 syllabus, see the syllabus).

In summary, considerable changes have taken place in college English in the last two decades. The three revisions of the National English Syllabus, the important decisions taken by administrators, and the great efforts made by teachers in their struggle to make a step forward, all have played important roles in promoting college English teaching in China. However, there is still a lot of room for improvement in college English. Teachers and students look forward to further reform.

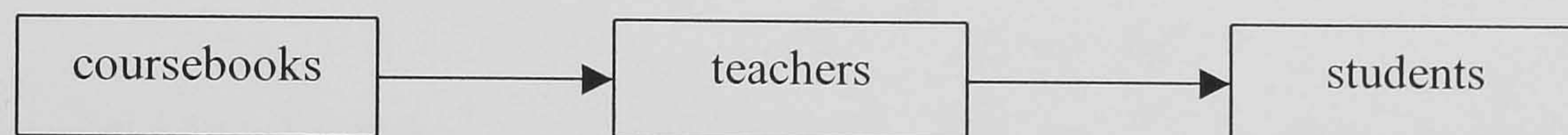
### **2.3. The need for further improvement in teaching and learning**

English language teaching still remains quite traditional in China where structural approaches have been in effect for several decades. An emphasis on grammatical accuracy and translation has long pedagogic root. In classrooms top priority is still given to teaching grammatical structures and the vocabulary of the language, which is only a “beginners’ model” (Eskey, 1973; Clarke, 1988).

It is now time to shift the emphasis from word for word reading, memorising, and passive decoding. For quite a long time, college English has been concentrating on studying grammar and structures, a methodology that provides few opportunities to use the language as a means of communication. Students only play a very passive role, and are told what to learn, how to learn and when to learn. The traditional roles of teachers’ and students’ can be illustrated in the following figure: **Figure 2-1: The traditional roles of teachers and students**



Teachers function as knowledge transmitters, coursebooks as providers of knowledge and students as recipients being passively fed. The relationships among the three can be illustrated like this: Figure 2-2:



What students are asked to do is to memorise and reproduce the knowledge in objective questions such as multiple choice or true or false questions in exercises and in examinations (Harvey, 1985; Carter & Walker 1989; Adamson, 1998). Students are expected to accept whatever is written in the textbooks and whatever teachers present to them. Such methods in English teaching have not done much to develop students' skill in interactive reading, nor in learning to learn. "Reasoning, intuitive and deductive processes are not generally made to work very hard in reading comprehension - the thinking skill is left undeveloped" (McRae, 1991: 47). As a result, students become dependent on teachers and books for everything. They do not take charge of their own learning, nor are they allowed to take any responsibility, which contradicts not

only the development of interactive reading but also runs counter to processes of cognitive learning.

According to Cotterall & Crabbe (1999), in school education, the core responsibilities of a teacher are:

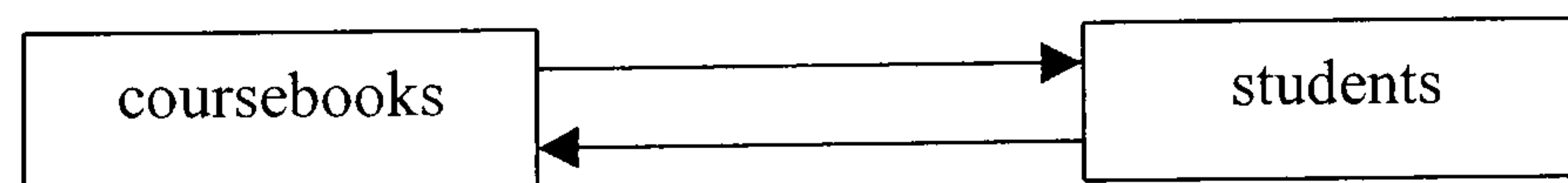
- to present
- to explain
- to encourage
- to set standard
- to assess

While the core responsibilities of a student are:

- to seek and display understanding and skill
- to apply knowledge
- to achieve standards

The reform of college English teaching lies in a change in the relationships between coursebooks, teachers and students. An ideal relationship among the three should be that students interact with coursebooks with the help of teachers.

**Figure 2-3 An ideal relationship between coursebooks and students**



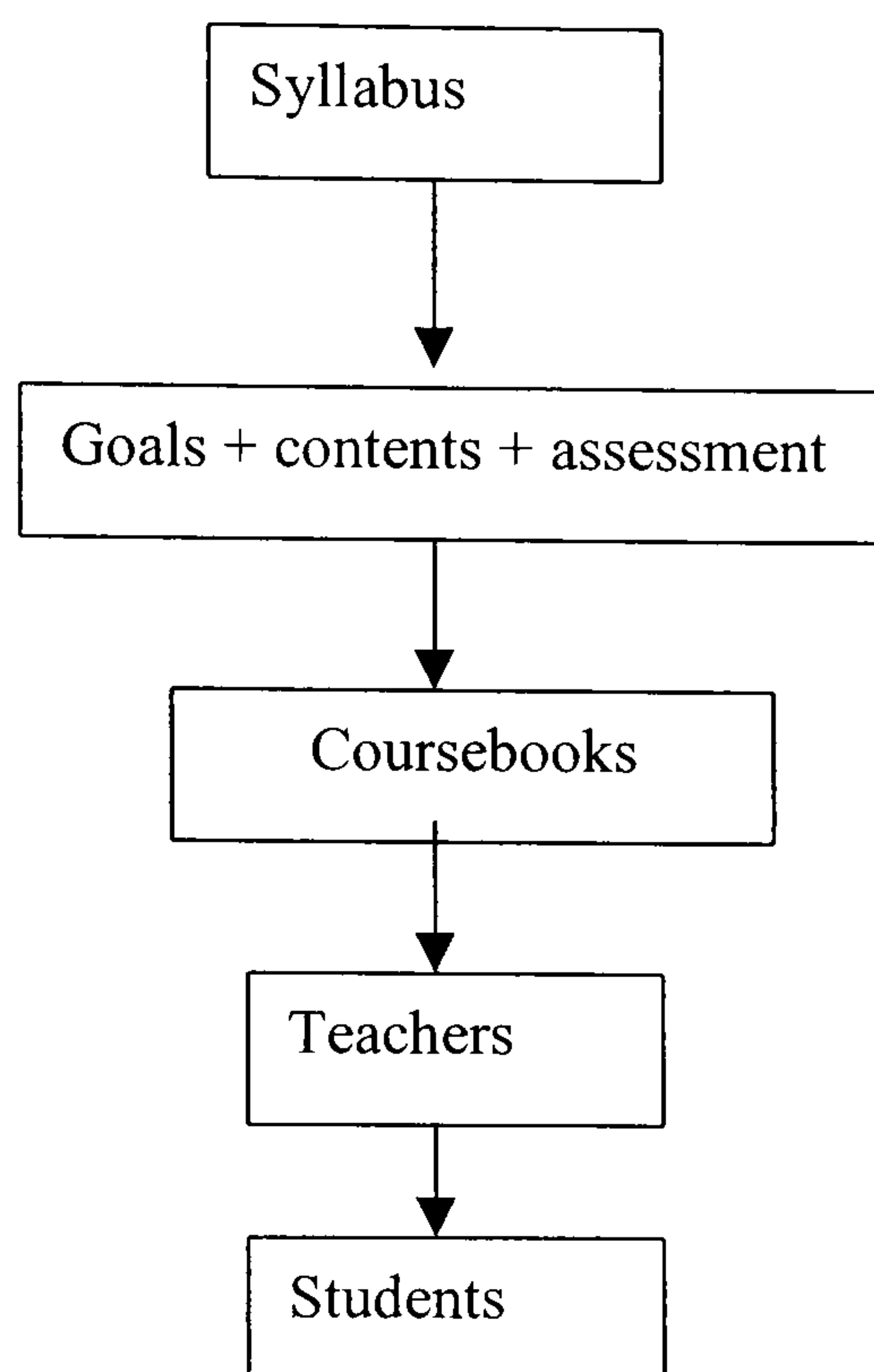
According to McRae (1991: 97), “the teachers’ role should be as an intermediary between author, text and receiver – opening up a multi-directional sphere of interaction”. The teachers are to make sure that students feel relaxed

and confident while taking in 'input' (Krashen, 1982; Krashen & Terrell, 1984). Moreover, the principal goal of language teaching is to supply comprehensible input to help students' acquisition (Ibid.). Little supports the opinion by claiming that "the principal goal of second and foreign language teaching has always been to enable learners to use the language in question as a medium of communication, defined in the broadest sense. Communicative efficiency in the target language community depends on learners having the independence, self-reliance and self-confidence to fulfil the variety of social, psychological and discourse roles in which they are cast." (Little, 1991: 27). Besides, it has been long recognised that comprehension and acquisition are not the same thing (Ellis, 1990). Therefore, a serious challenge to the traditional approaches to college English teaching has occurred.

The fact that revising the National English Syllabus has always been considered the most important event in the development of college English shows the significant position of the syllabus in the model of college English teaching which has been illustrated by the writer of this thesis as the following:



Figure 2-4 The model of college English teaching



From this figure, it is clear that the syllabus is the key factor which influences all the other elements. It not only sets unified goals, contents and assessments but also determines how coursebooks are written, how the teaching process is carried out and how the students are assessed. Therefore the key to college English improvement should lie in syllabus design.

#### 2.4. On syllabus design

Syllabus has always played a significant role in all levels of education in China. This is due to the fact that education in China is highly centralised. Though China is huge, every student from all parts of the country has to reach the same learning goals and has to be tested by the same examination. The entrance examination for universities, and CET Band 4 and Band 6 are good examples. It

is this centralisation that highlights the objectives, the contents and the function of the National English Syllabus.

#### **2.4.1. Defining 'syllabus'**

Until recently, from 1980 on, much of the literature on language curriculum has concentrated on issues of syllabus design, methodology, and materials (e.g. Yalden 1987, Nunan, 1988a). Applied linguists and second language teachers have begun to recognise that second language curriculum development consists of far more than merely deciding what to teach and how to teach it. Recent literature has given prominence to the complex and interdependent relationship of the elements, which comprise a curriculum jigsaw: policy, planning, implementation, assessment and evaluation, resource and management. (Nunan, 1990:1)

There have been confusions between 'syllabus' and 'curriculum' in both ESL and EFL. Brumfit (1984) summarised syllabus as meaning the specification of the work of a particular department in a school or college. It is organised in subsections defining the work of a particular group or class; it is often linked to time, and will specify a starting point and an ultimate goal. It is a public document and an expression of accountability.

Candlin distinguishes between syllabus and curriculum. Curriculum is concerned with making general statements about language learning, learning purpose and experience, evaluation, and the role relationships of teachers and learners. Syllabus, on the other hand, is more localised and is based on accounts

and records of what actually happens at the classroom level as teachers and learners apply a given curriculum to their own situation (Candlin, 1984).

Robertson shares the opinion of Candlin. In his view curriculum includes goals, objectives, contents, processes, resources, and means of evaluation of all the learning experiences planned for students both in and out of school and community through classroom instruction and related programs. A syllabus is a statement of the plan for any part of the curriculum, excluding the element of curriculum evaluation itself (Robertson, 1971:564).

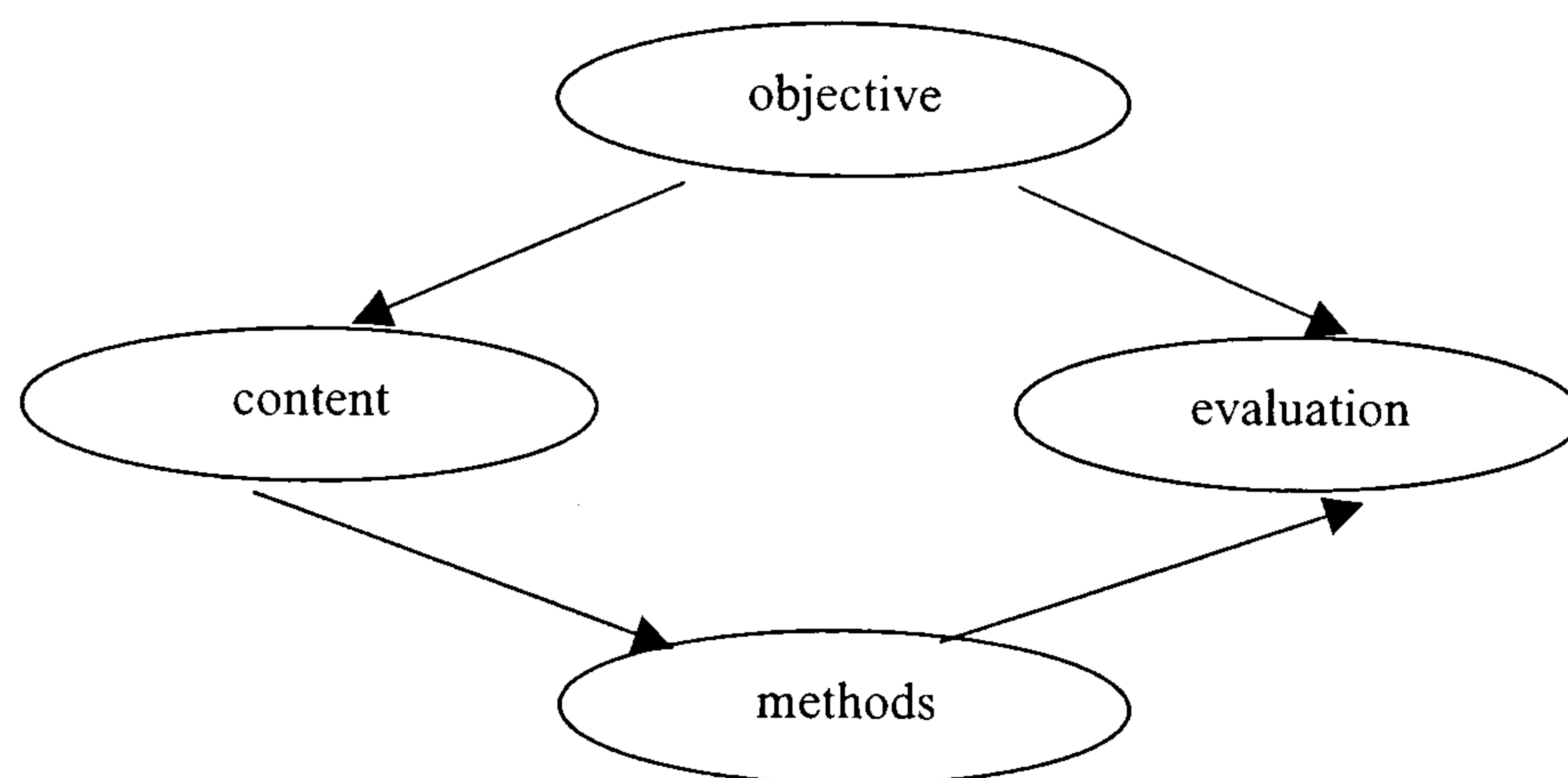
Nunan (1988a:8) clarifies curriculum and syllabus in the following way: "'Curriculum' is concerned with the planning, implementation, evaluation, management and administration of education programs. 'Syllabus', on the other hand, focuses more narrowly on the selection and grading of content." White (1988: 4) and Markee (1997:21) agreed with Nunan: 'Syllabus' refers to the content or subject matter of an individual subject, whereas 'curriculum' refers to the totality of content to be taught and aims to be realised within one school or educational system. Breen claims "Any syllabus is a plan of what is to be achieved through teaching and learning. It is part of an overall language curriculum or course which is made up of four elements: aims, content, methodology and evaluation." (Breen, 2001)

However, Nunan (1988a: 8) comments that: " In the USA, 'curriculum' tends to be synonymous with 'syllabus' in the British sense. Thus a curriculum subsumes a syllabus" (White 1988:4). Stern (1984:5-12) agrees with White in declaring

that syllabus and curriculum are more or less the same, only syllabus is used in Britain and curriculum is used in North America. A syllabus is a statement of the subject matter, topics, or areas to be covered by the course leading to a particular examination. Students and teachers consult the syllabus in preparation for an examination, and very often the teaching of a course will be strictly guided by the syllabus. Instead, in North America, the term curriculum is more often used to cover the same ground. He has the preference for this fairly comprehensive definition of syllabus because he reckons that language teaching has suffered from an overemphasis on single aspects. A wide comprehensively conceived definition can better express the view that language teaching is multifaceted and that different facets should be consistent with one another.

The writer of this paper agrees with White and Stern. 'Syllabus' and 'curriculum' ARE the same, but they are used in a more general sense like 'curriculum' rather than the rigid narrow sense of 'syllabus' in Britain. In the Chinese context, the term syllabus has been used to refer to contents, objectives, instructions, methodology, evaluation, and learning experience, the totality of content to be taught and the aims to be realised within one educational system. To sum up: a syllabus is composed of four elements, namely: objective, content, method and evaluation (Yalden, 1987; White, 1988; Breen, 2001), and the relationship among them is implicative and interactive:

Figure 2-3: Relationship of the four elements in a syllabus



#### 2.4.2. Current views on syllabus

For several decades, there has been a national syllabus for every subject in China. Yet there is an issue having been discussed in the last few years whether it is necessary to have a pre-designed syllabus to be imposed on teachers and students; if a fixed syllabus inhibits good teachers. In order to give more freedom and flexibility to institutes, their teachers and students, some courses have been constrained to fundamental requirements, which are more open and negotiable, leaving more space for individual teachers and students to be creative in class. Fundamental requirements are meant to encourage students to explore ways of learning, to interpret knowledge and to engage in all kinds of activities.

In English language teaching, linguists and teachers also have different views about whether it is practical to have a fixed syllabus. In the 1983 TESOL convention, Stern summed up the major current views (1984:7-12):

- The 'Lancaster School' has strongly reacted against the notion of a fixed syllabus which can be planned, pre-ordained, and imposed on teachers and students, no matter if the syllabus is structural or functional. They regard a syllabus as open and negotiable while teachers and students could have their interpretation and reconstruction. Candlin rejects 'a syllabus which requires learners to bank received knowledge', and to attain predetermined 'states of knowledge'. He also rejects the idea of a fixed plan, which imposes objectives, contents, and teaching methodology upon the teacher who, in turn, imposes this syllabus upon his students.
- The 'London School' argues that a syllabus is necessary; it is economical and useful. Widdowson makes a conceptual distinction between syllabus and teaching methodology. He suggests that a syllabus should be structural; it is the methodology that can be communicative. Brumfit points out that a syllabus must be based on concepts of language, language learning and language use.
- Yalden recognises the practical social necessity of a syllabus. She recognises that learners may have an input to make into the curriculum. But she is not preoccupied with the learner's role in syllabus development. The syllabus is primarily a teacher's statement about objectives and contents.
- The 'Toronto School' is not concerned with the question of the learner's role in syllabus development, but rather with how to construct a theoretically sound and practically useful curriculum.

Having studied the trends in the western world and considered the situation in China, Chinese linguists and English language teachers agreed that a national English syllabus **IS** necessary, which should serve as a guideline in all the universities and colleges.

English is different from Chinese and it is hard for Chinese learners. In the Chinese context, English is only a foreign language, nobody uses it in any communication. Therefore the language is only taught and learned and acquisition is almost impossible. It will be very practical and helpful to have a syllabus, which states what to learn and what to learn first. Though it is a compulsory subject taught in schools, English is not always treated equally with other subjects. Whenever schools lack teachers or students have difficulties, the first subject likely to be given up is English. There are also other problems like shortages of proper materials and facilities etc. A positive aspect of constraint suggests a pedagogic justification, as a syllabus provides security because it gives directions and indicates paths that both teachers and students are to follow. And to some extent, a syllabus can serve as a convenient map (Widdowson, 1984 a: 25). To guide teachers and students, the National English Syllabus has been retained and will be revised from time to time.

#### **2.4.3. Framework for revising an existing syllabus**

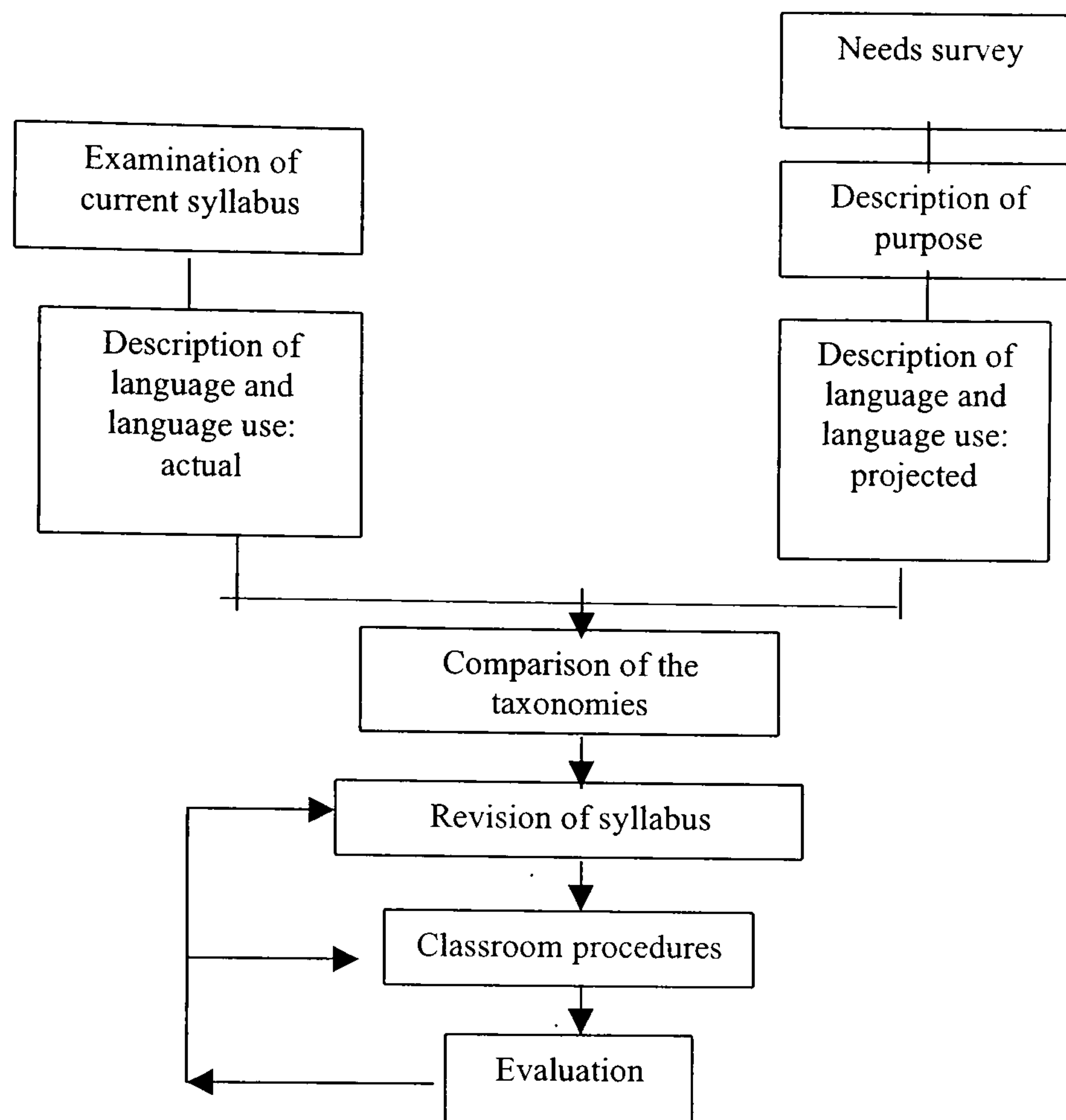
The 1999 version of the National English Syllabus has drawn upon the 1985 version of the syllabus. The situation discussed here is a revision of an existing syllabus rather than the generation of a new syllabus, so the procedures given by

Yalden in generating a revised syllabus fit the situation. The procedures she offered are shown as the following: (Yalden, 1987:99):

<b>Stage</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>I</b>	<b>Description of purpose in terms of</b>  student characteristics  student needs  language skills on entry and on exit
<b>II</b>	<b>Design of a Communicative Syllabus</b>  Phase One: examination of the existing syllabus  1. extraction of current taxonomies of  a. linguistic form  b. Lexis  c. language functions and skills  d. notions and topics  e. situations  f. other components  2. Sequencing of items thus identified  3. Comparison of current taxonomies with proposed taxonomies  Phase Two: the revised syllabus  4. preparation of revised taxonomies for the whole curriculum



Figure 2-4: Procedures in generating a revised syllabus



In revising a syllabus, one does not have to start from the very beginning. It is more a question of examining and modifying the existing syllabus than building up a whole new process. Finding out the changes that must be made in the needs survey and what has already been done and what has not been done are essential stages in deciding on modifications to the goals and objectives, content selection and sequencing. Therefore, the revising team first carried out a needs survey before they decided which part could be used as the basis and which part would have to be changed according to the new objectives.

#### **2.4.4. Questionnaires and tests in the needs survey**

In the needs survey, the revising team led by Zhejiang University did three questionnaires and two tests in 1996. The questionnaires cover:

- administrators', scholars' and teachers' expectations of college students' English for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Appendix I, Vol. II)
- graduates' actual use of English in their affiliations (Appendix II, Vol. II)
- employers' comments on graduates' English proficiency (Appendix III, Vol. II)
- The tests focused on students' English grammatical proficiency (Appendix IV, Vol. II) and their vocabulary size (Appendix V, Vol. II) upon entering universities.

Those three questionnaires and two tests have laid the basic foundation for the revision of the syllabus.

##### **2.4.4.1. Questionnaire result on administrators', scholars' and teachers' expectation of college students' English for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

The questionnaire consists of 21 questions (Appendix I, Volume II), which are classified into 5 categories:

1. the objectives for college English
2. Which skill is the most important in the coming 5-10 years: reading, listening, speaking, writing or translating?
3. vocabulary size
4. courses and contact hours

## 5. graduating students' English ability

The result from 42 administrators and 160 teachers is as follows:

1. As far as objectives are concerned, 59.5% of administrators and 61.3% of teachers suggested that College English should aim at developing students' overall language proficiency, particularly communicative ability, to meet the requirement of social and economic development.
2. As to the issue of which skill is the most important in the coming 5-10 years, administrators sequenced it in the order of listening (71.4%), reading (64.3%), speaking (61.9%), translating (47.6%) and writing (45.2%). The first three are fairly close to one another, while translating and writing are far behind. Teachers held different opinions; they put reading in the first place and the percentage was really high: reading (80.6%), then listening (49.4%), speaking (32.1%), translating (28.1%) and writing (23%).
3. Concerning vocabulary size, both administrators and teachers think that freshmen should have mastered more than 1600 words.
4. Courses and contact hours
  - a. most teachers and administrators agree that first year students should have 5-6 contact hours and second year students 4 contact hours every week.
  - b. 50% of administrators and 61.9% of teachers proposed that all students from key universities should pass CET Band 4, 50% of students should pass CET Band 6.

- c. 60.4% of people suggest that third and fourth year students take specialised English; 58.81% of people proposed speaking and writing courses.
  - d. 57.1% of administrators reckoned that materials were to be chosen in general terms, 31% insisted in specialised English, while 40% of teachers liked no limitations for material selection, 37.5% preferred materials to be selected within specialised fields.
  - e. 59.5% of administrators maintained 2 contact hours per week and 31% suggested more for third and fourth year students; but 58.1% of teachers suggested more hours.
5. Graduating students' English ability:
- Reading: 47.45% think students should be able to read general articles and academic papers concerning their own fields in English newspapers and periodicals.
  - Listening: 39.45% think students should understand conferences in their own fields and lectures on general subjects in English.
  - Speaking: 53.75% think students should be capable of expressing themselves in general conversations and topics which are familiar to them.
  - Writing: 50.5% think students should be capable of general writing such as letters, resumes etc.
  - Translating: 46.05% expect graduating students to translate literature within their own fields.

#### **2.4.4.2. Questionnaire result on graduates' actual use of English**

In this questionnaire (Appendix II, Vol. II) there are 54 questions divided into 4 categories: personal background; how students learned English in universities; how much English students use in their jobs; and how to improve their English. The following is the result from 656 graduates from different universities who are now working in different affiliations.

How students learned English: 68% had 4 terms of English; 13% had 5 or 6 terms, which indicates that very few universities have English courses through the final year. After finishing the first two years, only 29% of students took English courses; more than two thirds of students stopped learning. Discontinuity is indeed a serious problem. Only 28% of students did not take CET Band 4 and 36% did not take CET Band 6, which suggests the popularity of CET tests.

How much English students use in their jobs: 71% students hardly use any speaking; 60% hardly use any listening, but they use reading very often, especially reading instructions and technical materials in English.

How to improve their English: Students prefer to have more conversation (70%) and advanced listening (58%). Although 62% think their reading skill is good enough, still 27% want improvement.

#### **2.4.4.3. Questionnaire result on employers' comments on graduates' English proficiency in the last few years**

There are 57 questions classified into three groups: type of employers' institutions; graduates' use of English; measurements taken to improve their graduates' English (Appendix III, Vol. III). 386 employers answered the questionnaire, mainly from enterprises or companies (49%), universities and research institutes (24%), and government offices (16%). The result is as follows:

Employers expect their graduates to translate scientific materials (59%), to receive foreigners (41%), to serve as interpreters (38%), to import equipment (37%), to import and export goods (28%) and to go abroad to study (28%). Among the employers who answered the questionnaire, 90% were satisfied with their graduates' reading; 25% with their translating; but 37% were dissatisfied with their graduates' speaking; 27% with their listening; and 24% with their writing.

Concerning the importance of language skills, employers listed them in the order of: reading 91%, listening 88%, writing 88%, speaking 84%, translating 83% and interpreting 63%.

70% affiliations provided their graduates with various opportunities in further learning English.

#### 2.4.4.4. Students' English proficiency test upon entering universities

This test borrowed the placement test paper of Beijing '96 by Beijing Association of College English Teaching and Research (Appendix IV, Vol. II). 21893 freshmen from 11 chosen key universities took the examination in September 1999. The 11 universities are: Zhejiang University, Tsinghua University, Peking University, Fudan University, Shanghai Jiaotong University, Nanjing University, Harbin Polytechnic University, Jilin University, Wuhan University, Zhongshan University, and Chongqing University. The following is the result:

Table 2-1: Result of placement test of '96 freshmen in 11 key universities

School	STU-N	LS	RD	VOC	STR	V+S	CZ	TT
11	21839	10.2	25.87			15.77	7.7	59.54
10*	21282	10.14	25.28			15.74	7.68	59.39
5*	11226	11.56	27.55			16.32	8.45	63.89
6	11804	11.54	27.52			16.30	8.44	63.80
ZHJ	2636	9.86	25.54	7.08	8.62	15.70	7.51	58.61
TSH	2300	12.45	28.97	7.49	9.24	16.73	9.10	67.25
PK	2150	11.20	29.00			16.60	8.90	65.70
FD	1943	13.04	27.92	7.40	9.04	16.44	8.77	66.17
SJT	2197	11.56	26.52	7.25	8.88	16.13	8.11	62.32
NJ	538	12.20	28.44	7.57	9.20	16.77	8.68	66.09
HBP	1791	8.09	22.58	6.60	8.04	14.64	6.26	51.57
JL	1522	8.36	23.85	6.79	8.21	15.00	6.83	54.04
WH	1849	8.85	24.66	7.00	8.48	15.48	7.16	56.15
ZHSH	1821	9.72	24.21	6.72	8.37	15.09	7.39	56.41
CHQ	1949	7.00	23.00			15.00	6.00	51.00

\*Nanjing University is not included.

#### 2.4.4.5. Questionnaire result on students' vocabulary size upon entering universities

A test on students' vocabulary size (See Appendix V, Vol. II) was given to '96 freshmen in 12 chosen key universities in September 1996. They are the above mentioned eleven universities plus Beijing Aerospace University. The following is the result:

Table 2-2: Result of vocabulary size of '96 freshmen in 12 key universities

School	STU-N	V5	V5PCT	V4	V4PCT	V3	V3PCT	TT	V-SIZE
12	21839							70.60	2006
11*	21282							70.48	2001
5*	11152							73.71	2143
6	11709							73.78	2146
ZHJ	2641	17.90	89.50%	26.35	75.29%	26.38	58.62%	70.63	2008
TSH	2246	18.50	92.50%	28.76	82.17%	28.42	63.16%	75.68	2230
PK	2154							75.04	2202
FD	1915	18.31	91.55%	28.62	81.77%	28.19	62.64%	75.12	2205
SJT	2196	18.20	91.00%	27.64	78.97%	27.00	60.00%	72.84	2105
NJ	557	18.31	91.55%	28.53	81.51%	28.45	63.22%	75.29	2213
BA	1252	17.74	88.70%	25.72	73.49%	24.81	55.13%	68.27	1904
HBP	1790	17.52	87.60%	24.79	70.83%	24.32	50.04%	66.63	1832
JL	1523	17.58	87.90%	25.36	72.46%	24.98	55.51%	67.92	1888
WH	1803	17.65	88.25%	25.77	73.63%	25.34	56.31%	68.76	1925
ZHSH	1813	17.77	88.85%	23.95	68.43%	22.91	50.91%	64.63	1744
CHQ	1949							66.00	1804

\* Nanjing University is not included.

#### 2.4.4.6. Discussion of the results of the three questionnaires and the two tests

The first questionnaire reveals that around 60% of administrators and teachers agree that the objectives of college English should aim at developing students' overall language proficiency as well as communicative ability (See 2.4.4.1.). The old idea of getting information relating to one's own field is no longer satisfying. More than 80% of teachers still think reading is the most important skill, then listening, speaking, translating and writing, while administrators have



a slightly different idea. As far as vocabulary size is concerned, all the teachers and administrators hope that freshmen should have mastered at least 2000 words when they enter universities and that this will rise to 4500-5000 after the first two years in universities and will include another 1000-1500 more in the last two years. Most teachers and administrators wish that the first year students could have 5-6 contact hours and the second year could remain four hours; For the third and fourth year students administrators and teachers like at least 2 hours for specialised English. 58.81% of all the teachers and administrators prefer speaking and writing classes to specialised English. More than half of teachers and administrators insist that all students from key universities should pass CET Band 4; 50% should pass Band 6. Materials used should be general rather than focusing on students' specific fields only. Around 50% of teachers and administrators expect that graduates should be able to read general articles in English newspapers and academic papers in English periodicals. Students are also expected to express themselves in general conversations and topics relating to their majors, in general writings and by translating literature on their specific subjects.

The result of the second questionnaire (See 2.4.4.2) shows that: though they do not use speaking and listening in their everyday work, students still think listening and speaking are very important. They have a strong desire to improve their speaking and listening. Only 38% like to have more reading. The reason might be: that students started learning English by reading and, comparatively speaking, their reading ability is always better than any other skills. What is more, students are able to do reading on their own.

The third questionnaire shows (See 2.4.4.3): employers are not very satisfied with their graduates' English proficiency, particularly listening and speaking skills, so about 70% of affiliations have taken different measures to train them in one form or another.

In the first test (See 2.4.4.4.), students from six universities got more than 60 marks out of 100, and those from the other six universities got less than 60 marks. The highest is Tsinghua University with 67.25; the lowest is Chongqing University with 51.00. The test consists of five parts: listening 15%, reading 40%, vocabulary 15%, grammatical structure 15% and cloze 15%. In listening, the highest is Fudan University, 13.04, and the lowest is Chongqing University, 7 only. Four universities failed for they got less than 9 points, which indicates their weakness in listening on a large scale. In reading, Peking University is the highest, 29.00; Harbin Polytechnic University is the lowest, 22.58; only three universities failed to get 60%, which proves the students' strong reading ability. In vocabulary, it seems all the universities failed, except Peking University, which did not have the detail figure. This shows the significance of enlarging students' vocabulary. In the grammar section, only Tsinghua University, Fudan University and Nanjing University passed, which suggests that language form should not be neglected either. Cloze is a complex exercise requiring a comprehensive knowledge of the language. Very often it proves to be the most difficult in all kinds of examinations, which explains why only Tsinghua University narrowly passed it. The result illustrates that improvement has to be done in students' overall language abilities.

The second test (See 2.4.4.5) tells us that freshmen from the 12 chosen universities have a vocabulary range of from 1744 - 2230 words. All have therefore reached the requirement of 1600 words stated in the 1985 & 1986 versions of the syllabus. Half of the university students have more than 2000 words, another half are below 2000: two reached 1900, three are above 1800, only one has 1700. The average number is 1821.25 words, which is contradictory with the result of the vocabulary section in the first test. This is because in the second test, the meanings of words are given in Chinese and are listed in isolation. Chinese students are good at memorising words in this way, but not in the way language is actually used in a context. Besides 1600 is quite a low standard, it is far from satisfactory if students want to enhance their overall language abilities.

#### **2.4.5. Goals and objectives setting**

Goals and objectives for a syllabus designed to be practised in language teaching in such a huge country as China must be broad in the first place. Priority should be given to what exactly the learners want and need to achieve through the language and what the society expects them to achieve. It is true that college English has made improvements since promulgating the 1985/1986 version of the syllabus. However, because of the misunderstanding and misuse of communicative approaches, accuracy has been substituted for fluency. And because of the misleading influence of popular exams such as CET Band 4 and Band 6, TOEFL and GRE, students have concentrated on techniques which help them obtain high marks, while productive skills and the actual use of the

language have had to give away. The needs survey reveals that administrators, teachers, and employers all wish that college English could develop student's overall language proficiency as well as leading to a good command of communication. Even the students themselves have realised the gap between their high marks and their real language ability and their weakness in listening, speaking and writing. They have also developed a strong desire to catch up in these aspects. Getting information related to one's field through passive reading can no longer satisfy the students or the society. Though reading is still the most important, other skills cannot be left behind either. Therefore, the 1999 version of the syllabus has set the improved goal as: "...to develop a strong reading ability for the students and a fairly good ability in listening, speaking, writing and translating so that students are capable of **EXCHANGING** information in the target language..." (Revising Team, 1999:1).

In comparison with the former syllabus, one important change has been made from 'obtaining information' to 'exchanging information'. 'Obtaining' involves only receptive skills, while 'exchanging' engages students into more productive activities of actually using the language.

Another important change lies in differentiating the requirements of language skills. According to White (1988:68-69), in syllabuses for general purposes, the four skills have been given more or less equal weighting. In the Chinese context, there are five skills. Translating has always been listed as the fifth skill. Reading has always had the priority because reading is the input, the essence and the foundation stone of the other four skills. The traditional idea that students of

non-English majors need a 'reading' knowledge of the target language has been proved true again in the need analysis. Nevertheless, the requirements of other four skills have been changed from two levels (Listening and translating are superior to speaking and writing) into one level. This means a higher demand despite the fact that speaking has been the most difficult and most public exams at the moment contain only listening but not speaking.

#### **2.4.6. Content selection and gradation**

In selecting content for a syllabus, consideration of learners' wants, expectations and affective needs are of most value (Nunan, 1991), and the focus of content selection and gradation discloses the characteristics or features of a syllabus. For instance: a structural syllabus gives more importance to the artful selection and organisation of structures and emphasises the accuracy of language forms. A functional syllabus, however, takes communication functions as the leading element (White, 1988:47), and focuses more on getting oneself understood or on understanding what others are trying to communicate.

Form-based traditional syllabus dominated language teaching for several decades. Then attention switched to content rather than the form of the target language. Many language-teaching programmes took a notional-functional or 'communicative' syllabus as their starting point (Yalden, 1987). As a result, teachers were expected to bring into classrooms a wide variety of activities designed to promote language use, for instance: role playing, games playing and problem solving activities.

Since the 70's, the concern has changed to whether it is possible to include consideration of socially appropriate and communicative use of language as well as linguistic structure and general usage (Yalden, 1987; Nunan, 1988a). Content in syllabus has been suggested to specify both the grammatical elements learners are expected to master, and the functional skills they need to succeed in communication.

For college English in China, it is impossible to depart from the standard syllabus, which consists of a list of grammatical structures and a list of vocabulary items to be taught because of the traditional culture. Chinese teachers believe that if students gain a good command of English grammar, their communication will come in good time, therefore they often equip their students with the full range of grammatical resources and let communication come later. Of course, the specification of a certain amount of grammar and vocabulary and a certain level of skills are important, but the contemporary active use of the language deserves equal treatment. Language becomes meaningful only when it is put in context in communication. It is argued that language teaching should emphasise language use rather than the formal aspect of language (Willis, 1993; Breen, 2001). It is the aims of the education which play a fundamental role and initially determine the choice of syllabus type. If priority is given to language as product, a content syllabus will be most appropriate. If priority is given to the process of developing second language competence, a method syllabus will be preferred. The choice must be made according to the needs and circumstances of the learner. A notional-functional syllabus will be appropriate only when the aim is a limited fluency in the target language. If, however, the aim is to develop

a flexible and adaptable control over the target language, a process or a procedural syllabus is likely to be more appropriate. In the end, a hybrid syllabus or a proportional syllabus will probably result as a compromise (White, 1988:110).

#### **2.4.7. Key features of the 1999 version of the National English Syllabus**

In the early 1980's, college English used to emphasise structure. Take reading for example. The speed for intensive reading was only 17 words per minute; teachers and students spent most of their time producing perfect forms of the language. Grammatical mistakes were taken seriously. After 1985, things changed from one extreme to another. Priority was given to fluency, and accuracy was abandoned altogether. As a result students understood the main ideas but not the details while reading. The placement test in the needs survey shows that students' language form still needs to improve (See 1.3). Against this background, the revising team designed a proportional syllabus of structures and functions to balance both form and communication. The following are the key features of the syllabus:

- The change in the objectives from 'obtaining information' to 'exchanging information' shows that enough attention has been given to the productive skills of speaking and writing as a result of the needs analysis. For the first time, those two productive skills are given the same requirements as receptive skills of listening and reading. Communication is not one way only, it has been extended to two ways: to understand and to be understood.
- In theory, the 1999 version of the National English Syllabus is a combination of several types of product syllabuses. First of all, it is

traditional because it has a pre-designed content, it sets out what is to be taught and learned. Moreover, it is composed of a list of linguistic structures and a list of words. Secondly, it is structural because it emphasises teaching the structure and the vocabulary of the language, and it encourages students to make a comparison between their native language and the target language. Thirdly, it is situational because it realises that different social situations may need different features of language. Fourthly, it is functional because it gives priority to the needs of the students and takes the desired 'communicative capacity' as a starting point, and what is more, its organisation is not determined solely by grammatical considerations but takes communicative categories into account. Since it is a combination of different syllabuses, it is concerned with both accuracy and fluency.

- In practice, it combines the 1985 version of the National English Syllabus applicable to undergraduates of science and engineering with the 1986 version of the National English Syllabus applicable to undergraduates of Arts which emphasises the common core of the language.
- It stresses the importance of continuous study of college English by making objectives within two frameworks: the framework of college English teaching for general purposes and college English teaching for specific purposes. The foundation stage, including CET Band 1-4 and CET Band 5-6, is supposed to be finished in the first two years. In this stage students have 'general' courses which are composed of a large number of different types of text, concentrating on the basis of any form of language use. The foundation stage is to develop students' receptive skills (listening and reading) as well as productive skills (speaking, writing and translating), so that students have



general language skills at their disposal in the target language. The advanced stage is in the last two years of universities. Students usually have specialised English, introducing them to scientific texts in the English language relating to their professions.

- Once again it gives special attention to reading, a most important activity in any language class, because it is a source of information and a means of consolidating and extending one's knowledge of the language. This is particularly necessary in the Chinese context, where the main reason for students to learn English is to read materials on their own special subjects. Many of them may never have opportunities to speak the language.
- It pays enough attention to the productive skills of speaking and writing as a result of the needs analysis. For the first time, those two skills are treated equally with listening and translating.
- Another important decision of the syllabus is that all students have to finish college English Band 4, even if they are minority peoples and from remote areas. They may start from pre-college level, but they must accomplish all the basic requirements in the foundation stage. Otherwise they cannot start their advanced stage learning.
- Requirements of reading, listening, speaking, and writing have been raised to meet the needs of the students and the society.
- All the four inventories of vocabulary, grammatical summary, functional and notional category and language skills have been changed accordingly.
- Reading in Specialised English has been improved to Specialised English which requires not only reading, but also a balance-developed language skills such as listening, speaking, writing and translating.

As far as the contents are concerned, the 1999 version of the syllabus can be considered a well-developed and rich syllabus. However, as White stated, the more elements that are included and specified in a syllabus, the richer it is, but the richer the syllabus, the less choice is given to the teacher and learner. (White, 1988:92)

#### **2.4.8. Method and evaluation**

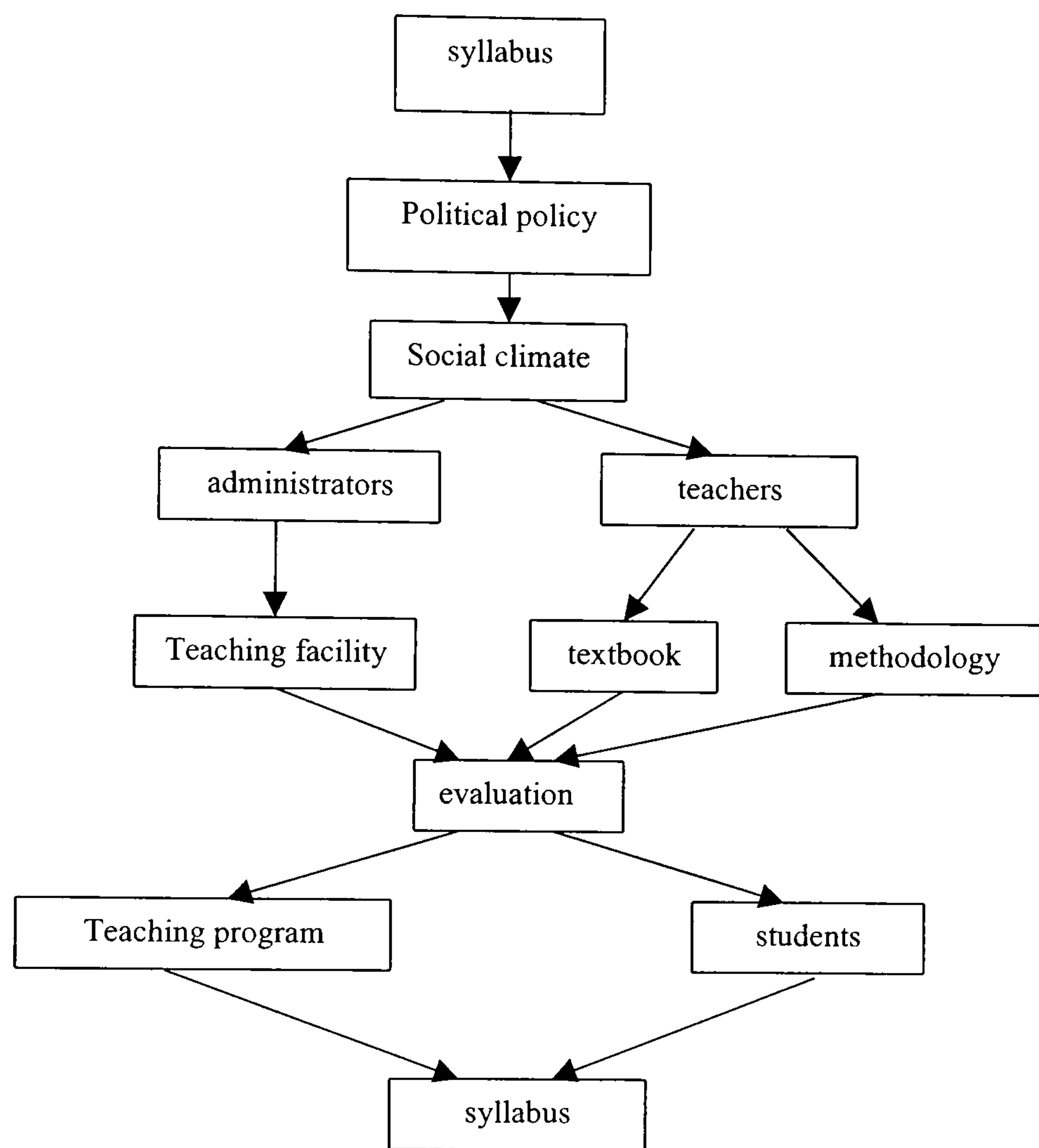
A foreign language is learned not taught. No matter how hard instructors teach, students cannot learn without practice. Furthermore, “language teaching is full of choices and alternatives, and no one is totally sure which way is right” (Dougill, 1987:29), so whatever methods are used, as long as they get students involved in actually using the language, students can approach their final goals. Traditionally, Chinese educators always encourage all kinds of methods, never restrict teaching to any methods. Besides, students are different in interest, personality and character. They should be stimulated and encouraged to arrive at the same goal through different paths. Nevertheless, it is always useful if teachers can give them guidance from time to time. It is also beneficial for teachers if they have opportunities to exchange ideas and experiences with colleagues from different affiliations. Borrowing what has been proved good to other learners is not necessarily the best way or only way for one's own students. Teachers should work out a flexible and adaptable method, which best suits their own situation and context. The new syllabus does not prescribe particular teaching methods to give freedom to teachers in conducting, supervising, and encouraging classroom interaction.

Testing functions as quality control. Through testing and its feedback, appropriate remedial action can be taken to repair failures or deficits. However, testing is only a means of monitoring, not the goal of the whole teaching, it can not and should never replace teaching. An ideal test is integrative, able to check all the skills required in a syllabus. The syllabus suggests tests to achieve a balance between reliability and validity; a balance of objective and subjective questions, involving not only grammatical competence, but also discourse and pragmatic competence.

#### **2.4.9. Some guiding principles for syllabus implementation**

Designing an appropriate syllabus is important, but devoting enough time and effort to its practical implementation is equally significant. Successful syllabus implementation comes through an awareness of the complexity of the change process and through collaboration between people at different levels of an educational institution (Brindley and Hood, 1990; Markee, 1997). "Change is a process, not an event. Bringing about any kind of educational change is an extremely long, complex and difficult business." (Fullan, 1982) The complexity lies in many factors such as: political policy, social climate, changes of administrators' belief, teachers' attitude, teaching methodology, textbooks, teaching facilities, etc. Based on what Brindley and Hood (1990) has discussed, the writer of this thesis has summed up the implementation of a syllabus in the following graph:

Figure 2-5: Implementation of a syllabus



For a change to get under way, a political recognition and a suitable social climate are necessary. China has promoted the “open-door policy” for more than 20 years, which has brought development in politics and economics. More and more foreign companies have set up offices in China. They provide jobs for graduates and open a new horizon for Chinese citizens through which an appropriate social environment for learning English has been built. However, education reform needs more support and co-operation from its own field. For instance: administrators to provide adequate funding, time, resources and skilled personnel; teachers to compile new textbooks and studying new methodology

are all required. Success takes place only when responsibilities are shared at different levels.

#### **2.4.10. Suggestions for improvement**

As it is mentioned in 2.4.6, the 1999 version of the syllabus is a well-developed proportional syllabus, which includes both language structure and function, and which emphasises fluency as well as accuracy. And it contains many elements. Therefore it is restrictedly rigid and leaves hardly any space for adaptation, improvisation and growth (White, 1988:92).

College English course aims to develop five different language skills to two degrees of competence: the first is reading ability, which deserves more attention; the second is listening, speaking, writing and translating. The four skills in the second degree should be developed equally. Students might opt for different levels of performance in the five skills, for different individuals often have different needs and wants. So it is not necessary to achieve uniformity. If some students want to develop speaking or translating to the first degree, they should be encouraged.

The syllabus intends to be a continuation of what students have learned in high school. Yet there are still many repetitions due to the strong desire of completion and perfection in systemic teaching of vocabulary and grammar, etc.

The syllabus is applicable to about 5 million students in more than 1000 Chinese universities and colleges. Though it has clarified that students should be taught

in accordance with their aptitude, the options are not enough to cover such a huge gap. Consequently some requirements might be too high for some students but too low for other students. For instance, the vocabulary requirement for Band 4 is low for some key university students, but too high for students from remote areas. Listening and speaking are high in a general term; even English majors will need to make an effort to reach such goals.

The speed for intensive reading is set at 70 words per minute, which is too specific because learners' reading speed is largely affected by the contents of reading texts and by their knowledge about the subjects. One may read articles on a particular subject very fast but slow down with articles requiring different background knowledge. And it is impossible to limit or predict reading materials in advance.

Evaluation should consist of two aspects: to evaluate or test the students in the program; and to assess the teaching as well as the overall course programme. The syllabus seems to neglect the second aspect, which is as significant as the first.

Some inventories like Functional & Notional Category and Language Skills appeal only to very limited teachers who are to write textbooks. A big majority of teachers and students tend to ignore them.

## 2.5. Conclusion

This chapter provides some information concerning background, history and syllabus design of college English in China. College English started only two decades ago but has developed fast. In its development, syllabus revision is considered most important. Therefore issues and research questions concerning syllabus design are reviewed. First the word 'syllabus' is defined in the same way as 'curriculum' in the Chinese context. 'Syllabus' here is concerned with the selection and gradation of contents as well as planning, instruction, method, and evaluation. There have been different views as to whether it is necessary to have a fixed syllabus. After a careful consideration of English language teaching in China, it is agreed that a fixed syllabus serving as a guideline for college English is necessary.

There are many different types of syllabus, according to whether they are product or process. The most discussed are structural, situational and functional syllabuses. A complete syllabus specification will include all five aspects: structure, function, situation, topic, and skills. The difference between syllabuses lies in the priority given to each of these aspects. In designing a syllabus, the starting point is to survey information about the learners' needs, wants and, occupational requirements, as well as the expectations of teachers and employers etc. This information helps formulate goals and objectives.

Three needs analysis questionnaires and two related tests were undertaken in revising the 1999 version of the syllabus. As a consequence, a combination of functional and formal syllabuses has been created to provide a satisfactory mix

of form as well as function. The new syllabus has been made a lot richer in elements and specifications. Consequently it becomes more rigid and restricted as it leaves less room for adaptation, improvisation and growth.

As the goals of a syllabus dictate major decisions in the development of coursebooks, meanwhile coursebooks enable the students to achieve the objectives of the syllabus, the next chapter will study issues relating to the study of coursebooks.



## **Chapter 3. Coursebook Study, Reading Process and Readability in Reading Coursebook Selection and Design**

### **3.0. Introduction**

The previous chapter provides information concerning background, history and syllabus design of college English in the Chinese context which lays a foundation for the study of coursebooks. This chapter first introduces the key issues in the study of coursebooks and the development of coursebooks in college English in China. Then it moves to the discussion of the reading process and the significance of reading in college English. It is hoped that the introduction of 'readability' will bring some new insight to reading materials selection and task design in college English.

### **3.1. An introduction to the key issues in the study of coursebooks**

In recent years, particularly in the last few decades, there has appeared to be apathy and even hostility to the ELT textbook in the literature. Textbooks are constantly criticised as inadequate to meet the needs of the classroom and to accomplish what the writers have claimed (Allwright, 1981; O'Neil, 1982; Hutchinson & Torres, 1994). This results from the fact that some textbooks attempt to predict the learning process of learners; others promote over-involvement of teachers and under-involvement of learners (Allwright, 1981). The danger with ready-made textbooks is that they seem to absolve teachers of their responsibility. Instead of making decisions concerning what to teach and how to teach it, teachers just sit back depending too much on the textbook, cherishing the belief that the wise and virtuous people who have produced the

textbook know exactly what is good for them and their students. Unfortunately this is rarely the case (Swan, 1992).

In spite of all the criticism mentioned above, ELT coursebooks not only have survived but also prospered in every part of the world, and their growth is still increasing. Every year millions of ELT coursebooks are sold. Generations after generations of them are coming out. Each is becoming more and more comprehensive and highly structured than the last, leaving less and less to the teacher to decide and work out, which in fact contradicts some modern theories of language teaching.

ELT coursebooks have been little studied, and books and papers on the topic are not many; yet its significance has been gradually recognised. "Textbook description and evaluation have gradually gained in importance over the last few decades, both from a practical point of view and from a research point of view" (Els & Bongaerts, *et al*, 1984). Representatives are the following contributors:

Mariani (1980) pointed out the special "love - hate relation" between coursebooks and teachers, which reveals that teachers, on the one hand depend on textbooks, and on the other hand complain that textbooks have deprived them of their freedom in lecturing. Nunan (1988c) holds the idea that language teaching should focus on the writing or adapting of materials by individual classroom teachers.

Positive comments are given by O'Neill (1982) who has listed many benefits through his experience of using a textbook in language teaching, and Hutchinson and Torres (1994) who even considered the textbook as an agent of change in language teaching reform. McDonough and Shaw (1993) are quite objective. They think a coursebook helps in teaching if one knows how to use it. They also provide some information on textbook selection and evaluation.

Completely negative comments are made by Swales (1980) and Greenall (1984). The former pointed out directly the impossibility of ESP textbooks claiming to be suitable for all students at all levels. The latter carried on the issue leading to a "coursebook credibility gap".

It is believed that to assess a coursebook is not easy (Shelden 1988). However, Cunningsworth (1984, 1995) tried to provide some practical ideas on how to analyse and evaluate published materials, as well as an easy-reference checklist of evaluation criteria. Breen and Candlin (1987) attempted to offer a guide for both materials evaluation and design. Tribble (1996), Brown (1997) and Johnson and Johnson (1998) also contributed to the evaluation of coursebook materials.

Dubin and Olshtain (1986) provided insights into design and content issues in the preparation of EFL reading textbooks. Clarke (1989a & b) discussed the relationship of communicative theory, teaching materials and the concept of authenticity. Byrd (1995) discusses textbook writing from the point of view of professional writers. Hall (1995) advocates his theory of learning in relation to

materials evaluation. Hidalgo et al (1995) propose how to write textbooks. Tomlinson (1998a) has published a collection of papers in materials development by well-known contributors to the fields of EFL. Tomlinson (1998b) also lists some theoretical principles and procedures for materials development, and outlines a framework for teachers to use when developing materials (Tomlinson, 1999).

An international materials development association (MATSDA) was even founded in 1993 by Brian Tomlinson with the aims of stimulating further experimentation and innovation, and thus to continue the research on developing high quality materials. The University of Luton in Britain designed an MA course in L2 Materials Development. All of those mentioned have contributed to the development of quality materials for learners of English as a second or foreign language.

### **3.1.1. The functions of coursebooks**

There has been considerable disagreement about how languages should be learned and taught. Some suggest exposure to the target language; others argue for actual use of the language. Some are for subconscious learning; others are for conscious attention to distinctive features of the language. Whatever argument people have, they have to agree that coursebooks are fundamental in formal language teaching, and coursebooks play multiple roles, among which are: a source for presentation materials and a source of activities for learner practice and communicative interaction.

The term coursebook is used to refer to textbooks, “which provide the core materials for a course. It aims to provide as much as possible in one book and is designed so that it could serve as the only book which the learners necessarily use during a course. Such a book usually includes work on grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, functions and the skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking” (Tomlison, 1998: ix).

The coursebook is an almost universal element of English language teaching. No teaching-learning situation is complete until it has its relevant coursebook. Coursebooks are the most convenient means of providing the structure that the teaching and learning system requires. Coursebooks have a vital and positive part to play in the day-to-day job of teaching English (Hutchinson & Torres, 1994), for they represent the visible heart of any ELT programme (Sheldon, 1988). They are not simply the everyday tools of the language teacher, they are an embodiment of the aims, values and methods of the particular teaching or learning situation (Hutchinson, 1987), and their significant roles have been recognised by both teachers and learners. A number of functions carried out by coursebooks have long been established and become well known (Dubin, 1995; Cunningsworth, 1995):

**A coursebook is an important means in implementing a syllabus.** After the formulation and specification of objectives in a syllabus (2.4), the next step in the process of designing a course is the selection of the contents for the coursebook. Coursebooks are supposed to enable the learner to efficiently achieve the objectives laid out in a syllabus (Allwright, 1981; Els, Bongaerts et

al, 1984; Yalden, 1987). Thus the preparation and compilation of new coursebooks are necessary components of a new syllabus. That is the reason why 2.4 was devoted to syllabus design. When writers start to write coursebooks, they make decisions about issues such as audience, language skills, proficiency levels and expected goals. Only a syllabus can direct them in setting their main principles, which means that the goals of a syllabus dictate the major decision in the development of coursebooks (See 2.4.5). Coursebooks must be harmonious with the syllabus they are to serve. In this case, their composers should always make sure that notions, topics, situations and language functions laid out in the syllabus have been covered as thoroughly as possible. The role of coursebooks is to aid the learner and the teacher to accomplish the tasks set for the course (Cunningsworth, 1984:14). Therefore, coursebooks are often used to maintain the consistency of a syllabus by administrations and schools (See 2.4.2).

**Coursebooks are providers of input into classroom lessons.** Coursebooks can provide a useful resource for both teachers and learners by serving as a script in the form of texts, activities, explanations and so on (Krashen, 1982; 1988; Hutchinson & Torres, 1994; Ellis, 1999). They model the target language, assign practice tasks to learners from time to time, and frequently allow learners to engage in a good deal of improvisational behaviour. They help students to learn on their own, to catch up afterwards, and to prepare for examinations, which is especially true in college English in China (See 3.1.3).

**Coursebooks function as framework or guidance to both teachers and students.** Coursebooks facilitate both teaching and learning by being easy, well organised and convenient. Teachers do not have to look for materials themselves; directions and guidance are not only there but are organised in a logical and incremental sequence order with a long term purpose for both improvement and assessment. They help organise teaching and learning inside as well as outside the classroom. As far as students are concerned, coursebooks provide them with a sense of clarity, direction and progress so that students can use them to review, to look ahead and to learn on their own (Woodward, 2001). That is why coursebooks are always treated like ‘Bibles’ in China.

**Coursebooks help to maintain a degree of standardisation across different classes or schools.** Both teachers and students need to know what is expected of them in a certain period of time in terms of content and skills. They also need to be informed of others' progress so that they can keep pace with other people at the same level.

**Coursebooks also provide confidence and security.** Coursebooks can provide teachers with useful resources because generally they are designed and written by specialists and have been improved several times before publication. Topics and contents are chosen from a variety. Exercises are designed to cater for students' needs. Indeed they provide a good map to target language learning. Even if a teacher is a novice, he or she does not need to worry as long as he/she follows a coursebook. Also coursebooks can help learners “gain confidence and

a sense of progress from focusing on a systemic series of discrete features of the language” (Tomlinson, 2001: 68).

### **3.1.2. Theoretical principles in text selection and task design**

It is true that writers of college English textbooks do not necessarily have influence upon such important matters as educational policy, objectives, duration of the course, curriculum, etc. However, the materials they select as texts and the tasks they design in their coursebooks determine to a considerable extent the daily activities in the classroom, and within the framework of the didactic cycle, they form a component by which teachers and learners are greatly influenced. Coursebooks have considerable influence over what teachers teach and how they teach (Cunningsworth, 1995; See 3.1.1).

Therefore, some contemporary linguists and researchers offer the following proposals concerning the appropriate principles for materials selection and coursebook design:

#### **Nunan (1988a) and Penafiora (1995) suggested:**

1. Materials should be clearly linked to the curriculum/syllabus they serve.
2. Materials should be authentic in terms of text and task.
3. Materials should stimulate interaction
  - a. providing greater opportunity for students to use language
  - b. creating a less stressful environment for language use
  - c. allowing students to use a greater range of language functions
  - d. encouraging students to help one another
  - e. increasing motivation to learn



4. Materials should allow learners to focus on formal aspects of the language
5. Materials should encourage learners to develop learning skills, and skills in learning
  - a. to provide learners with efficient learning strategies
  - b. to assist learners to identify their own preferred ways of learning
  - c. to develop skills needed to negotiate the curriculum
  - d. to encourage learners to set their own objectives
  - e. to develop learners' skills in self-evaluation

**Rosenblatt (1994) considered the four following aspects as important criteria in materials selection:**

1. Are the texts long enough to provide a significant length of engaged reading?
2. Are the texts varied in genre and style so as to prepare the learners for the varied experience of reading?
3. Does the content of the texts have the potential to encourage the cognitive and affective attention of the learners?
4. Could some of the texts induce a deep, personal engagement which helps the readers to live through the event of reading the text

**Tomlinson (1998a: 7-22) summarises basic principles relevant to the development of materials for the teaching of languages. Four are listed here because it seems that coursebooks in college English need to be improved in these aspects.**

- Coursebooks should have appealing content, which learners feel relevant and useful, things like students' life in the western world; how to write one's CV in applying for jobs, and who are the stars in MTV and sports etc.
- Coursebooks should require and facilitate learner self-investment. "It would seem that learners profit most if they invest interest, effort and attention in the learning activity".
- Coursebooks should provide learners with opportunities to use the target language to achieve communicative purposes.
- Materials should maximise learning potential by encouraging the intellectual, aesthetic and emotional involvement of learners. It is important to provide students with exercises and activities, which can stimulate mental and affective processing. For instance, creative exercises of problem solving, writing a summary, completing an essay, analytic exercises such as writing outlines, information transfer, evaluating activities and so on can lead to deeper and more durable learning than simple, shallow mechanical drills, and grammar rule learning. Students' learning capacity could be enhanced if they have to recall their previous experience and have to use their brain to think, the so-called "thinking skill". Meanwhile they value and appreciate more what they have accomplished through hard work.

It is assumed that with this kind of coursebook students will gradually develop their own study skills and become less and less dependent on teachers, classrooms and coursebooks so that they are able to use what they have learned in class and to explore resources outside in the real world. Details of those

principles are to be discussed in the following two aspects: factors in text selection and considerations in task design.

### **3.1.2.1. Factors in text selection**

There are several factors influencing text selection for the EFL classroom. They are summarised mainly as authenticity, reader interest as well as language difficulties (Rivas, 1999).

#### **3.1.2.1.1. Authenticity**

“Authenticity” is a notion, which has been debated among ELT teachers and researchers for decades. Authentic English is the real English that is appropriately used outside the classroom (Widdowson, 1996). Authentic texts have been traditionally written for native speakers (Rivas, 1999: 13), which are characterised by genuine time, location and people (Wong, et. al, 1995). The authentic idea develops naturally out of the communicative approach to language teaching (Widdowson, 1996) since authentic texts enable students to appreciate the use of English in the real world and broaden students’ minds so as to enrich their experience and knowledge in the learning and the use of English. “Authentic texts also provide meaningful exposure to language as it is typically used” (Tomlison, 2001:68).

In the last few years, the use of authentic materials has become common in EFL with an assumption that by using authentic materials, learners are able to achieve communication in both spoken and written forms. Authentic materials are original and intended for a real-life communicative purpose with the writer

passing a certain message on to his readers. Usually the contents in authentic materials are up-to-date and appealing to students. It is believed that through continuous exposure to such materials, students prepare themselves for their future communicative needs. Nevertheless, authentic materials are more difficult both linguistically and ideologically, as they are both original and unsimplified. Their linguistic items, such as syntactic patterns and vocabulary are not graded. Some ideological contents like belief, religion, superstition and opinion are also hard for foreign learners. Nevertheless, authentic materials are preferred because they serve to motivate and promote learners' interest in language learning. They not only provide learners with a chance to promote their linguistic and communicative competence, but also with an awareness of conventions of communication which will enable them to realise the use of appropriate styles in different communicative contexts (Bacon & Finnemann 1990).

Reading is a process in which readers practise their use of language. Many teachers and researchers strongly support the use of authentic materials in reading textbooks for college English whose ultimate goal is to enable students' to communicate effectively and to exchange information with native speakers. Students are expected to be able to 'use the language appropriately' (Williams, 1984:11). Authentic materials 'can bring students into contact with language as it is used in the culture to meet actual communication needs' (Melvin and Stout, 1987: 44). Authentic materials also allow students to experience and enjoy the rewards of learning a foreign language in their study so to increase their interest to carry on with their further learning. (Melvin and Stout 1987: 55)

Authentic materials provide learners not only with a chance to develop their linguistic and communicative competence but also with an awareness of conventions of communication, which enables them to use appropriate styles in different communicative contexts (Bacon and Finnemann, 1990). Researchers also found that interesting authentic materials are useful in stimulating students' curiosity for learning (Young, 1980: 224; Bacon & Finnemann, 1990). When students are exposed to authentic materials, their prior knowledge, interest and curiosity make it easy for them to engage with the texts (Lee, 1995).

However there are other researchers who do not favour the use of authentic texts. Widdowson (1976) claims that authenticity lies in the continuing interaction between the reader and the discourse, something which cannot be achieved in the earlier stages of teaching. Widdowson (1984a: 218) also commented that "pedagogic representation of language... necessarily involves methodological contrivance which isolates features from their native surroundings". Davies (1984), Day and Bamford (1998) advocate that simplified reading texts have the natural qualities of authenticity. A simplified text has an opposite notion to 'authenticity.' Simplified texts are written or shortened for non-native speakers. They are likely to be "specifically prepared for the teaching and learning of English" (Wong, et. al, 1995).

#### **3.1.2.1.2. Interest**

Texts have to be interesting in order to attract students' attention. If students have interest and motivation, they are likely to be able to cope with more difficult texts (Bright & McGregor 1970). According to Fortez ( 1995) if a text

appeals to students, they are likely to exert more effort to understand it. Similarly, if a text is on a familiar topic, students can more easily identify with it. Good readers have more interest and have higher motivation but poor readers deserve more care because they are likely to be damaged by the experience of failure to cope with a text (Davies, 1995). Of course, teachers can motivate students by making their foreign language reading interesting in class. By treating reading as a purposeful activity, teachers can make teaching more purposeful and classes livelier. However, if the selected texts or the exercises accompanying them are not interesting, it is not easy to motivate and stimulate the students in class no matter how hard a teacher tries.

#### **3.1.2.1.3. Language difficulty**

Language difficulties include grammar, vocabulary and structures named as text factors by Davis (1995). Text factors check:

- a. if the text selected covers the main grammar appropriate to each level
- b. if vocabulary is adequate in terms of quantity and range
- c. if the text deals with the structuring and conventions of language use above sentence level

The principal sources of texts for foreign language learners proposed by Williams (1999) are:

- texts in the language coursebook, which are generally intended to improve the learner's language by exemplifying particular structures or vocabulary items;
- texts in reading comprehension books, often aimed at improving both language and reading skills

McKay (1986:192) has extended the factors to contextual difficulties by claiming: “What is critical in selecting a text is to examine it for both its linguistic and its conceptual difficulties”.

### **3.1.2.2. Considerations in task design**

“Often the success or failure of a text depends not on its apparent difficulty but on the exercises accompanying it” (Melvin and Stout, 1987: 50). According to Willis (1996:72): “It is more realistic to grade the tasks rather than the text”. Tasks should not be used simply to ‘test’ the students, but to lead them towards an understanding of the text (Doff, 1988: 175-177). Good exercises not only check how well students have understood the text, and what needs to be more fully explained but also focus students’ attention on the main points and lead them to think about the meaning of the text.

Textbook writers should keep in mind the three following essential principles in exercises designing:

- a. Sequence
- b. Usefulness
- c. Sufficient freedom

#### **3.1.2.2.1. Sequence**

There are two levels of ‘sequence’ here. One goes ‘from the shallower to the deeper, from the easier to the more advanced’; and the other leads from

receptive skills to productive skills, which is ‘from comprehension of the material to student production’ (Melvin and Stout, 1987: 52).

The first part of activities and exercises should be clear and explicit, being based on simple language decoding, and easy to find answers from the text, which McRae (1991: 95) called ‘low order questions’. Very often, texts appear at first to be too difficult and overwhelming to students. They need guidance to realise that they are able to understand more than they actually think they do. To reduce this initial anxiety, it is of importance to design exercises that draw their attention to things they are familiar with and are within their comprehension. Given an initial success, they are encouraged to go on and are more likely to approach the text a second and third time. On the contrary, if first exercises are too difficult, students get frustrated easily, and will not continue.

Receptive skills are not as difficult to master as productive skills. After students have acquired some vocabulary, sentence patterns and the necessary grammar items, and have identified some important issues surrounding the topic, they will be prepared to talk or write about a topic similar to the one they have worked with. Productive activities are expected to grow naturally out of comprehension activities which are meant to be the basis for production in speech and writing rather than ends in themselves, as are often the case in textbooks and tests ((Melvin and Stout, 1987). Productive skills are often developed by ‘high order tasks’ and presented in subjective open-ended questions, which lead to the areas of opinion, discussion, evaluation, acceptance and rejection (McRae, 1991). They are often process-based and activity-centred, inviting students to



participate and interact. By actually participating and creating, students' interpretative and referencing skills have been developed, language awareness will have been enhanced eventually (Carter, 1996).

Usually, texts are used as an introduction or input to the productive skills of speaking, translating, writing and thinking. It is hoped that the vocabulary, grammatical structures and writing techniques used in the texts can be practised again and again so that students should have learned how to use them by the time they finish the book.

Reading starts with *pre-reading*, goes on to *while-reading* and finishes with *after-reading*.

**Pre-reading:**

The main functions of pre-reading exercises are to activate and build up background knowledge relevant to the text; help student's with their vocabulary development and to arouse students' interest (Doff, 1988; Rivas, 1999). According to McRae (1991) the pre-reading question gives precise indication of what the reader is to do with the text. Students need pre-reading support to help them overcome the difficulty of 'getting into' a text (Hill, 1997) by "introducing them to situations or a pictorial collage that generates expectations that will be useful in anticipating and predicting the content of the passage" (Papalia, 1987: 75). Pre-reading questions cannot be very numerous (Rivas, 1999).

**While-reading:**

While-reading supplies strategy and skill practice, and linguistic development, as well as helping learners to understand the writer's purpose, the text structure and the content (Rivas, 1999:16).

While-reading questions check if students understand what they have read and provide the students with a clear signpost through the next section (Hill, 1997).

Rivas (1999:16) classified three types of comprehension questions for while reading exercise:

- a. Direct reference questions, mainly practising language, rather than aiding comprehension, which can be answered without understanding the text.
- b. Indirect reference questions, which are usually employed to recognise text cohesion, where - for example- the reader has to identify in the text the words a pronoun refers to.
- c. Inference questions, which require an understanding of vocabulary, and make the reader think about the text. This helps to both check and develop comprehension.

**Post-reading:**

Post-reading exercises are those that help students consolidate what they have read as well as to relate the text to the learners' experience, knowledge, and opinions. (Rivas, 1999:18) Activities such as writing summaries and compositions, discussing information and providing facts etc are also marked as post-reading exercises according to Barnett (1989).

#### **3.1.2.2.2. Usefulness**

Activities and tasks should be ‘useful’ and ‘meaningful’, in a way not only being associated with the reading passages but also being presented with a high level of interest, excitement and importance, which encourages students to communicate and to accomplish their sense of achievement. Naturally, they will develop a need and a desire to learn afterwards. To integrate reading experiences with developing language control, reading should be continually linked with purposeful communication. Thus, to provide activities and tasks for learners to get personally involved and highly motivated by relating the texts to their own knowledge and experience becomes very crucial (Campbell, et al, 1998) in exercise design.

#### **3.1.2.2.3. Sufficient freedom**

Exercises should be designed to give students sufficient freedom to experiment with the language they possess. They should also be able to create an environment in which students feel free to express the ideas that have been stimulated by their reading and to work their way towards more valid interpretations through discussing among themselves (Papalia, 1987:81).

The Chinese have a saying ‘Fish or to fish’ which means that education should aid students to master the skills and techniques to learn rather than providing knowledge only. Littlejohn and Hicks (1996) called it ‘learn to learn’. Such activities include ‘Making an exercise Box’ and the ‘Help Yourself’ units in the workbook of *Cambridge English for Schools*. In the former exercise students

learn to make up exercises for others, while from the latter exercise students get practical ideas for learning English.

The most successful exercises are those that lead students into texts that seem difficult at first. With hints, inspiration and encouragement from exercises, students not only come to understand and appreciate what is in the texts but also develop the ability to use what is there. It is believed that the ultimate goal of learning a language is to communicate. Therefore exercises should, first of all, encourage students to use what they have learned and demonstrate their communicative skill whenever and wherever it is possible. And as suggested by Melvin and Stout (1987: 54) the design of activities can decide the success or failure of a book.

### **3.1.3. Special features of college English teaching are the prominence of coursebooks**

Because of the long-rooted history and the particular cultural background in China, college English teaching has formed the following special features:

- a. One single national syllabus controls everything: All students have to achieve the same goal no matter what level they start at upon entering the university. This is clearly stated in every version of the National English Syllabus (Revising Team, 1985; 1986; 1999), and has also been confirmed by the fact that the revision of the National English Syllabus proves the most important event in the development of college English as discussed in Chapter Two.

- b. Monolithic examinations: All students take the same exam to enter the university and the same exam CET Band 4 or CET Band 6 to finish college English required by the 1985 and 1986 version of the National English Syllabus. The 1999 version of the syllabus has been improved to allow students to take other exams as well as CET Band 4 and Band 6 (Revising Team, 1999). These exams are mainly grammar based.
- c. College English stresses teacher-centred management. Students expect their teachers to feed them with all the knowledge needed. Coursebooks serve as knowledge input and regarded as ‘bibles’ by both teachers and students; teachers function as knowledge transmitters, the only role left for the students is passive receiver (See 2.3). They are expected to accept whatever is written in the textbooks and whatever teachers present to them. Dubin’s idea (1995) that the typical role of a teacher is to be the director or guide for the students, simply does not work in the Chinese context.
- d. A lot of memorisation and rote learning is used in language acquisition (Harvey, 1985; Adamson, 1998).
- e. Intensive reading has always been regarded as the basis for all other language skills (Revising Team, 1985; 1986; 1999), which is not wrong in itself. The problem is that very often emphasis in intensive reading is laid on grammatical accuracy and vocabulary enlargement. Teachers explain items of grammar and new words and expressions that have appeared in the text. Then students mechanically practise the use of those words and expressions. Quite possibly students lose interest in a fragmented text. In the end, students have to face the awkward fact that linguistic competence does not

necessarily or automatically lead to communicative competence (Rao, 2002).

- f. Translation methodology is widely employed. A certain number of teachers employ the translation method in their teaching to save time and to make sure that students have a clear understanding of the text. Consequently translation has been considered 'classical' in the Chinese EFL context. Certainly there are also quite a number of teachers who are unable to teach in English.
- g. There has always been a lack of English teachers and teachers with lower English proficiency, especially in remote areas.
- h. Language teaching facilities are not as good as those in developed countries. The classroom is still the only place for students to learn the language. Though students of key universities have access to the Internet and CD roms, the majority of students are not exposed to these facilities yet.
- i. All college English teachers in one university use one coursebook only, taking their students through it from the beginning to the end. This is because, for one reason, the choices are not many. There are only four authorised coursebooks for college English in the whole country. For another reason, teachers do not have the freedom to create their own teaching programme, and it is difficult and time consuming to prepare materials on their own.
- j. Coursebooks are literature based, even some listening and speaking coursebooks are written in bookish English because of the lack of a language use environment (Harvey, 1985; Adamson, 1998).

- k. Published coursebooks in China are normally written by experienced and well-qualified teachers. Teachers by contrast are varied in qualification. They don't have the confidence to question the books. What has been written in published materials is always supposed to be correct and is expected to serve all the purposes in teaching.

All those factors foreground the functions of coursebooks (See 3.1.1.) which teachers and students depend on. Coursebooks are considered the only means to achieve the goals and objectives laid out in the syllabus, particularly those coursebooks that claim to be based on the National English Syllabus, and which correspond closely with course aims and syllabus requirements. Coursebooks are regarded as 'the holy bible' in the teaching and learning process. It is impossible to imagine that college English teaching in China can maintain or survive without coursebooks. As to the significance of the National English Syllabus, see Chapter 2 Section 4.

#### **3.1.4. Coursebook development in college English in China**

Russian was the only foreign language to be learned and taught in the 1950's because of the close partnership between the Chinese government and the former USSR. The study of English was considered less important. Only in the early 60's did English start to receive attention (See 2.2). The first generation of coursebooks, like *English* (for students of Arts) by Fudan University, *English* (for students of science and engineering) by Huadong Normal University, were published, but they were soon abandoned as the Culture Revolution started in 1966. The Culture Revolution lasted for more than 10 years. After 1978, China

ended her political and economic isolation and began to stress the value of English for technology, commerce and international diplomacy. “English as a foreign language became an essential requirement for study overseas and an asset in securing lucrative employment; consequently it enjoyed a renaissance among Chinese students” (Adamson, 1998:143). As a consequence, a number of college English coursebooks were published, among which three are worth mentioning: *English* by Dalian Marine Institute which started from ABC level; *English* by Tsinghua University which started with a vocabulary of 450 words, *English* by Shanghai Jiao Tong University which started with a vocabulary of 700 words. Because their starting points were all quite basic they were soon abandoned as being unable to meet the demands and interests of the students. Meanwhile China started to import foreign coursebooks such as *New Concept English, Follow Me*; as well as dictionaries like *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* and many other reference books.

In June 1985, the State Textbook Compilation and Censorship Board for College English was founded by joining the Textbook Compilation and Censorship Board of science and engineering and the Textbook Compilation and Censorship Board of Arts, to help develop materials and coursebooks for college English. In the same year, the revision of the 1985 version of the National Syllabus was finished and promulgated by the State Education Ministry. Further details have been discussed in Chapter 2 section 4.

As it is known that a coursebook is always the best and the most important means of carrying out what is stated in a syllabus (Allwright, 1981; Els,



Bongaerts et al, 1984; Cunningsworth, 1984, 1995; Yalden, 1987). Whenever there is a new version of the syllabus promulgated, teachers start to write new coursebooks to fulfil the requirements in the syllabus (See 3.1.1). So many leading universities began to compile the third generation of coursebooks. Two years after the 1985 version of the syllabus came the "period of good harvest" for coursebooks in college English. First, Fudan University, Peking University, Huadong University and People's University had their jointly produced *College English* published (Dong, 1986), which was the first coursebook based on the 1985 and 1986 versions of the syllabus. It is a package composed of five different coursebooks: *Intensive Reading*, *Extensive Reading*, *Fast Reading*, *Listening*, and *Grammar and Exercises*. Each except *Grammar and Exercises* has six volumes; Teachers' books and tapes. Not long after, *New English Course* (Yang, 1986) by Tsinghua University, *College Core English* (Yang, 1987) by Shanghai Jiao Tong University and *Modern English* produced by Macmillan and the Higher Education Press were published one after another. They are all 'package books'. The *New English Course* consists of 6 volumes of *Guided Reading* (both intensive and extensive), 4 volumes of *Comprehensive English* (listening and speaking), *Fast reading*, *Writing*, *Grammar* and *Teachers' books* and tapes. *College Core English* contains 6 volumes of *Reading and Writing*, 6 volumes of *Listening and Speaking*, *Extensive Reading*, *Extensive Listening*, *Vocabulary and Grammar Exercises*, *Teachers' books* and tapes. *Modern English* was first written by Englishmen but edited by Chinese professional teachers. It is a package, too. Though the four coursebooks had different merits and demerits, they were all written or edited by following the same official version of the syllabus (1985/1986) and shared more or less the same rationale:

- a. They try to target students of all subjects, providing a wide variety of materials with both information and interests, emphasising general English with a view to give students a solid foundation in the language for their later competence in English.
- b. Language foundation and communicative ability are considered equally important.
- c. Developing students' reading skill is emphasised more than any other skills.
- d. Texts are differentiated in style, content and source, and include articles from newspapers, magazines and academic writings, as well as extracts from short stories or novels.
- e. Many texts are authentic materials from real life with only necessary editing.
- f. They try to reflect what the students need and are interested in.

In 1988, conferences on coursebook development and evaluation were held discussing the feedback of the four above-mentioned coursebooks. After a certain period of experimentation and testing, the State Education Ministry and the State Textbook Compilation and Censorship Board for college English authorised those four coursebooks to be used in all the universities and colleges in China. Ever since then, coursebook development and evaluation received the attention it deserved, and conferences on college English coursebooks have been held every year. By the end of 1999, the four authorised coursebooks had all finished their third editions with different changes to satisfy the potential demands of both society and students (See 2.4.4).

### **3.1.5. Different requirements for reading in the two versions of the syllabus**

In comparison with the 1985 version of the syllabus, one distinct feature of the new version lies in the change from "obtaining information" to " exchanging information". This is clear in the final goal of the new syllabus and it means a shifting of the intended pedagogy and content towards a focus on communication skills or productive skills (See 2.4.5.). There are other changes, which have been made according to the needs analysis (See 2.4.4; Appendix I-V). The following two tables provide us with some idea of the different requirements for reading in the two versions of the syllabus.

**Table 3-1: A comparison of the requirements for reading in the 1985 and 1999 versions of the National English Syllabus**

	Band 4		Band 6	
Version	1985	1999	1985	1999
Speed	Int: 50wpm Ext:80wpm	Int: 70wpm Ext:100wpm	Int: 70wpm Ext:120wpm	Int: 70wpm Ext:120wpm
Amount of reading	Int: 8000-9000 Ext: 36000-40000	Int: 9000 Ext: 40000	Int: 9000-10000 Ext: 45000-50000	Int:10000 Ext: 50000
Details	Able to read texts at roughly the same level of difficulty as those in the coursebooks; acquire basic reading strategies; for fast reading, materials should be less difficult than texts with new vocabulary not exceeding 3%.  The minimum comprehension level should be 70% accuracy.	Able to read fairly difficult articles on general topics; master basic reading strategies	Able to understand more difficult articles on a wider range of topics; acquire more advanced reading strategies  For fast reading, materials should be less difficult than texts with new vocabulary not exceeding 3%.  The minimum comprehension level should be 70% accuracy.	able to understand more difficult articles on a wider range of topics; acquire more advanced reading strategies

Table 3-2: Requirements for reading skills in the 1999 version of the National English Syllabus

	Foundation Stage		Advanced Stage	
	Band 4	Band 6	Specialised English	Advanced English
Speed	Int: 70wpm Ext: 100wpm	Int: 70wpm Ext:120wpm	Int: 70wpm Ext: 100-120wpm	Int:100wpm Ext: 150 wpm
Amount of reading	Int: 9000 Ext: 40000	Int:10000 Ext: 50000	250000	Int: 15000 Ext: 75000
Details:	Able to read fairly difficult articles on general topics; master basic reading strategies	Able to understand more difficult articles on a wider range of topics; acquire more advanced reading strategies	Able to read original textbooks, reference books and other materials relating to specialised subjects, master reading strategies; fast reading materials should be less difficult than the texts with less than 3 % new words	able to understand more difficult articles on a wider range of topics; acquire more advanced reading strategies; fast reading materials should be less difficult than the texts with less than 3 % new words

The above two tables show that the requirement for reading speed and the amount of reading have been raised. Take Band 4 for example, the speed for

intensive reading has been raised from 50 wpm to 70 wpm. For extensive reading, it has been raised from 80wpm to 100wpm. The amount has been set up at 9,000 words for intensive reading and 40,000 for extensive reading. As to the topics and readability of the articles, the requirement has been shifted from “the same level of difficulty” to “fairly difficult articles on general topics”. The 1999 version of the syllabus has not mentioned the percent of comprehension accuracy because the designers realised that there was no way to measure the accuracy of comprehension. See 1985/1986 and 1999 versions of the National English Syllabus for more details. (Also see 2.4.5; 2.4.6)

### **3.1.6. The gap between the currently used coursebooks and the goals of the 1999 version of the National English Syllabus**

It is suggested by McDonough and Shaw (1993) that it is always necessary to examine the current coursebooks in order to see how far they can be integrated into the new syllabus as core or as supplementary materials. Then we can select those which suit the particular syllabus or the set of objectives that we have to work to. It is important to review all the materials which have come out during a given period of time and to require some criteria with which to assess these materials. Of course, the evaluation process is never static; when materials are deemed appropriate for a particular course after a preliminary evaluation, their ultimate success or failure may only be determined after a certain amount of classroom use.

For more than 10 years the four currently used coursebooks, *College English*, *New English Course*, *College Core English* and *Modern English*, have enjoyed

and maintained a great popularity among university students and college students. But because they were based on the 1985/1986 version of the National Syllabus and met only what was required in that syllabus, there is obviously a big gap between the currently used coursebooks and the goals stated in the 1999 version of the syllabus, which is shown in the previous section (See 3.1.6). Though the four authorised coursebooks did provide teachers and students with guidance in teaching and learning, they still have their shortcomings:

- a. All four coursebooks were written with a very strict restriction of vocabulary. Difficult words were often replaced by words given in the word list provided in the syllabus. What students learned in class bore little resemblance to the actual language in use. Even if they got high marks in the exam, they hardly had confidence in using the language outside in the real world.
- b. Information provided in the four coursebooks is out of date. As those four authorised coursebooks were first published in 1986 or 1987, texts and exercises were selected and written before 1986, and the information contained in them is no longer up to date. Though they all have second and third editions, they have not changed much, some even just changed exercises or put one more text in each unit. Words like 'e-mail', 'the Internet', and 'clone' need to be added to keep the students informed about new developments in science and modern technology.
- c. Because of commerce, coursebooks are becoming thicker and thicker, yet, the true needs of their learners have not been considered properly. For instance: in the needs analysis for revising the National English Syllabus (See 2.4.4), both students and graduates showed a strong desire for

communicative skills. Teachers, university administrators and employers have also expressed their increased expectation of their students' ability to use the language in reality. However, the coursebooks are mainly product-based, displaying mostly mechanical comprehension exercises. Any degree of involvement or interaction with the text is not mentioned, which not only contradicts recent research in language teaching and learning but also hinders the development of students' productive language skills and their awareness for language. This has been confirmed in Chapter 5 (See 5.2; 5.3; 5.4) and has been further discussed in Chapter 6 section 1.

- d. Because of CET Band 4 and Band 6, College English teaching has been test-oriented in the last 10 years. The four coursebooks have been designed with a focus on the tests' requirements, and on fluency rather than a strong foundation in the language and the practical use of the language, which restrict students' actual language use and creativity. Students are able to get high marks without mastery of productive skills, but their apparent success is only an illusion, as after the course they still cannot speak or write (See 2.2; 2.4.4; 2.4.5).

Since the major function of a coursebook is to implement a syllabus (See 3.1.1), the four currently used coursebooks should have accomplished their historical missions by now, and should have proved fairly successful. A coursebook is best seen as a source in achieving aims and objectives that have been set in a syllabus (See 3.1.1), and obviously the existing coursebooks are unable to fulfil the requirements of the 1999 version of the syllabus (Revising Team, 1999), as they were all written more than 13 years ago. Their third editions were even



published before the promulgation of the 1999 version of the National syllabus for commercial purposes. Most important of all, their pedagogy and contents in the second and third editions have remained more or less the same. For instance, they are written

Many changes have taken place in college English in the last twenty years. Despite the improvement in the 1999 version of the syllabus (See 2.4.5; 2.4.6; 2.4.7 and 2.4.8), there are also changes in students' English proficiency, as well as their needs, interests and motivation in learning; changes in expectations of employers and society (See 2.4.4). Change also has become almost endemic in ELT all over the world. The past two decades have seen a welter of new methodologies, new areas of interest, new approaches to syllabus design, new concepts and so on (Hutchinson & Torres, 1994). According to Van den Akker (1988), a highly structured written textbook has the potential to be a very effective agent of change in an educational system, as it can introduce new ideas and provide a complete picture of the changes to both teachers and learners through its formats and exercises. For instance: the new syllabus and the recently undergone teaching reform in college English pay more attention to students' productive and communicative skills, exercises such as

- prediction
- clozes
- expanding a passage
- ranking tasks
- active comprehension techniques
- producing and acting out the text etc.

can pass the message to teachers and students. These exercises may not be new in language teaching in China, but they are not at all familiar to EFL teachers and students in the Chinese context who may find them time consuming and may feel at a loss at the beginning. This has been confirmed in 5.2 and 5.3. Nevertheless, their attitudes will change once they realise that these exercises support the development in students of interpretative and inferencing skills, particularly interpretation of the relation between forms and meanings (Carter, 1996).

Coursebooks to be compiled should intend to fill those kinds of gaps both in knowledge about the language and knowledge about innovation in language teaching. "The textbook plays an important role because it dictates to a considerable extent the content and form of teaching: the textbook is structured, ideally, in such a way that it reflects the available insights, ideas, traditions, experience and research data" (Els & Bongaerts, et al, 1984.) as has been discussed in 3.1.2.

Tomlinson (1998b: 7-22) summarised a few basic principles relevant to the development of materials for the teaching of languages. Four are listed here because it seems that coursebooks in college English need to be improved in these aspects.

First, coursebooks should have an appealing content (See 3.1.2.1), which learners feel relevant and useful, things like a student life in the western world;

how to write one's CV in applying for jobs, and who are the stars in MTV and sports etc (See 3.1.2.1 and 5.2).

Second, coursebooks should require and facilitate learner self-investment. "It would seem that learners profit most if they invest interest, effort and attention in the learning activity (See 3.2.3; 3.2.4 and 4.2.1).

Third, coursebooks should provide learners with opportunities to use the target language to achieve communicative purposes (See 3.1.2.2).

Last, materials should maximise learning potential by encouraging the intellectual, aesthetic and emotional involvement of learners. It is important to provide students with exercises and activities, which can stimulate mental and affective processing (See 3.2.3; 3.2.4 and 4.2.1). For instance, creative problem solving exercises, writing a summary, completing an essay, analytic outline writing, information transformation, evaluating activities like debating with the author and so on. These can lead to deeper and more durable learning than simple, shallow mechanical drills, and grammar rule learning. Students' learning capability could be developed if they have to recall their previous experience (See 3.2.4 and 4.4.2) and have to use their brain to think, the so called "thinking skill" (McRae, 2000). Meanwhile they value and appreciate more what they have accomplished through hard work (Carter, 1996).

It is assumed that with this kind of coursebooks, students will gradually develop their own study skills and become less and less dependent on teachers,

classrooms and coursebooks, so that they will be able to use what they have learned in class and to explore resources outside in the real world. This is the main change that college English has aimed at in the past two decades. It has been realised that no reform or change can take place quickly. However, it is time to try.

### 3.2. Why reading?

The National English Syllabus promulgated in 1999 has made some changes in objectives and ways of measuring students. However, the development of their reading ability is still regarded as the foundation of other skills in College English. "College English aims to develop a strong reading ability for the students and a fairly good ability in listening, speaking, writing and translating so that students are capable of **EXCHANGING** information in the target language. College English is intended to aid students to master a method of language learning, to build a solid language foundation and to improve their abilities in artistic appreciation so that their language competence can meet the needs of the social and economic development." (Revising Team, 1999).

"To develop a strong reading ability for the students" is still the core of the National English Syllabus. First of all, books provide students with the situations in which learning takes place. "Where there is little reading, there will be little language learning" (Bright & McGregor, 1970: 52). Students have to read a lot if they want to learn. This is particularly true in the case of Chinese students' learning English. In the Chinese context, where there are not many opportunities for speaking and listening, reading has certainly become an

important activity for expanding knowledge of the English language (Harvey, 1985; Rao, 2002). Their way of learning the language is different from that of native speakers, who learn to read only after they are able to speak. This coincides with Williams (1999), who remarked that most attention, in terms of research effort and materials production, has been devoted to improving the second/foreign language reading as far as English is a second language or foreign language.

English is only a foreign language in China. Students learn English mainly through reading. Before they begin to read, they do not know the language at all. Very often they understand by reading but do not speak or write. Listening is more difficult as they do not have many opportunities for exposure to an English language environment. Most students will never have the chance of conversing with native speakers, and only by reading can they acquire the skills of the language since it is only by doing so that it is possible for them to get access to the literature, periodicals, scientific and technical journals written in the English language. Many will need these publications to assist them with further studies or in their professions; others will wish to enjoy reading in the language in their leisure time or to keep them informed about the outside world. Thus, in college English in China, reading has always been given the priority (See 2.4.4 and 2.4.5).

### **3.2.1. The importance of reading**

In the context of the importance of reading, many linguists have made significant remarks which concentrate on the following five statements:

- a. Reading is the foundation of all other skills in language learning. Good reading ability will definitely lead to a mastery of the target language. That is why reading has always been put in a very special position in the complex of all language skills whose other components are listening, speaking, writing, and translating. Reading seems to be able to interact with all the rest of the skills, encouraging them to develop, and at the same time paving the way for still higher linguistic achievement. (Strang, 1978). Reading has always been viewed as the core of the EFL instructional program, the centre of the classroom, the input for language acquisition, including vocabulary and syntactic development (Crandall, 1995). Reading is also considered the most important academic language skill by Lynch & Hudson (1991).
- b. Reading also consolidates and extends one's knowledge of the target language (Rivers, 1981). Of all the language skills, reading is the one that can be most easily maintained. Once students have learned how to read they can progress to a high level without further help from a teacher. It is through reading that students increase their knowledge and understanding of the language.
- c. Reading proficiency is regarded as the royal road to knowledge (Strang, 1978). In this modern world, all learning depends on one's ability to read literary works, to get a lot out of them and to understand them well. This is particularly true of English, as so much professional, technical and scientific literature is published in English today. Being able to read in English is in fact, essential to academic studies, professional success and personal development all over the world with English becoming more and more internationalised (Alderson, 1984). Though this is not fair, it is a fact that

everybody has to face. Reading in English helps one keep pace with new developments of science and technology and helps globalise all the countries of the world.

- d. Crandall (1995) identified reading as the single most powerful source of language input, a source that students can access in various situations, such as in class or outside class, with others or alone. Reading does not need any facilities. No matter wherever you are, if you want to read, you can always find something, a novel, a magazine, even simply a note. They are all sources and you can focus on each of them in your mind. Of course, effective reading is purposeful, and requires one to think, feel and imagine.
- e. Reading is a source of pleasure. Reading activity also functions by seeking pleasure. Reading is the ability to comprehend the thoughts and feelings of others, which distinguishes human beings from animals. Through reading people get knowledge about themselves and others (Pumfrey, 1999). Reading takes people out of themselves and out of their countries by transcending the limitations of time and space.

To sum up, reading is clearly the most important skill in language learning. In fact in many instances around the world reading is the most important foreign language skill, particularly in cases where students have to read English materials for their own specialist subject but never actually have to speak the language (McDonough & Shaw, 1993). This is the case in English teaching and learning in China. Both teachers and learners have regarded reading as a key to almost all other skills (See 2.4.4 and 5.2.3). In Chinese society, literature is seen as the prime example of writing. Therefore one of the first things a student is

asked to do is to read. In classroom teaching, it is often thought to be easier to supply a written text to be read than a spoken one to be understood. And it is often the case that the ability to read in English is required of students by their subject departments and by their future employers (See 2.4.4). This is often assessed by a test of reading comprehension. Indeed a reading ability is often all that is needed by learners of English as a foreign language as well as of other foreign languages.

Although reading is so important, and students are aware that knowing a foreign language will guarantee them better jobs, access to literature, the Internet or whatever, they are not very enthusiastic about reading because for many years reading coursebooks and reading classes were dull. Many reading texts have the unvaried flavour of the *Readers' Digest*. Teachers only focus on vocabulary and grammar, comprehension questions are too apparent (See 3.1.3 and 3.1.6). Some can even be answered without referring to the text. Deep level questions such as problem-solving, which involves thinking, are abandoned because of the test-orientation in important exams (See 3.1.2 and 3.1.3). In this case, it is not surprising that some students' motivation to improve reading proficiency is not very high, and this is a major problem for many reading teachers. To compose a high quality reading coursebook is also related to students' motivation of needing to read.



### 3.2.2. Two kinds of reading

There are two kinds of reading: intensive reading and extensive reading.

**Intensive reading** refers to extremely careful reading or exact reading, where the aim is complete comprehension of the text. The principal aims of intensive reading are to provide input and practice in the second/foreign language and also practice in reading skills and styles. Thus texts for intensive reading are generally at a language level judged to be slightly above the readers' proficiency, but packed with a great deal of meaning and information, and with a high proportion of task items, normally done with following detailed instructions and with the guidance of language teachers. The text chosen for intensive reading, in many cases, is short and various in style, often to be used as a vehicle for the introduction of new vocabulary and structures as well as culture and subject knowledge. Teachers function as directors in intensive reading.

**Extensive reading** refers to a relatively rapid style of reading, typically of longer texts which are judged to be within the language proficiency of the reader. Extensive reading is claimed to be important not only because of the view that one becomes a good reader through reading, but also because it is claimed to improve language proficiency, especially knowledge of vocabulary (Williams, 1999). Extensive reading focuses on general ideas with the aim of expanding students' knowledge about the language, supplying them with more opportunities to practise what they have learned from their teachers in intensive reading.

There should be a difference between intensive reading and extensive reading. Intensive reading provides a basis for explaining difficulties of grammar structures and knowledge of vocabulary, expressions and idioms. It also provides materials for developing greater control of the language in speech and writing (Rivers, 1981). Intensive reading is often used to illustrate to students how to get an entry into a text; while extensive reading is often done by students themselves out of class for the purpose of getting more practice. Ideally, intensive reading generates students' motivation by providing good stories and by drawing on the insights of literary appreciation so that students enhance their language learning skills by developing a desire to read more in extensive reading.

In college English teaching in China, the focus is always laid on intensive reading, which is quite understandable. The problem is that very often intensive reading classes end up in a confusion of aims: students are not being taught reading and how to develop reading abilities, but rather they are involved instead in enlarging their vocabulary and memorising collocations. They complain that they learn nothing except new words and phrases and too many mechanical drills. This is because coursebooks and classroom teachers only pay attention to vocabulary and grammar teaching (Rao, 2002) rather than teaching real reading skills. Comprehension questions after a reading text can sometimes be answered without having to look at the text at all! The essential purpose of all reading generally is to get new information, not to go over what is known already or what is inconsequential to the reader in the first place. This is clearly inadequate if intensive reading aims to teach reading skills as well as vocabulary and

grammar. It is not surprising that students feel that their imagination, creativity and interaction with the text are being suppressed due to lack of challenge and involvement in the text. Consequently, they tend to regard reading as tedious and therefore give it a low priority. Cunningsworth (1995) warned us that teaching materials or coursebooks could exert considerable influence over what teachers teach and how they do it. Grant shares the same opinion. He comments “ ... it is clear that the types of textbook you use will have a considerable influence on the way you teach and the way your students learn” (Grant, 1987: 12).

Generally, students of college English are not able to read English with ease, and they are not conscientious about reading. It is unlikely that students will want to continue to read in a foreign language after they have completed their studies, unless they have been taught to read the target language fluently, without deciphering it laboriously word by word (Rivers, 1981). However, from the needs survey for syllabus design in chapter 2 (See 2.4.4) and questionnaires and interviews in Chapter 5 (See 5.2.3 and 5.2.4), it is seen that students are motivated to learn English for different purposes and would like the challenge to 'dialogue' with writers and to interrogate texts under the guidance and encouragement of their teachers. Littlewood has confirmed this (2000:33) in his study that Asian students would not like to adopt the role of 'obedient listeners' in class and passive receivers of knowledge. If coursebooks can be improved by providing learners with various and useful texts and effective strategies to invite readers to participate and to improve their reading ability as well as language skills and knowledge, then students will develop good habits of reading and will eventually improve their English proficiency. Of course, coursebooks like this

demand not only experience in teaching but also theoretical knowledge from the writers concerning the nature and process of reading.

### **3.2.3. The nature and process of reading**

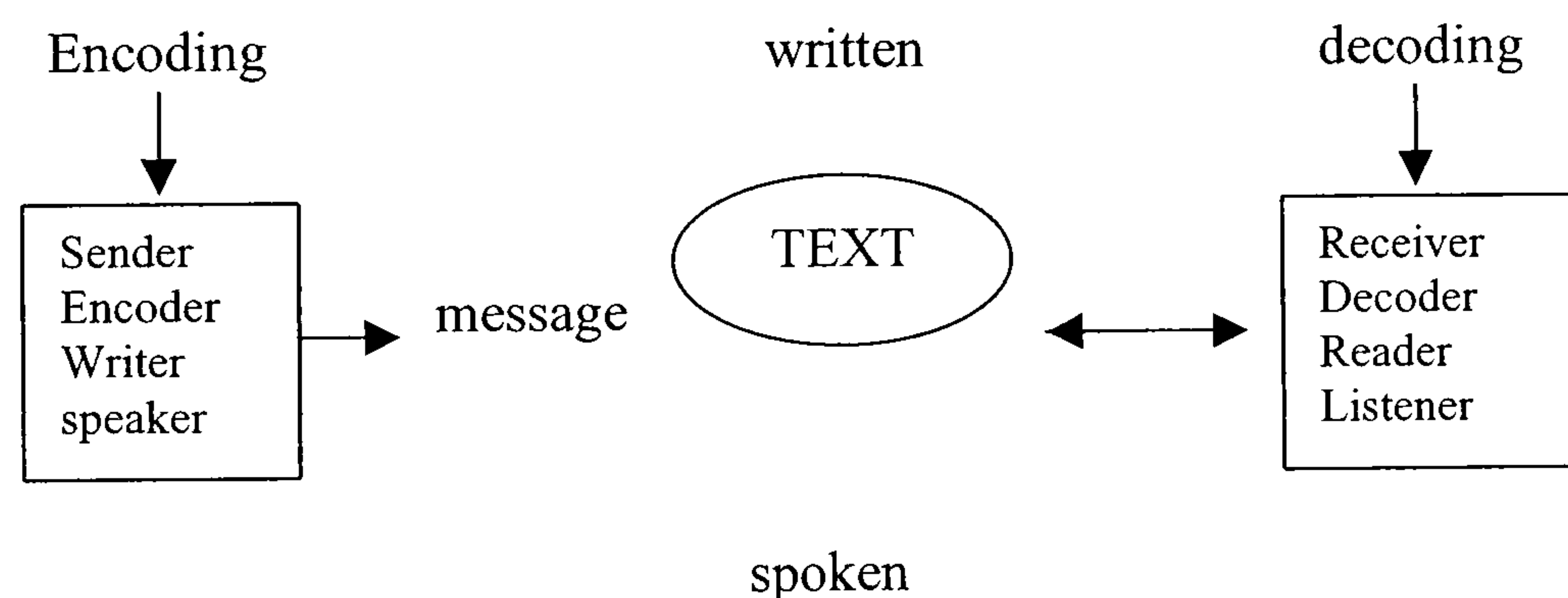
Reading is a complex process, which has been extensively studied across a wide range of different disciplines (Davies, 1995). Reading used to be regarded as decoding or as a set of context-free skills, which according to Wallace (2001) is seen as a product, with the emphasis on the form and meaning of written texts and their constituent parts. However, another orientation sees reading as a process, which “pays relatively greater attention to the role of the reader in the ongoing processing of written language and the strategies that she or he draws on in constructing meaning from text” (ibid.: 21). Examples are modern linguists such as Carrell, Devine & Eskey (1988), Swaffar (1988), and Crandall (1995) who argue that reading should be defined as information processing or as an **interactive process** in which a reader is **actively involved** in using available content knowledge and knowledge of the text structure, characterised as a “schema” (See 3.2.4) to construct the meaning of the text.

Reading undeniably and incontrovertibly involves two necessary elements: a reader and a text (Alderson, 1984; Davies, 1995; Nuttall, 1996), which will be discussed in Chapter 4 (See 4.2.1). The essential skill in reading is that readers get meaning from a printed message written by writers (Carroll, 1978; Nuttall, 1996). Reading, on the one hand, is private, because it is a mental or cognitive process in which readers follow and respond to a message from a writer. On the other hand, the reading process is a kind of communication between readers and

writers, with writers functioning as message senders and readers as message receivers. Readers react to a written text as a piece of communication by interpreting and understanding what the writer is trying to say. Readers have the purpose of decoding the printed words put together by writers with some communicative intent (Wallace, 1992). Though this kind of communication does not take place in a face to face situation, nobody can deny it is a type of communication between readers and writers.

Nuttall (1996) drew a model of the process of this type of communication:

Figure 3-1: **Process of communication between readers and writers**



From a psychological point of view, the process of reading includes all that goes on between intake and output. Intake refers to the stimulus of the printed words while output refers to the readers' response to what they have read in the following order:

- a. Visual reception
- b. Perception
- c. Conceptualisation
- d. Higher levels of association

To be more specific, a reader first has to recognise the author's meaning. Then he/she uses his/her previous knowledge to evaluate the soundness of the author's ideas, to research valid conclusions, and to gain new insights and interests. In doing this, his/her feelings naturally enter into the decisions regarding whether to accept or to reject the ideas read. As a result, he/she will use those enlarged patterns of association in his/her further reading and thinking (Strang, 1978).

Nuttall (1996) pointed out that the overriding purpose of reading is to get meaning from a text, which sounds simple and direct, but as a matter of fact has several levels of requirements:

1. the ability to recognise the meaning of unfamiliar words
2. the ability to derive literal meaning from sequential words and their grammatical relations to each other in sentences, paragraphs and chapters
3. the ability to recognise the author's intent and purpose, to interpret his thoughts, to pass judgement on his statement, to distinguish between facts and opinions etc.
4. the ability to derive implications, to speculate about consequences and to draw generalisations not stated by the author.
5. the ability to appreciate the writing, which contributes to personal development and social welfare.

The first two levels focus on text characteristics, while the next three levels are readers' factors in terms of 'readability' which will be introduced in Chapter four (See 4.2). The higher the level of the reading materials, the more

challenging it is to the readers. To get a better understanding of a text, readers very often need to turn to their previous knowledge, as will be seen again in 4.2.1.

In recent years, an increasing number of ELT materials have encouraged close interaction between the reader and the text. They no longer treat the 'text as object', but rather focus on the 'text as process' (McDonough & Shaw, 1993).

The relationship between the reader and the text is as follows:

**Figure 3-2: Relationship between the reader and the writer in 'Text as Process'**



Rather than:

**Figure 3-3: Relationship between the reader and the writer in 'Text as Object'**



This kind of relation emphasises the readers' role as 'participants' in the interaction between reader and writer (Davies, 1995). Readers are likely to interact with the texts and to involve themselves in the social contexts of what they read while engaging in various kinds of reading tasks in the real world. Besides the experience of reading also provides an opportunity to explore and relate to a world wider than one's own (See 4.1.1). In this sense reading extends social, cultural and academic horizons and is determined by, and gives rise to, affective responses to the text as the reader interacts with the writer.

Consequently, those social, affective and cultural factors play a major role in influencing the readers' selection of texts, their interaction with the text and their concepts of themselves as readers.

According to Alderson (1984; 2000), factors that affect the nature of reading can be categorised into two: the reader and the text. The reader factor refers to aspects of the person doing the reading that have been thought or shown to have an effect on the reading process and the product of reading, while the text factor looks at those aspects of the text to be read that are of significance. This will be further discussed in Chapter 4.

Recent innovative coursebooks emphasise reader factors in the reading process by inviting and encouraging readers to “see through language”, to think how the language works and how it means. This kind of reading involves readers with implications and spurs them to move beyond the text to make critical and cognitive links with their own experience. Wells (1991) Hasan (1996) Carter and McRae (1996) Carter (1997) McRae (1996, 2000) and Wallace (2001) all noticed the acquisition of this processing skill, which McRae named “the fifth skill – thinking” (McRae, 2000). He points out that “think” requires higher interpretation skills and involves a refining of three levels of awareness in cognitive terms, namely: language awareness, text awareness and cultural awareness. Campbell et al (1998) claims that this ‘awareness’ encourages good communication between people from different cultural backgrounds and helps learners to enrich their knowledge of different cultures.



Readers need to develop a capacity to evaluate and respond to the choice of language on the part of the producer in a more open system of lexis and register rather than the more closed system of syntax. This is more rewarding as it leads to a greater appreciation of the text. According to Carter (1996), students are more likely to appreciate and understand texts if they are invited to actively participate in the process of meaning-creation.

"Projective reading" is a term used by Grant (1987: 61) to refer to the skill of 'reading between lines or beyond lines'. Grant also pointed out that the skill has the advantage of relating the reading passage to real life - and in particular to student's own opinions, knowledge, imagination and experience. By constructing meanings rather than simply responding to an already complete artefact, students would get more enjoyment. Of course, their enjoyment depends on how much background knowledge they have accumulated, which is classified as 'schema theory'.

#### **3.2.4. Schema theory**

Schemata refers to personal responses assimilated by experience, attitudes and emotions in the process of constructing an interpretation, which are often explained as cognitive structures, according to Rumelhart (1980) and Zuckerman & Samuels (1988). Schema theory attempts to account for the consistent finding that what readers know affects what they understand. Schemas, or schemata as they are sometimes known, are seen by Alderson (2000) as interlocking mental structures representing readers' knowledge. They have also been described as

'cognitive constructs which allow for the organisation of information in long-term memory'. (Widdowson, 1983).

Widdowson (ibid.), Cook (1989) and Wallace (1992a) all emphasise the cognitive characteristics of schemas which allow readers to relate incoming information to already known information in the reading process. By schemata, they mean the whole range of knowledge of the world, from everyday matters such as the fact that full English breakfast consists of toast, sausage, bacon, eggs, beans, orange juice etc. to very specialised knowledge about gravitation, and cloning.

Schemata can be classified into two categories (Carrell 1983; 1988: 103): formal and content

**Formal schemata** stand for background knowledge of the formal rhetorical organisational structure of the text or simply knowledge of language.

**Content schemata:** stand for background knowledge of the content area of the text and knowledge of the world.

**Formal schemata** should be associated with a deeper form of understanding, sometimes called 'reading between the lines.' Students must learn to detect mood and intentions as well as factual detail. These elements are conveyed by the syntactic and lexical choices of the writer, which devolve from selected register, or level of language and stylistic devices (Papalia, 1987:74). It is true that

reading can be difficult if readers do not know the language of the text, for example: too many unknown words or unfamiliar grammar structures. However, even if readers do not have any language problems, reading may not be necessarily easy, because “reading comprehension entails more than knowledge of vocabulary and syntax” (Papalia, 1987:74). Language used in a text is not the only factor in making material difficult. As reading is an interaction between the readers and the text, efficient comprehension also requires prior knowledge about the subject and related cultural background stored in the minds of the students known as content schemata.

**Content schemata** refer to the related experience and knowledge readers have about the subject. If readers are familiar with the subject, they can recall and activate more knowledge about the subject and as a result it will lead to successful reading and vice versa. Reading comprehension involves more than language skills and reading strategies. It also requires factors such as schema availability and schema activation. Culturally unexpected behaviour or attitudes or values may well increase its inaccessibility to students (Melvin and Stout, 1987: 50).

Johnson (1982) has argued that a text on a familiar topic is better recalled by ESL readers than a similar text on an unfamiliar topic. Carrell (1988) demonstrates through a number of empirical studies that the absence of the content and formal schemata appropriate to a particular text can result in processing difficulties with that text. The use of culture and background knowledge definitely contributes to students' learning process (Nelson, 1995).

Brown and Yule (1983) also argued that background knowledge could guide and influence the comprehension process.

Two different but potentially related types of skills are needed in effectively comprehending a text. One is proper language skill specified as bottom-up processing, which decodes individual linguistic units and builds textual meaning from the smallest units to the largest, and then modifies pre-existing background knowledge and current predictions on the basis of information encountered in the text. The other is efficient knowledge named top-down processing, which predicates about the text based on prior experience or background knowledge, and then checks the text for confirmation or refutation of those predictions (Spiro, 1979). Reading processing takes place with appropriately decoding the content of vocabulary and the syntactic structure of a given text (Carrell, 1988; Eskey, 1988).

Corson (1990) pointed out that the central issue that has dogged research in reading has been the debate between the so-called 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' theorists. The 'bottom-up' position gives more importance to the decoding of letters, words and stretches of discourse in arriving at a text's meaning. In contrast the 'top-down' position sees reading comprehension as largely assisted by pre-existing schemata that generate predictions in the reader about the upcoming text (Wallace, 2001).

Good reading is a more language-structured affair than a 'guessing-game' proposed by Goodman (1971), and successful comprehension cannot be

achieved without decoding. Rapid and accurate decoding of language is fundamental to any kind of reading and especially crucial to second and foreign language reading. “Good readers know the language: they can decode, with occasional exceptions, both the lexical units and syntactic structures they encounter in texts and they do, for the most part, not by guessing from context of prior knowledge of the world, but by a kind of automatic identification that requires no conscious cognitive effort...” (Eskey, 1988: 96). However, Hudson’s (1982) research revealed that efficient knowledge of the subject could often compensate for lower proficiency levels in language.

Generally speaking, poor readers tend to over rely on processes in one direction, perhaps more on top-down processing, though both their bottom-up recognition skills and their top-down interpretation strategies need improvement. Fluent skilful readers do not stick to one mode of processing; they shift whenever it is needed, according to a particular type of texts and reading situation (Spiro, 1979). They employ both skilful decoding and relating the information obtained to their prior knowledge of the subject and the world. Thus fluent readers are characterised by both skills at rapid, context-free word and phrase recognition as well as at higher cognitive levels, intelligently using appropriate comprehension strategies. Fluent and accurate reading can result only from a constant interaction between the two processes. (Eskey, 1988). Therefore a balanced approach focusing sometimes on language development (vocabulary, syntax, etc.) and sometimes on reading strategy practice is highly recommended (Williams, 1984; Rivas, 1999).

Poorer readers depend more on the text in comprehension for the lack of relevant knowledge structures to utilise in top-down processing (Carrell, 1988: 103). And causes for the over reliance on text are often caused by the absence of subject knowledge and cultural background. Eskey (1988: 99) expressed his point of view as following: “A major virtue of the interactive model, however, is that it does direct our attention to both the top-down and bottom-up skills that fluent and accurate reading demands.”

Many investigators believe that schemata form an organised framework of knowledge... which guides the processing of new information and enhances comprehension (Carrel, 1983; Papalia, 1987). Researches on schema theory have proved that a combination of both bottom-up and top-town processing modes is the most efficient processing of text, if they are able to function interactively, as Rumelhart (1977, 1980). Carrel, Devine and Eskey (1988: 4) named it “an interactive approach” to language reading. Other writers such as Rosenblatt (1978), Iser (1974, 1978, 1980), Holland (1975), Eco (1979), Fish (1980), McRae and Boardman (1984), McRae (1991), Carter and Long (1991) and Hirvela (1996) all acknowledge readers’ role in interpreting the text, though to different extent.

In the reading process, inferencing and prediction of meaning in the top down skill help to facilitate comprehension. However, Papalia (1987:70) warned us to be aware that if too many inferences are required, the text may also seem difficult and comprehension may well become arduous.

Schemata explain the reason why reading something written by someone in a language with different cultural assumptions can be difficult (McDonough & Shaw, 1993). In conclusion, reading English for learners can be problematic not only because of linguistic difficulties, but also because of the fact that assumptions or schemata do not match up. The process of reading is very complex. The reading skill is not learned all at once. It takes a considerable amount of time. Furthermore, the process of learning to read is not simply a slow motion imitation of mature reading progress. It has numerous components, and each component has to be learned and practised (Carroll, 1978).

### **3.3. Current ways of selecting reading materials for coursebooks in college English**

In foreign language teaching or learning, both teachers and students have to realise that it is impossible to teach or learn everything, even if there were no limits to the time available. The reality in college English is that there is a very limited number of contact hours, about four to six hours per week in the first two years and two to three hours in the second two years of university study (Revising Team, 1999). This makes it imperative that texts in coursebooks should be well chosen and that exercises should be well designed and well written. Since the National English Syllabus controls everything in college English (See 2.3), it is essential that the course content be selected in such a way that it enables the students to do what is specified in the objectives of this official document. To achieve this, coursebook writers should be guided in the first place by the objectives that have been formulated in the syllabus together with a number of external factors, such as students' level, available time for the

course, teaching methods, learning circumstances, students' way of learning etc. According to Els (Els, et al, 1984), these external factors are of considerable importance to the selection process as well.

Coursebooks writers in college English have always been trying to do this. The problems are:

- They have been following the syllabus too rigidly and stiffly, particularly the requirements of vocabulary size, reading speed and reading amount, at whose expense 'some stimulus of cognitive and responsive processes' (McRae, 1996) was lost. Texts are chosen for informing the students, not for processing and interacting, which slowly strangles the interests and motivation of the students, as is seen in 3.1.4.
- All the currently used coursebooks claim to have a good variety of articles, however all the texts have been chosen mechanically according to the requirement stated in the syllabus, without any flexibility or creation. As a result texts appear more or less the same in length, in quality and in characteristics. No matter how good they are, students get bored by their homogeneity. For instance, most of them are argumentative and explanatory. There are some stories, but not many. Poems, advertisements, jokes, puns, newspaper headlines, and other texts which have rich elements of literariness inherent in them, and which invite readers to interpret (Carter, 1996) are avoided for being too short, containing no grammar items and no new vocabularies.
- The current ways of selecting texts are solely based on the intuition and experience of the writers themselves or the combined intuitions and



experience of their colleagues. It is not deniable that some coursebooks with texts chosen out of intuition and experience have proved to be successful, but it should be borne in mind that college English is dealing with a huge audience of as many as 2.5 million students. This naturally brings into question the efficiency and validity of a process of text selection which is determined only by the writers' intuition and experience. For such a massive readership, it is suggested that some theoretical consideration be taken into consideration.

- The success of the four authorised coursebooks of college English is closely related with the development of college English. In the late 80s' when the four authorised coursebooks were first published, the most urgent and important aim was to get students on track, to help them develop some language ability, no matter whether it was receptive or productive, as they had no language foundation nor any ability at all. Things have improved a lot. Nowadays students are fairly strong in receptive language skills but poor in productive language skills (See 2.2 and 2.3). They have developed a desire for enhancing their productive skills such as speaking and writing. The same demand has been required from the society in general including of course teachers, university administrators and employers (See 2.4.4).

Therefore, it is suggested that the intuition and experience of established teachers are necessary in selecting texts and materials for coursebooks. Besides this, some theoretical considerations should also be taken into account; for instance, the employment of readability theory in selecting texts for

coursebooks. It is believed that readability can provide some objective insights in materials selection and exercise design.

### **3.4. Readability and objectivity in reading materials selection**

Fortez (1995) emphasised the significance of materials selection in coursebook design by saying "Selecting input text is one, if not, the most essential aspect in the entire process of preparing and writing instructional materials. Text selection involves a considerable amount of time and effort on the part of the writers in searching for, reading, and gathering materials for the book while at the same time critically evaluating the appropriateness of these materials."

College English has only a very limited amount of hours available for teaching (Revising Team, 1999). However the objectives set out in the official document - the National English Syllabus are not much less than those set out for English major students who spend four years of their university life focusing entirely on learning the English language (See 2.4.5 and 2.4.6). In this case a choice has to be made by selecting those language forms which will enable the learner to carry out the tasks described in the objectives as efficiently as possible. In other words, selection of course content entails a conscious choice of those forms which are considered most 'useful', 'suitable', or 'important', given the objectives. In making such a choice, coursebook writers for college English are currently guided by their intuition and experience only, as is discussed in the previous section. It has been acknowledged that a number of well-known materials writers followed their intuition and that this led to the development of valuable materials. "In general, however, one will feel the need for a firmer basis, and

one will therefore start looking for more objective criteria that could be used as guidelines in making a selection." (Els & Bongaerts, et al, 1984). Several criteria have been developed for materials selection. For instance: the learners' proficiency, their interests and the degree of difficulty of a text, known as its "readability". Readability is not only determined by the number of words and structures known, but also by things such as the subject matter, the way in which the writer approaches the subject, and the knowledge the learners already have about the subject (ibid.).

It is true that "coursebook assessment is fundamentally a subjective, rule-of-thumb activity, and that no neat formula, grid or system will ever provide a definite yardstick. " (Sheldon, 1988), but still teachers and students are persistently searching for ideal coursebooks knowing that "No textbook or set of materials is likely to be perfect" (McDonough and Shaw, 1993). This awareness actually encourages coursebook writers to make very careful selection of texts. Texts to be used in coursebooks should not only reflect closely the aims, methods and values of the teaching programme, but they also should be at the right level so that students do not get frustrated by too many new words or bored by too easy sentences or content.

As readability has been studied and used as a yard stick in providing empirically validated information about the actual effects of different types of language learning materials, it is proposed to introduce the theory of readability in materials selection and coursebook design for College English. However, the readability used here does not only consist of readability formulae which

measure word difficulty and sentence length. Rather, the term is used on a more extended scale, it covers language features as well as readers factors.

### **3.5. Conclusion**

The last two decades have witnessed many controversies concerning the issue of whether it is necessary to have a coursebook in foreign language teaching. Though often being criticised, coursebooks have not only survived but have also prospered year by year. More and more linguists and language teachers have started to study the development of coursebooks and to evaluate them. This is because coursebooks have played and will always play a dominant role in foreign language teaching. Their functions include an important means of implementing a syllabus, the provision of input, guidance for both teachers and students etc. Those functions are highlighted against the special features of college English in China, in which priority has always been given to reading. As reading is the foundation of all other language skills as well as the royal road to knowledge, the core of college English is the development of a strong reading ability for the students.

The reading process is influenced by two factors: the reader and the text. In recent years, an increasing number of ELT materials have encouraged close interaction between the reader and the text. They have emphasised the reader's role as 'participant' in the reaction between reader and writer, and have invited the reader to "see through language", to think how the language works rather than what it says, to examine how it means rather than simply what it means. McRae named the acquisition of this processing skill "the fifth skill – thinking"

(McRae, 2000), which requires higher language interpretation and capability but definitely leads to a deeper understanding of the text.

The current methods employed in materials selection for coursebook composition are mainly a result of the unaided experience and intuitions of a number of well-known writers, which has resulted in the development of valuable coursebooks. However, some firmly-based objective criteria such as the theory of readability are believed to be able to improve the validity and efficiency of the texts selection and exercises design for coursebooks in college English. Therefore, the next chapter is going to study the theory of readability.

## Chapter 4. Readability and Readability Formulae

### 4.0. Introduction

As the significance of the theory of readability in materials selection and exercise design has been introduced in the last chapter, this chapter reviews major principles and development of the theory. Factors that affect readability in a text and how readability is conventionally measured are discussed as well. Decisions on parameters or specific factors in readability which influence materials selection and coursebook design for college English in China are to be carefully studied from the point of view of coursebook writers.

### 4.1. Readability

Klare (1978: 248-274) summarised that there were possibly three ways of estimating whether a particular piece of writing is likely to be readable to a particular group of readers:

- a. **Guess work:** Experienced writers and teachers often make estimates of readability based on feedback from readers, which has been pooled with the experience of colleagues together with the opinions of the students. Because it does not involve any statistics, it is completely subjective. Therefore, its validity and reliability is usually questioned.
- b. **Testing:** A comprehension test is often needed for a precise index of readability. The test covering the material is intended to determine readability. Many reading experts argue that cloze tests in the form of multiple choice can also be regarded as a valid and reliable measure for assessing readability (Bentley, 1985).

- c. **Using readability formulae:** Readability formulae use counts of language variables to predict probable difficulty in a piece of writing, which does not involve actual participants.

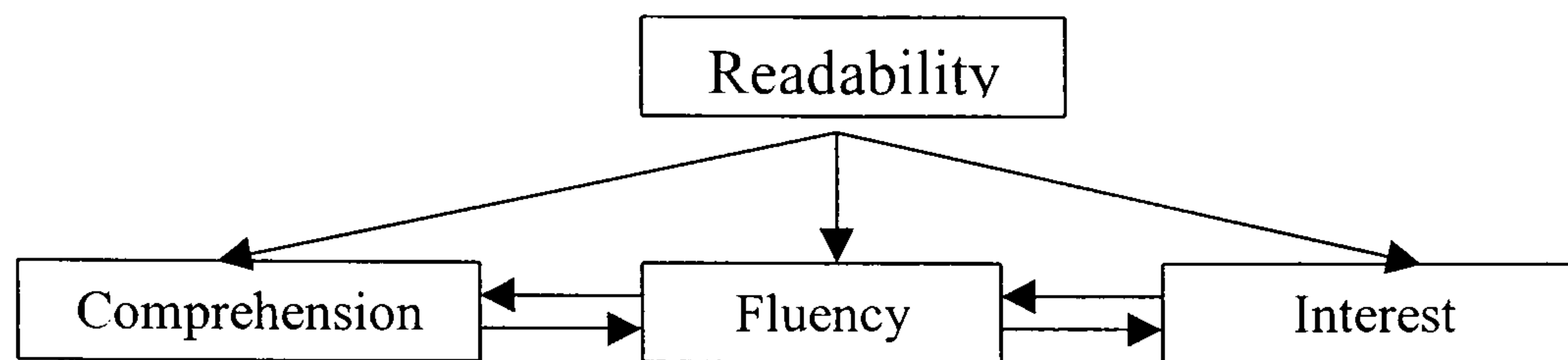
Of the three solutions, the first two are often considered and employed when limited numbers of readers are involved. Readability formulae are more likely to be preferred in cases where there is a large population of readers and there is a large amount of reading materials being published and available, as readability formulae have been devised statistically to predict difficulty of reading materials. This is exactly the case of college English in which there is a huge readership of 2.5 million students every year, which explains why the third solution of using readability formulae is recommended in materials selection in college English in the Chinese EFL context. As to the special features of college English, see 2.2; 2.3 and 3.1.3.

#### **4.1.1. Definition of readability**

Dale and Chall (1948) defined readability by stressing three aspects of the reading process, namely comprehension, fluency and interest. They maintained that readability is composed of the sum total of the above mentioned three elements within a given piece of printed material. All three affect the success which a group of readers have with the materials. Success is the extent to which readers comprehend it, read it at optimum speed and find it interesting. Rather than being separated, the three actors interact with one another to influence readability, with the main emphasis always given to such elements as words,

phrases, sentences, structures and subject knowledge, which lead to comprehension:

Figure 4-1: **Relationship of the three factors in readability**



English and English (1958), in their dictionary, defined readability as the quality of a written or printed communication that makes it easy for a given class of people to understand its meaning or that induces them to continue reading. This definition focuses only on the text itself, and neglects other components of readability, such as reader's interest, motivation, fluency and so on. Consequently, it is less cited and used than the one mentioned above.

Klare (1963) claimed that the term 'readability' has come to be used in three ways:

1. To indicate legibility of either handwriting or typography.
2. To indicate ease of reading due to either the interest-value or the pleasantness of writing.
3. To indicate ease of understanding due to the style of writing.

According to Klare, a lot of research has centred on the ease of comprehension due to the style of writing, and this has become very common with the widespread publicity of readability.



Mclaughlin (1968) emphasised the characteristics of the reader as well as the degree of compellingness of the text by arguing that readability studied the degree to which a given class of people find certain reading matter compelling and, necessarily, comprehensible. He believed that the characteristics of the reader was a necessary factor in determining readability because the reader would not carry on reading unless he understood and was interested.

Gilliland (1972) defined 'readability' as the study of matching the reader and the text. In other words, readability has to deal with the reader as well as the text, and studies the extent to which books are read with profit and the extent to which the reader and the text are matched.

Harrison (1980) refines the notion of 'readability' in relation to children's abilities and motivation, and in relation to a number of aspects of books such as: legibility of print, illustration and colours, vocabulary, conceptual difficulty, syntax and organisation. He claims that there are two senses for the definition of 'readability'. In the first sense which is more general, 'readability' is an attribute of a text, referring to whether or not it is interestingly and attractively written, and easy to understand. In the second, more technical sense, the study of readability relates to the systematic examination of a wide range of factors that in combination have been found to be associated with the interest and difficulty levels of texts (Harrison, 1999).

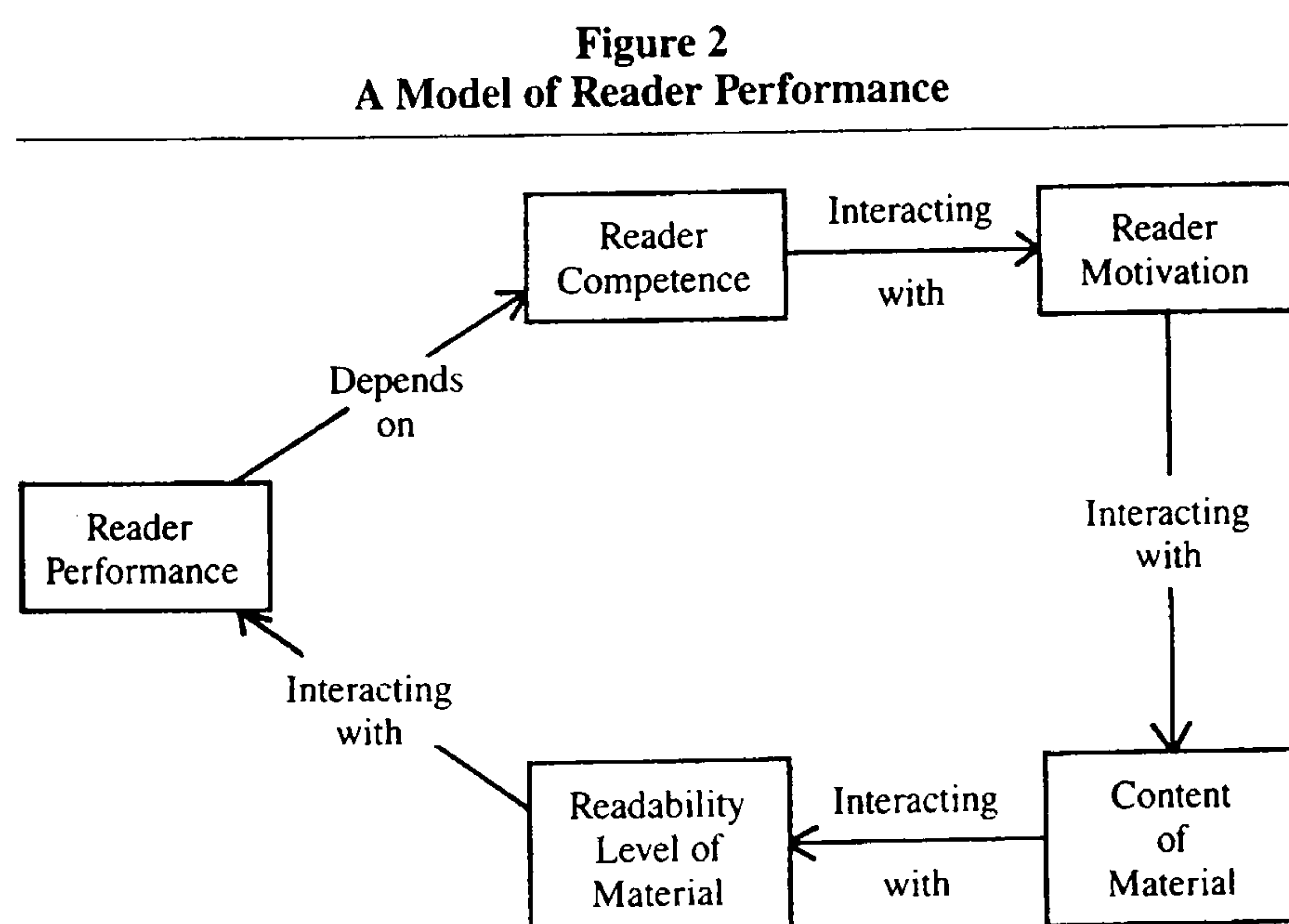
Nuttall (1996) shares the opinion of Harrison. He agrees that readability is often used to refer to the combination of structural and lexical difficulty. Nuttall also

concedes that a readability index provides only a rough guide, because it cannot take account of a reader's knowledge and interest. This indicates his recognition that the interest and knowledge of the reader are also essential in determining readability (See 3.2.3; 3.2.4; 4.2.1).

Bentley (1985) regards "readability" as an attempt to match the reading level of written material to the 'reading with understanding' level of the reader.

From the summary Klare (1988:29) offers on the elements that influence the performance of a reader in the reading process, it is seen clear that reader's performance depends on competence, motivation and prior knowledge, since the reading process involves both the reader and the text. This is discussed in the previous chapter (See 3.2.3 and 3.2.4). The process of reading will be left uncompleted if readers' factors are not taken into account.

Figure 4-2: A model of reader performance



Again, the figure supports the idea that the reading process is in fact an interactive communication taking place between the reader and the writer (See 3.2.3). “In the 1980s and 1990’s the role of the reader shifted” (Wallace, 2001: 22) so that readers are now described as ‘active’ and ‘interactive’. Readers are creating and negotiating meanings within a particular text. “Writers’ intentions may not be privileged over readers’ interpretation” (ibid.).

The writer of this thesis prefers the definition that includes elements from both the reader and the text. She holds the idea that readability studies the factors that make a text readable or the ways of judging if materials or texts are difficult to a certain group of readers. The two elements are of course related to each other. Without the potential reader, it is impossible to tell if a text is easy or difficult, and vice versa (See 3.2.3 and 4.2).

There are people who would like to substitute the term of *readability* with *legibility*. Harrison (1980) insists on using the term of *readability*, as he thinks *legibility* is more confusing and would like to use the term *readability* to refer to the constellation of text factors that determine whether a reader will be likely to find a book attractive, interesting and comprehensible. *Legibility* sounds more physical and is unsuitable to carry the connotation of such reader’s factors as reading ability, interest, background knowledge, motivation etc.

#### **4.1.2. Importance of readability**

“Learning to read is difficult for most people and complete mastery usually requires years of practice” (Crain & Shankweiler, 1988: 167). Reading in a

foreign language is even more difficult because there is not much time, nor many opportunities to practise, for instance, college English in a Chinese context (See 2.2; 2.3 and 3.1.3). Thus it is important and necessary to predict the difficulty of materials/texts for potential readers. It is well known that readers with limited reading ability will always become discouraged if they are given texts which are beyond their comprehension. Similarly, even competent readers will be frustrated if they are restricted to simple repetitive texts. So to apply “readability” properly in preparing and selecting materials for a variety of readers means making sure that they are neither too difficult nor too easy. This will guarantee sufficient reading and understanding of the text, and will consequently improve the reading ability of the readers.

Linguists such as Clarke (1989b) and Bacon & Finnemann (1990) all reckon that the outcome of learning is definitely affected by learners' perceptions. If a text is too difficult or too dull, it can be frustrating because learners will lose confidence; it will not help either if the text is too simple. Widdowson (1980) maintained that proper interaction between materials and learners will not occur unless learners can respond appropriately to the materials. If the materials to be read are far beyond the reading ability of the potential readers, response and comprehension can never take place. The communication between the senders and the receivers can only be achieved if there is an agreement between the material writers' intentions and the learners' interpretation. Learners need certain language ability and prior knowledge in interpreting and communicating with writers as has been studied in 3.2.3.

All readers tend to lose heart if what they are reading seems to be too difficult or unfamiliar. The study of readability ensures that the right book reaches the hands of the right person at the right time (Gilliland, 1972). Readability has been widely used in a variety of situations where estimates of text complexity are thought to be necessary, but so far is only popular in native English speaking countries.

According to Gilliland (*ibid.*), the subject of readability should be of interest and value to a variety of people:

- A. Writers, who are directly concerned about readability, because they need to assess the right level of their audience in order to get the best out of their books. Measures of readability can offer them a means of testing the efficiency of their communication. Readability should be of immediate interest to textbook composers for they should be able to predict if the texts they are writing are easy or difficult for a certain group of students.
- B. Publishers, who might also profit from some knowledge of the results of readability studies. This will help them to control difficulty levels in materials for different readership groups.
- C. Readers, who could save time and energy if readability measures provide information about the relative difficulty of the texts to be read. In today's world, people are facing an ever increasing flood of printed materials, and a choice has to be made when they read since it is impossible to read everything.

- D. Teachers, who consider readability a good guide that helps them select from a variety of contents, styles and difficulties. It also helps them organise materials that are suitable for their students.
- E. Librarians, who are involved in the process of selecting and organising reading materials for use by others. They are another professional group who benefit from the readability studies.

The writer of this dissertation attempts to apply readability criteria in selecting and designing coursebooks for college English in China. There is a huge readership of about 2.5 million students in college English. For those seeking to write textbooks for such a big group of students, it is of particular value to find some theory that can provide a systemic basis on which to judge the appropriateness of reading materials or texts. It is hoped that readability criteria will assist in assessing the difficulty of a text, especially those which can be measured objectively. If this is the case readability can provide more objective standards or guidelines than guessing by experience.

Almost all the texts in currently used coursebooks in college English have been chosen by coursebook composers according to their intuition and experience or through the pooled experience of their colleagues (See 3.3). Intuition and experience are necessary but should not be the only yardstick. This is because though teachers' individual judgements or combined judgements are generally reliable and consistent, individual teachers vary a lot in their estimates of the age at which an average reader can read a particular passage with understanding (Klare, 1975; Harrison, 1977, 1980). For this reason some procedures which

would predict, in a reliable way, the difficulty of a text are needed. A teacher's professional judgement, even their pooled judgements, are not enough. This does not mean that teachers are unreliable assessors of text difficulty. The problem lies in the students who come from different parts of China. They are different in English proficiency. Even students from the same university do not have the same language ability. Therefore, "what seems to be needed is a more objective method of predicting text difficulty" (Harrison, 1979), something which extends the teachers' judgement and makes it more reliable. Readability study is assumed to be able to fill the gap, as it has the advantage of objectivity, in that it assigns a numerical value to linguistic variables. Nuttall (1996) finds the readability index useful by simply comparing new texts with familiar ones for the right level.

#### **4.1.3. Previous history of readability**

Although Gilliland (1972) did not give a clear statement as to when the study of readability started, he pointed out that the desirability of ensuring a close match between the reader and books by various forms of systematic assessment was acknowledged even at the beginning of this century. The study of the research for factors in the text that could be easily counted and incorporated into objective measures has been recognised for some time. Chall (1988: 2; Stembrouck 1988; Harrison 1999) confirmed that the more recent history of readability began in the 1920s. Actually the serious study of readability originated in the USA (Harrison (1999) in 1921 with a man named Thorndike who published *A Teacher's Word Book of 10,000 words*. The book pays close attention to the vocabulary used in school textbooks, and results in careful

consideration of whether the books then in school were too difficult for the pupils. In the 1930's, readability studies started to be employed in journalism and mass communication. Readability formulae were devised after that, with an average of approximately 10 every year.

Klare (1963) classified the development of readability formulae into four general periods:

1. The development of early formulae, 1921-1934
2. The development of detailed formulae, 1934-1938
3. The development of efficient formulae 1938-1953
4. The development of specialised formulae, 1953- 1959

Gilliland (1972) made some comments on the different focuses of those four different periods. For instance: in the first period, early series of formulae were produced which used vocabulary range, and the number of prepositions or polysyllabic words to measure readability. They were applied generally but could give only approximate ratings of difficulty. In the second period, the formulae devised required the laborious collection of statistics as well as lengthy calculations, reflecting a great concern for accuracy and reliability. In the third period, a series of practical formulae, which were both efficient and simple to use, appeared to have replaced the more detailed formulae. In the last period formulae showed a shift of emphasis to the development of specialised formulae for particular purposes. They were produced to deal with characteristics of particular kinds of materials, such as children's books, abstract articles, etc.



After 1959, an interest in readability increased with the need to search further for accurate measures for predicting and controlling the difficulty of texts.

In addition to readability formulae, a number of other methods have been developed to measure readability. These are generally of three kinds: the 'clinical' method, the method of reader judgments, and various testing methods. Of all the various methods of measuring readability used in research, formulae are much the most common. (Klare, 1963)

## **4.2. Factors that influence readability**

A reader's response to a book is determined by two groups of factors: one group is related to the reader himself and is labelled 'reader factors'. The other group is related to the text and is called 'text factors', because reading is viewed as a kind of communication between the writer and the readers. This has been illustrated clearly in 3.2.3.

### **4.2.1. Reader factors**

In the assessment of readability, the first and foremost factor is the reader (Gilliland, 1978). It is generally realised that people do not read equally well. Nor does any individual learner read in the same way and understand to the same extent as other individuals (Gray & Leary, 1972). Individuals show wide differences in their reading interests, attitudes and motives, as well as their intellectual capacity, previous experience etc. Even the amount of time they devote to reading is not necessarily the same. All these factors exert a great deal of influence on ease of reading. Take newspaper reading for example; young

people might devote more time to reading sports; professionals might spend more time on news affairs, old people might be more interested in weather changes. Different people read the same newspaper differently.

The initial factor should go to the degree of interest (Gilliland, 1972). If students like what they are reading, even if it is hard to interpret, they are able to carry on and learn because the desire to master the book's content carries them through all the difficulties. This has been shown in Chapter 5. 'Interests' here refers to emotional satisfaction (such as enjoyment, pleasure), satisfaction of curiosity, sometimes information readers get from reading. Ideally interest and motivation provide a starting point, and continuous long lasting enthusiasm encourages further learning and understanding. Interests, motivation and attitude are closely related to one another and will drive the reader to go on reading (See 4.2.1).

Klare (1976) and Harrison (1980) fully support the notion that motivation is an important variable in readability research, but they stress that attention should be given to a careful consideration of the difficulty of texts which are read under conditions of low motivation.

Intellectual capacity and previous experience determine the ease of readability as well because the reading process goes far beyond simple decoding of a text (See 3.2.3; 3.2.4 5.2.3; 5.3; and 5.4). Reading is not only a question of finding the meaning in a text; meaning is generated on the basis of the text representation and world knowledge. The reader has to draw from his long- term memory in order to build a coherent structure. A good understanding is usually

based on the information goals of the reader, on his or her knowledge of the subject matter, and on the representation of the information in the text (Spiro, Bruce, & Brewer, 1980; Wittrock, 1982; Wallace, 2001 etc.). One major construct in current theories of reading research is the use of prior knowledge in the form of schemas for organising and interpreting a reading text, which deserves attention especially in foreign language teaching/learning (See 3.2.4) as “Differing background knowledge and cultural assumptions may make it difficult to interpret texts in a way which corresponds with the material’s schema” (Wallace, 1992a: 44). Zakaluk and Samuels (1988:121) claimed: “Both decoding ability and text topic familiarity influence reading comprehension performance”. As in reading, readers decode and interpret what writers intend to say, and naturally their performance is reflected in the accuracy and fluency of their language proficiency (Perfetti & Lesgold, 1977; 1979; Samuels, 1977; Zakaluk and Samuels, 1988) (See 3.2.3; 3.2.4 and 5.4)

#### **4.2.2. Text factors**

Text factors refer to the actual language used in the material, whose effect upon readability has long been recognised. There are many ways of grouping possible variables used in studies of readability and comprehension, but for convenience, Harrison (1980) suggests six fairly broad headings:

**Legibility of print** refers to aspects of typography, which determine how readily the letters and words of the text will be decoded. These include size of type, type font, line length, margins, line space, etc.

**Illustration and colour** is used to motivate readers. In general, poorer readers need more illustrations and colours than good readers.

**Vocabulary** plays a large part in whether a person finds a book readable or not (Chall, 1958; Harrison, 1980; Klare, 1988). Ever since the nineteenth century, when people first started to measure and describe the comparative difficulty levels of books, unfamiliar words have been considered to be the most important factor in determining text difficulty (Chall, 1988). There are many ways of measuring vocabulary difficulty, of which word length and word frequency are the most commonly used measures (Chall, 1958; 1988; Klare, 1988; Harrison, 1980; 1999). Longer words and less frequent words are considered to make a text more difficult. Longer words refer to those which have more letters and more syllables. Less frequent words are those that do not often occur in ordinary usage. Generally speaking, the longer a word is or the more syllables a word has, the more likely it is to be a rare word and a difficult word, and vice versa. Very often long words have abstract meanings and are hard to understand. On the contrary, frequent-familiar everyday words, are often short, and are easy to understand (Miller & Selfridge, 1951). Therefore, word length, word complexity; word frequency; word familiarity; and word diversity, all play a role in readability research. This will be shown in Chapter Five.

**Conceptual difficulty** is used to refer to abstraction. Readers might be familiar with the words used but still they are unable to understand the abstract concept expressed. Readers need to have specific knowledge to understand concepts such as 'refraction', 'congeal', "gradient" and so on. Conceptual difficulty is

rarely included in readability formulae because there are no ready criteria for judging conceptual difficulty, which is both vital and at the same time difficult to estimate.

**Syntax** refers to grammatical and structural difficulty. Most people intuitively feel that the longer sentences are, the more difficult they are to comprehend, however, this is not always the case. Compressed sentences for example are not necessarily easy to understand for they do not provide enough clues for the reader.

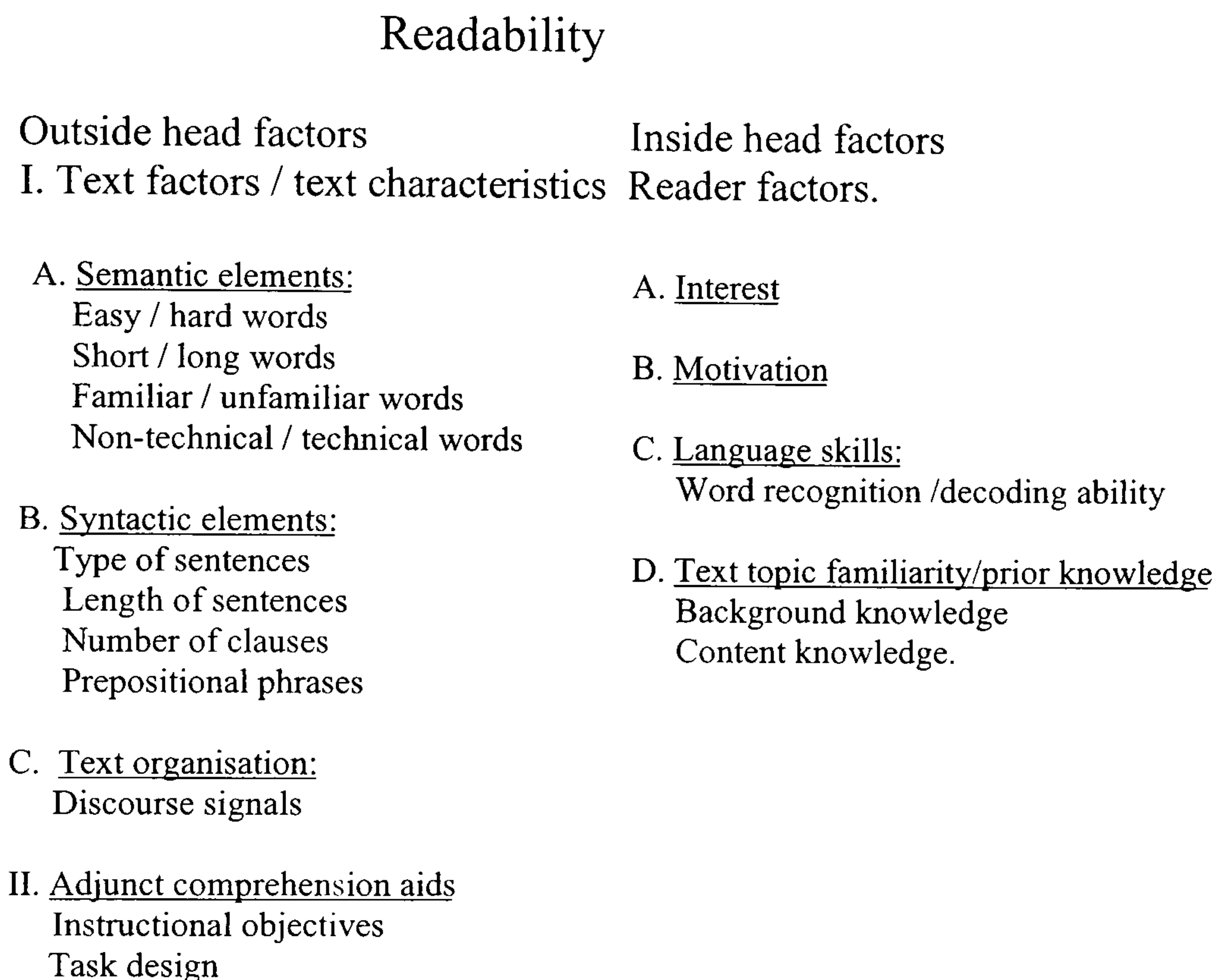
**Organisation** refers to ways of organising contents. It is found that readers understand better when the text is paragraphed and organised logically as opposed to when it is presented in one paragraph. The degree of organisation of a text affects its difficulty level to a great extent (Zukaluk & Samuels, 1988).

**‘Adjunct comprehension aids’** is added by Zukaluk & Samuels (1988: 136) to this list. ‘Adjunct comprehension aids’ include statement of objectives in a text and tasks design by asking low and higher order questions (McRae, 1991). ‘Adjunct comprehension aids’ highlight important information and increase the depth of text processing (1988: 136).

Based on a broad review of literatures on readability, particularly on Zukaluk & Samuels (1988: 121-133), the writer of this thesis has extended readability to a more comprehensive and extended sense, which includes text factors as well as reader factors. Even text factors do not only describe word difficulty and

sentence length but also organisation and task design or adjunct comprehension aids. Factors to be studied in the extended readability can be summarised in Figure 4-3:

Figure 4-3: **Factors that influence readability**



### 4.3. Measurement of readability

Since the 1920's, many attempts to assess the readability of books have appeared using a variety of techniques. According to Gilliland (1972), the most commonly used methods for grading texts are:

- a. subjective judgement
- b. sentence completion and cloze procedure
- c. comprehension questions (objective question and answer techniques)
- d. tables and charts
- e. readability formulae

**Subjective judgement** is often used in cases where there are no convenient quantitative methods to assess the readability of books. Potential users have to make judgements according to their experience. No matter how hard the user tries, his subjective measurement can be only partly accurate. The reliability and consistency of such expert judgements are under question. (Chall, 1958; Klare, 1978; Harrison, 1979; 1980; 1999)

**Sentence completion and cloze procedure** Sentence completion is a long established exercise for reading comprehension. The extent to which a reader can replace the omission indicates his understanding of the text. 'Cloze' tests derived later. In these words are deleted randomly for the reader to fill in. Many writers such as Klare (1966), Bormuth (1969), and Rankin (1970) stressed the importance of cloze procedure as a valid and consistent measure of readability. 'Cloze' is often favoured because it needs little computation. A challenging cloze text for classroom use under the guidance of the teacher should be such that a typical student could score about 45%. For students to read on their own or out of class, cloze texts need to be easier. It is advised that such texts should be chosen from books on which students can score at least 60 per cent, otherwise they are likely to become discouraged (Nuttall, 1996). Cloze is a good means of measuring readability in English speaking countries but is not necessarily reliable for college English in China, because cloze is always seen as the most difficult exercise by Chinese students. English is only a foreign language in China. Students learn English through reading rather than speaking and listening, which is the common way in learning one's native language. According to Klare (1978: 248-274), 'cloze' is valid and reliable within limited numbers of students

because ‘cloze’ involves actual participants. Zukaluk and Samuels (1988:vii) also expressed their opinion towards ‘cloze’ by commenting that “The cloze technique does not predict and assume; it provides an actual try out on the material”. In the context of college English in China, the readership is as massive as 2.5 million. Therefore, it is impossible to involve readers.

**Comprehension questions** usually measure comprehension of content. Though it is more controlled than subjective estimates, still it is quite subjective. Additionally, it tests only the extent to which the reader recalls the content and of the passage. It does not really reflect the other components of readability, which restricts its utility.

**Tables and charts** employ graphs and charts to facilitate the assessment of readability in a direct and obvious way. More people pay attention to tables and charts, but so far only a few tables and charts have been produced.

**Readability formulae** refer to a method of measurement intended as a predictive device that will provide quantitative, objective estimates of the style difficulty of writing (Klare, 1984). As they are based on an analysis of easily identifiable aspects of the text such as word length, sentence length and so on, they are more objective, more reliable and are more widely accepted for measuring readability. Binkly (1988:117) commented: “classic readability formulas serve an important purpose. They are intended to and do predict an approximate level of difficulty”.



#### 4.3.1. Readability formulae

According to Baker, Atwood and Duffy (1988), there are more than 100 readability formulae in popular use today and all of those formulae are based on the same underlying model of the reading process. Harrison (1980) shares this opinion, saying: "The number of predictive readability formulae now constructed runs into hundreds. Some have been designed by psychologists and researchers, others by classroom teachers."

According to Gilliland (1972), of all the formulae, the most typical, popular and applicable ones are the following five:

- a. Morris and Halverson (1938) Idea Analysis Technique
- b. Flesch (1948) i. Reading ease formula; ii. Human interest formula
- c. Dale and Chall (1948)
- d. Gunning (1952) The Fog Index
- e. McLaughlin (1969) SMOG Grading

Harrison (Harrison, 1980) discussed 9 popular ways of measuring readability. Four were the same as Gilliland's, except the first one: Morris and Halverson (1938) Idea Analysis Technique. Yet he added five more. They are Fry graph, Powers-Sumner-Kearl formula, Mugford formula and chart, Spache formula and Forecast formula. Actually Fry graph was mentioned by Gilliland, but in the section on Graphs and Charts (Gilliland, 1972), which indicates that Gilliland viewed it as a graph rather than a formula. Harrison also stated that the Fry Graph cannot really be considered a formula (1980). Klare (1984: 686)

acknowledged that Fry provided one of the most popular aids in his “readability graph”.

Harrison (1980) summed up the nine formulae mentioned in the following way:

1. The Powers-Sumner-Kearl formula (1958) is a relative simple formula. It is suitable for primary schoolbooks, however it is not so suitable for secondary texts because it exhibits a marked ceiling effect, and will rarely produce a reading level above twelve. The formula is:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{US grade} = & - 2.2029 + (0.0778 \times \text{WDS/SEN}) \\ & + (0.0455 \times \text{SYLL/100W}) \end{aligned}$$

where WDS/SEN = average number of words per sentence

and SYLL/100W = average number of syllables per 100 words

UK reading level (in years) = US grade + 5

2. The vocabulary variable, actually the percentage of unfamiliar words in the Spache formula (1953) tends to produce more accurate scores than the Powers-Sumner-Kearl formula, and it takes time to work it out. Its limitation lies in the fact that the formula is unreliable with books above a true difficulty level of eleven years. The Spache formula is:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{US grade} = & (0.121 \times \text{WDS/SEN}) \\ & + (0.082 \times \text{PERCENT UFMWDS}) \\ & + 0.659 \end{aligned}$$

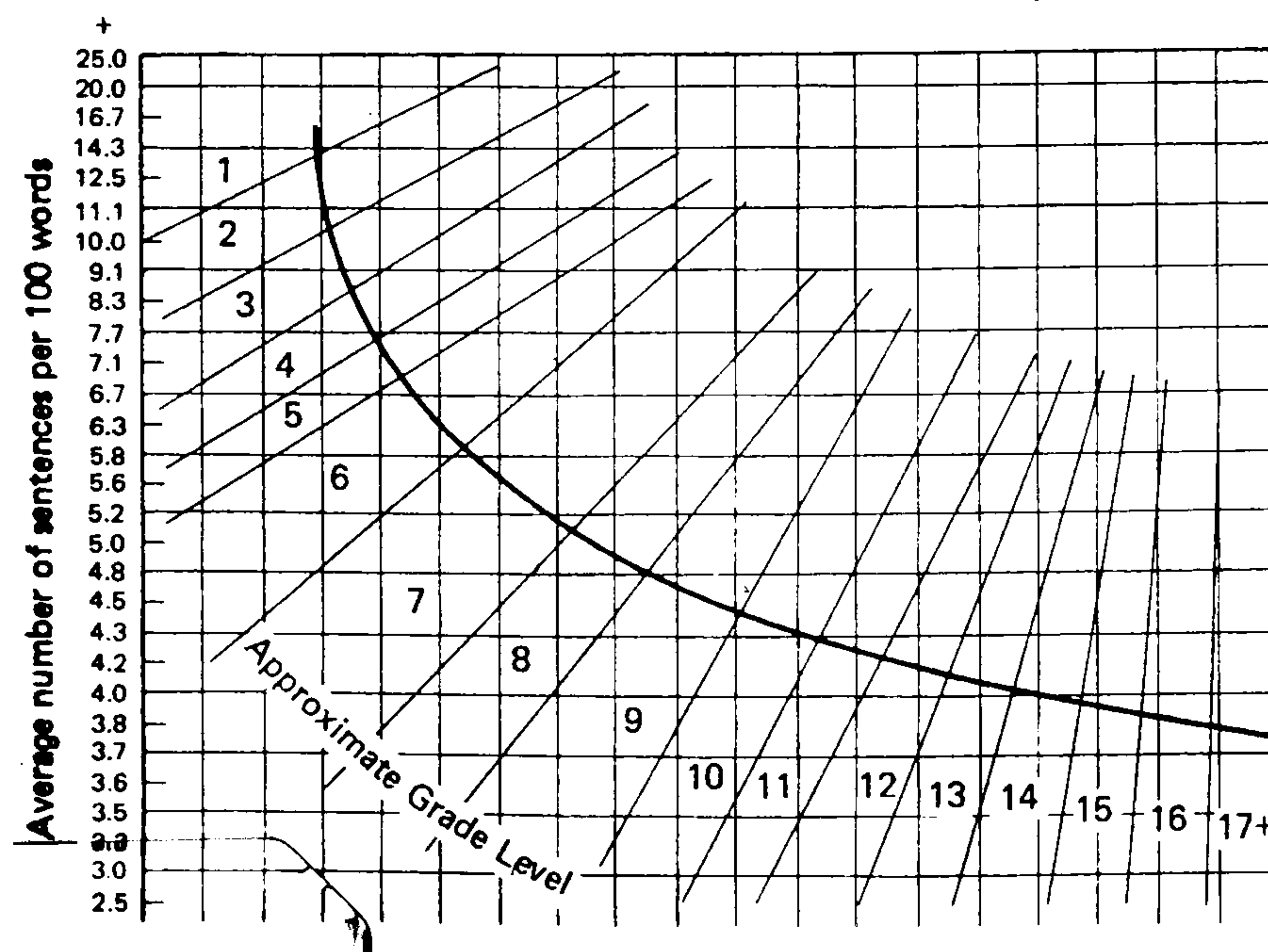
where WDS/SEN = average number of words per sentence

and UFMWDS = unfamiliar words

UK reading level (in years) = US grade + 5

3. \* The Magford chart (1970) is the best of the 'intuitively' derived readability measures. It has been tried in classrooms for many years, and its letters-per-word variable takes account of difficulties in monosyllabic words, which many formulae ignore. It works out in the following way: First, count a 100-word sample, treat words joined by hyphens as separate words. Second, make four charts of the words in the sample. Chart 1 contains the polysyllabic words; chart 2 consists of the non-polysyllabic words; chart 3 lists the 5-letter non-polysyllabic words; and chart 4 contains the 6-letter non-polysyllabic words. Then count the number of words in each chart. Find the word length for each chart and add these scores together to get the word length for the whole passage.
  
4. \* The Fry graph (1977) is one of the most straightforward ways of obtaining a readability index. Its graphical form saves time on making calculation and offers visual information, which helps understand clearly and accurately.  
  
(Harrison, 1980, P. 73)

Figure 4-4: The Fry graph



5. \* The Dale-Chall formula (1948) uses a word list called the Dale list as a basis for predicting vocabulary difficulty. The list is composed of 3000 words that are best known to American eight-year-olds. The formula, though time-consuming, has shown up well in validation studies, and is as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{US grade} &= (0.1579 \times \text{PERCENT UFMWDS}) \\ &+ (0.0496 \times \text{WDS/SEN}) \\ &+ 3.6365 \end{aligned}$$

where UFMWDS = unfamiliar words

and WDS/SEN = average number of words per sentence

UK reading level = 5 + US grade

6. \* The Flesch formula (1948) is one of the best-known readability measures. It uses the same variables as the Powers-Sumner-Kearl formula, but it does not produce a US grade level right away. Since Flesch was more interested in assessing adult reading materials, his difficulty index is related more to a notional comprehension score rather than to grades.
7. \* Gunning's Fog formula (1952) is one of the easiest of all the readability measures. It counts the percentage of polysyllabic words, instead of the total number of syllables in a passage. The formula is:

$$\text{US grade} = 0.4 \times (\text{WDS/SEN} + \% \text{PSW})$$

where WDS/SEN = average number of words per sentence

and % PSW = percentage of polysyllabic words

$$\text{UK reading level} = \text{US grade} + 5$$

8. \* McLaughlin's SMOG formula (1969) is the easiest and quickest formula of all to work out. The formula uses a single variable - the number of polysyllabic (i.e. three-or-more syllable) words in 30 sentences. This variable focuses on vocabulary, but also takes account of sentence length.

$$\text{US grade} = 3 + \sqrt{P} \text{ (i.e. 3 plus the square root of P)}$$

Where P = the nearest perfect square to the number of polysyllabic words (i.e. three-or-more syllable words) in thirty sentences

$$\text{UK reading level} = \text{US grade} + 5$$

9. \* The FORCAST formula (Sticht, 1973) was devised on US Army projects. Its orientation is towards functional literacy rather than school learning. It is different from the other measures mentioned as it does not include any sentence-length variable. It uses just one variable: the number of single syllable words in a 150-word passage. It is useful in assessing forms, job materials or other print which is not in normal sentence form. The formulae is:

$$\text{US grade} = 20 - (\text{NOSW} \text{ divide by } 10)$$

Where NOSW = number of one-syllable words in a passage of 150 words

These nine readability formulae/measures have been developed for different purposes, and each has its own merits and demerits judged on the basis of validity and reliability. They have been known in at least one field or for one age group.

Harrison's summary data on the nine readability measures and his ratings of ease of application can give us a guide as to which formula to choose in a particular situation (Harrison, 1980: 61)

Figure 4-5: Harrison's summary data on the nine readability measures and ratings of ease of application

	Validity	Age level accuracy (8-16 age-range)	Ease of application
Flesch formula (Grade score)	●●●●	●●●	●●
Fry graph	●●●●	●●●	●●●
Powers-Sumner-Kearl formula	●●●●	●	●●●
Mugford formula and chart	●●●●	●●●●	●●
FOG formula	●●●	●●	●●●●
SMOG formula	●●●	●●	●●●●●
Dale-Chall formula	●●●●●	●●●●	●
Spache formula	●●●●	●●	●●
FORCAST formula	●●	●●	●●●●

Key: the more blobs the better

Elley (1975) developed another formula by counting nouns in his book *Assessing the difficulty of reading materials*, which he claimed could overcome the difficulties caused by unfamiliar vocabulary. The formula counts all the nouns that have appeared in a passage, calculates the mean frequency level by adding up the frequency level numbers provided in the 2000 Nouns Graded by

Frequency of Usage, then divides the mean frequency level by the number of nouns. The result obtained is the suitable age level for readability ratings.

#### **4.3.2. Limitations of formulae**

Formulae help in assessing the readability of texts, but they are not perfect predictors (Klare, 1963). To discuss formulae alone does not provide full understanding of readability and its use; formulae are only one of several ways in measuring readability. Formulae have certain limitations.

- a. They measure only one aspect of writing-style: i.e. difficulty
- b. They touch content indirectly and incompletely.
- c. They do not consider organisation, word order, format, or imagery in writing.
- d. They do not take into account elements like different purposes, maturity, and intelligence of readers.

Formulae could only sample syntactic and lexical features to identify their predictors (Bormuth, 1969). They ignore significant factors contributing to difficulty by counting only “average”, general English. For instance: even the most well-known formulae (Dale-Chall, Flesch, FOG etc.) assess word difficulty by recording the number of words not represented in high frequency word lists, or by using the number of syllables as a proxy measure of difficulty. These methods are clearly not suitable for assessing the readability of specific

subject content. For instance, in medical texts typical core words are often long, and are not likely to be difficult for the specialist reader (Klare, 1963).

Harrison (1999) took the Flesch formula, one of the most valid and reliable formulae as an example. He added two more demerits, apart from those mentioned above:

- a. Formulae do not take account of word repetition. If a long difficult word is repeated many times in a passage, the passage is certainly easier than a passage containing several different long difficult words.
- b. Sentence length plays a significant role in syntactic complexity. Formulae do not make a distinction between simple clause structures and compressed, embedded, or elliptical constructions. As we all know the latter in many cases can be more difficult than the former.

Davison and Green (1988) pointed out that “ research in the whole field of readability had remained more or less isolated from work done in cognitive psychology, linguistics and other disciplines”.

Most important of all, all formulae recognise the importance of reader factors, such as knowledge, interest or motivation a reader brings to a text, but it is impossible to determine how much or to what extent reader factors affect the ease of reading a text. Formulae are unable to take into account reader factors (Bentley, 1985); they can give an index of the difficulty of a text in terms of text characteristics only. Since reading is viewed as decoding by readers (3.2.3),



features of both a text (4.2.2) and its readers (3.2.4 and 4.2.1) have to be taken into consideration.

However, in spite of all the criticism, the application of readability formulae in hundreds of studies has proved that they have more advantages than demerits (Harrison 1979). Some formulae like Dale-Chall, Flesch, FOG etc. still remain adequate at the present. For example, Harrison (1999) still regards the Flesch formula as a perfectly adequate formula. No other complex analyses available today have improved upon it.

Nevertheless, even if it is a valid formula, it can not give you any valuable measurement if it is applied in a wrong situation. As mentioned before, different formulae developed in different circumstances, and for different purposes, and potential users should make sure that they apply the right formula in the right situation in order to avoid any consequent inadequacy.

In view of the above-mentioned merits and demerits of readability formulae, it is proposed that the study of readability in this thesis will extend to seven parameters including text features as well as readers' characteristics.

#### **4.4. Seven parameters to be studied in this dissertation**

The purpose of this study is to provide some guidelines for coursebook writers in college English in China. At the present, unaided subjective judgement is widely used in choosing materials for coursebooks. This is necessary but is not reliable all the time (See 3.3). Readability is recommended for its objectivity in measuring the difficulty of a text (See 3.4).

Harrison (1999) has classified two main areas in the research of readability, one focusing on basal reading schemes applied in a series of books for beginning readers; the other emphasising content area reading used in school textbooks on such subjects as: mathematics, history, or science. This dissertation only discusses the formal area focusing of readability research, which predicts where students are likely to find **difficulties in a language reading book or a passage**. Language reading coursebooks in college English have to treat students of all subjects as a whole, ignoring their various major subject areas. The 'Definition of college English' given in 2.1. explains that college English is a language course taught to non-English majors in universities and colleges in China. 'Specialised English' of different subjects is a part of college English, but it is handled only when students finish their Band 4. And generally 'specialised English' is taught by subject teachers, with language teachers helping whenever they can. This is specified in the 1999 version of the National English Syllabus (Revising team, 1999; See Chapter 2). Bearing this in mind, the second element of readability which involves different content areas or 'Specialised English' is not studied in this thesis.

Even in the first area of readability research in language learning, relevant factors are quite numerous and it is impossible to discuss all of them due to limitations of time and space. As college English is the case that is being dealt with, potential readers are university students. Legibility of print, illustrations and pictures (Harrison 1980) are not considered highly significant to adult

learners. Besides, those factors are normally taken care of by publishers, as is always the case in China.

Since the intention of this research is aimed at proposing some rationales for coursebook writers in college English in China, restrictions have been made to ‘outside head factors’ and ‘inside head factors’ labelled by Zukaluk and Samuels (1988). **Outside head factors** are composed of semantic elements, syntactic elements and text organisation in text characteristics and adjunct comprehension aids (See 3.2.3 and 4.2.2). **Inside head factors** consist of interest, motivation and prior knowledge of the reader (See 3.3.3 and 4.2.1). Readers’ language skills are not considered because, although potential readers in college English are so numerous (about 2.5 million) and various, they have to meet **the same basic requirement** stated in the National English Syllabus when they enter universities (Revising Team, 1999; See also 2.3.). Content knowledge is not included in readers’ prior knowledge for the study is limited to readability in language reading coursebooks for college English as mentioned above.

It is hoped that through applying the findings on readability in materials selection and coursebook design, a set of guiding principles on coursebook writing can be developed for college English in China.

#### **4.4.1. Reader’s interest and motivation**

It has already been established that the interest and motivation of the reader are the factors that play significant initial roles in determining how the reader reads a book. (Gulliland, 1972; Harrison, 1980; Bruce & Rubin, 1988; Davison, 1988)

“Interest” here is used to refer to the “enjoyment” and “pleasurable feelings” one gets from reading (Gulliland, 1972), to satisfy his curiosity for information or to satisfy his sense of achievement in solving problems. The more interest the reader shows in a text, the more highly motivated he/she becomes and the more difficult the materials he/ she is stimulated to deal with, as reading is a reader-text interaction as discussed in 3.2.3.

There are many variations in focus of interest such as the size of a book, the design of the cover, the layout of the contents, the illustrations, the topics and even the price etc. and different readers may have different focuses of interest. For example: primary school pupils, high school pupils and university students definitely have different interests; students from different grades of the same school may have different interests; boys and girls in the same class may have different interests. Primary school pupils are perhaps more stimulated by the design and colour of the cover; while high school pupils may be motivated by the layout and the humour in a book. University students may be attracted more by the mysterious ending of a story, or other related topics of a book. In the same group or class, girls may be more interested in romantic stories, while boys may be more fascinated by detective stories. The questionnaire on topics that students may find interesting carried out by ten college English teachers from different part of China has proved that students interest vary (See 3.1.3 and 5.2; Appendix XI).

Whatever focuses students may be interested in, one thing is apparent; their performance in reading is significantly affected by their interest in a text. This

has been proved by the data collection and data analysis undertaken for the research in Chapter 5. Generally, a higher degree of interest and motivation automatically leads to better reading comprehension, and this is even more obvious with poorer readers. The fact that increased motivation has a more marked effect on poorer readers than on average readers has been confirmed by the research of Shnayer. The jump is approximately two years with poorer readers, but fluent readers show only a slight difference, which implies that readability is much more critical when interest and motivation are low (Shnayer, 1969: 47).

It has been realised that factors like passing exams, finding good jobs, going abroad to study and communicating with foreigners stimulate students to learn. However, in this sense, all students are motivated to more or less the same extent. Interesting topics need more consideration from textbook writers for they may give rise to different levels of stimulus in students' motivation. Very often, stimulus encourages readers to bring their world knowledge, cultural background, personal experience and interest to a text (McRae, 1991; Carter, 1996)

Interest and motivation exert a very powerful influence on comprehension of texts, particularly with poorer readers.

#### **4.4.2. Reader's prior knowledge**

Another important factor that influences reading comprehension is the prior knowledge of the reader about the topic. Race, age, sex, degrees of education,

cultural background, parents' occupation etc are among factors that contribute to prior knowledge categorised as 'schemata', as discussed in 3.2.4. Readers inevitably decode the meaning of a text by using their prior knowledge (See 3.2.3). Chinese learners of English at different levels have the experience that stories in English, with Chinese background, like *The Long March* and *Wild Swan*, are much easier to understand than those which have western contexts. This is because they are familiar with the specific cultural background, from which they can recall propositions and make proper inferences to make sure that their comprehension matches their prior knowledge and the knowledge presupposed by the story. But when they read stories set in a western context, even if they do not have to learn any new vocabulary, it can still be hard to comprehend the text because of the lack of experience on which to draw. Prior knowledge enables readers to make inferences and to fill in missing information. Readers recall what is stated as well as what seems to follow (Kintsch & van Dijk (1978).

Interest, motivation and prior knowledge cannot be clearly separated. If a reader has knowledge about a topic, he is likely to be more interested in it, and will choose to go on reading about it. As a result, the more he reads on the topic, the more knowledgeable he is and the more he will become involved in the topic.

Reader factors such as interest, motivation and prior knowledge cannot be measured by formulae, for they are the features that underlie the language, but they are equally as important as any surface features of the language. Chapter 6 will discuss solutions to the problems involved in dealing with reader factors.

#### 4.4.3. Semantic elements

"The variables that have emerged as the best predictors of difficulty, often combined in regression equations for readability formulae, have proved to be related to word difficulty, and to complexity of sentence structure" (Alderson & Urquhart, 1984). Generally speaking there are two ways of measuring word difficulty, namely: frequency and word length (usually measured in the number of syllables). It is believed that shorter, more frequently used, every day words are easier to understand, while longer words do not occur frequently and are expected to cause processing problems (Klare, 1978; Harrison, 1979; 1980, 1999; Zakaluk & Samuels, 1988). A good way of avoiding poor comprehension arising from language difficulties is to choose texts where the language is selected by reference to a generally accepted glossary based on word frequency. The notion that the most common words are the easiest and the least common words are the most difficult is fundamental to this. "Many publishers have produced series of Readers graded according to such word counts" (Williams, 1999). As Williams and Dallas (1984) stated: "Vocabulary lists found in the English syllabus would usually assist authors by providing a broad outline of the type of vocabulary that the reader can be expected to cope with."

In the case of college English in China, the first thing for the coursebook writers to do is to keep in mind the students' vocabulary level by making use of the vocabulary listed in the National English Syllabus. Once they know the students' vocabulary scope, they can count the new lexical items (words or phrases) in a text, including new uses of familiar words and new idiomatic combinations.

They then have to decide what proportion of new items is acceptable. The biggest issue for college English coursebook writers in China is that students have only learned about 2000 words when they enter university (See 2.4.6; Revising Team, 1999). This is far exceeded by any authentic materials. A realistic editorial aim is that the writer should be aware of the likely difficulties to be encountered by the readership. He either avoids them, or else copes with them by replacing infrequent words, while taking care to ensure that the text is still capable of imparting accurate information. As vocabulary is of crucial importance in measuring the ease of a text, Williams and Dallas (1984) gave similar advice; to write passages or texts within the vocabulary taught in the EFL/ESL course of the relevant age group of the country concerned. Green and Oslen (1988) offered two popular techniques for reducing the vocabulary readability score in a text:

1. substitute shorter or more frequently used words for words which the original author chose;
2. delete words and phrases, both to remove “difficult” words, and to reduce sentence length;

For the sake of ‘authenticity’ in the case of coursebook compilation for college English in China, writers do not write any texts (See 3.1.2.1.1 and 3.3). Instead they choose out of their unaided intuition texts that have been written by native speakers, and they design exercises accordingly (See 3.1.4 and 3.3). They often use the techniques offered by Green and Oslen to reduce language difficulty.



As to the question of how many new words is acceptable in an intensive reading passage, Nuttall (1996) suggests 2 or 3 percent, others suggest 5 percent. What is required in the National English Syllabus for college English is 8 per cent. According to the syllabus, the reading total for the four bands is 30,000 words, which is divided by 2400 (4200 words - 1800 words), the total of words required to be learned. This equals 8% (See 3.1.4; Revising Team, 1999)

#### **4.4.4. Syntactic elements**

Syntactic elements refer to sentence structure including type of sentences, length of sentences, and a number of clauses and prepositional phrases. Syntactic elements can be measured by a variety of devices, ranging from the number of transformations required to produce the surface string from a posited deep structure, to a simple count of the number of words in a sentence (Alderson & Urquhart, 1984). In general, the longer the sentence, the more complex it is. Sentences with embedded or subordinate clauses tend to be more difficult than simple periodic constructions (Zakaluk and Samels, 1988). New grammatical forms usually cause no problems if the text is comprehensible in other respects. Syntax readability involves structural difficulty, which is harder to assess. Sentence length and complexity are more likely to be regarded as causes of structural difficulty. To Chinese students, the passive voice is always more difficult than the active voice; Nominalisation is more difficult than use of an active verb. Many typical readability formulae measure the length of sentences. One of the most popular and reliable formulae for measuring sentence length is the Fog Index (1952):

$\frac{\text{No. words} + \text{no. 3-syllable words}}{\text{No. sentences}} \times 100$  (times) .4

No. sentences      no. words

1

And the result is interpreted as 12- = easy, 13-16 = undergraduate,

16 + = postgraduate

One common technique used to reduce sentence length is to break up compound and complex sentences into series of simple sentences by deleting subordinating conjunctions like "since", "when", "so" and etc. Nevertheless, there are also research studies which prove that deleting clauses does not necessarily reduce sentence difficulty, because specific relations implied by connecting clauses are no longer there to direct the reader. Green and Oslen (1988) mentioned that there were many more mechanical techniques employed in altering texts. Working out a readability index suitable for students can only provide a yardstick for measuring text readability. Although formulae measuring vocabulary and sentence length provide a reasonably useful guide to the readability of a text, they are not the only factors which influence the ease with which a text can be read. (Nuttall, 1996)

#### **4.4.5. Organisation**

The degree of organisation within a text can affect its readability. A great deal of research work has been done in this area. For instance: Ausubel (1960) first used the term 'advance organisers' to describe introductory paragraphs summarising the content of a text. Carroll (1971) gave some guidance on textual organisation. Researchers like Mandler and Johnson (1977) studied the internal structures of

stories. Paragraphs, subheadings and typographies are format variables, which are effective in improving comprehension. Cohesive ties described by Halliday and Hasan (1976) do not only operate on the micro, within or between adjacent paragraphs, but they also provide information on a macro level, by decoding chains that mark the semantic continuity of a given passage across a larger level of organisation. Therefore, the cohesive structure concerned with the interrelationships of ideas (Meyer & Rice, 1984) serves as the syntax of discourse (Binkley, 1988). Zuckaluk and Samuels (1988:125) express their opinion that “Shorter sentences may not be the answer” to readability for they simply destroy the cohesive structures in a text. All students in the piloting study find that discourse signals in cohesive structures help them understand the text absolutely (5.2.4.2.1.2). Students in the study also find discourse signals helpful in achieving higher levels of comprehensibility (5.3.2.3).

#### **4.4.6. Adjunct Comprehension aids**

Modifications that facilitate comprehension by highlighting important information in a text are called adjunct information aids. Adjunct information aids consist of instructional objectives and interspersed questions (Zuckaluk & Samuels, 1988: 127). “Instructional objectives are statements or study goals presented at the beginning of a text that suggest what the reader should know about reading” (ibid. 127). McRae calls it 'learning pay off' (1991) which helps learners check if they have mastered what they are required to learn. Researchers like Anderson (1980), Zuckaluk & Samuels (1988) find instructional objectives a useful aid for readers.

Interspersed questions refer to all questions in a text that facilitate learning which include pre-, while- and after- reading questions divided by McRae (1991; See also 3.1.2.1.2) into low order questions and high order questions. Low order questions are questions based on facts that are obvious in the surface of the text. High order questions require the students to recall their prior knowledge and make inferences in order to fill in missing ideas. Therefore high order questions invite students to explore and create deeper meanings for a passage, and by doing so readers will fall into a habit of interacting with texts.

Of the seven parameters to be studied in this thesis, interest, motivation and prior knowledge are labelled as ‘inside head factors’, semantic elements, syntactic elements and organisation are characterised as text features, and are called ‘outside head factors’ together with adjunct comprehension aids (See 4.2; Aslo Zukaluk and Samels, 1988). ‘Adjunct comprehension aids’ seems to be an area where there is ample scope for coursebook writers to investigate and explore, as has been discussed in Chapter 3 (See 3.1.2.1).

#### **4.5. Which formula to use?**

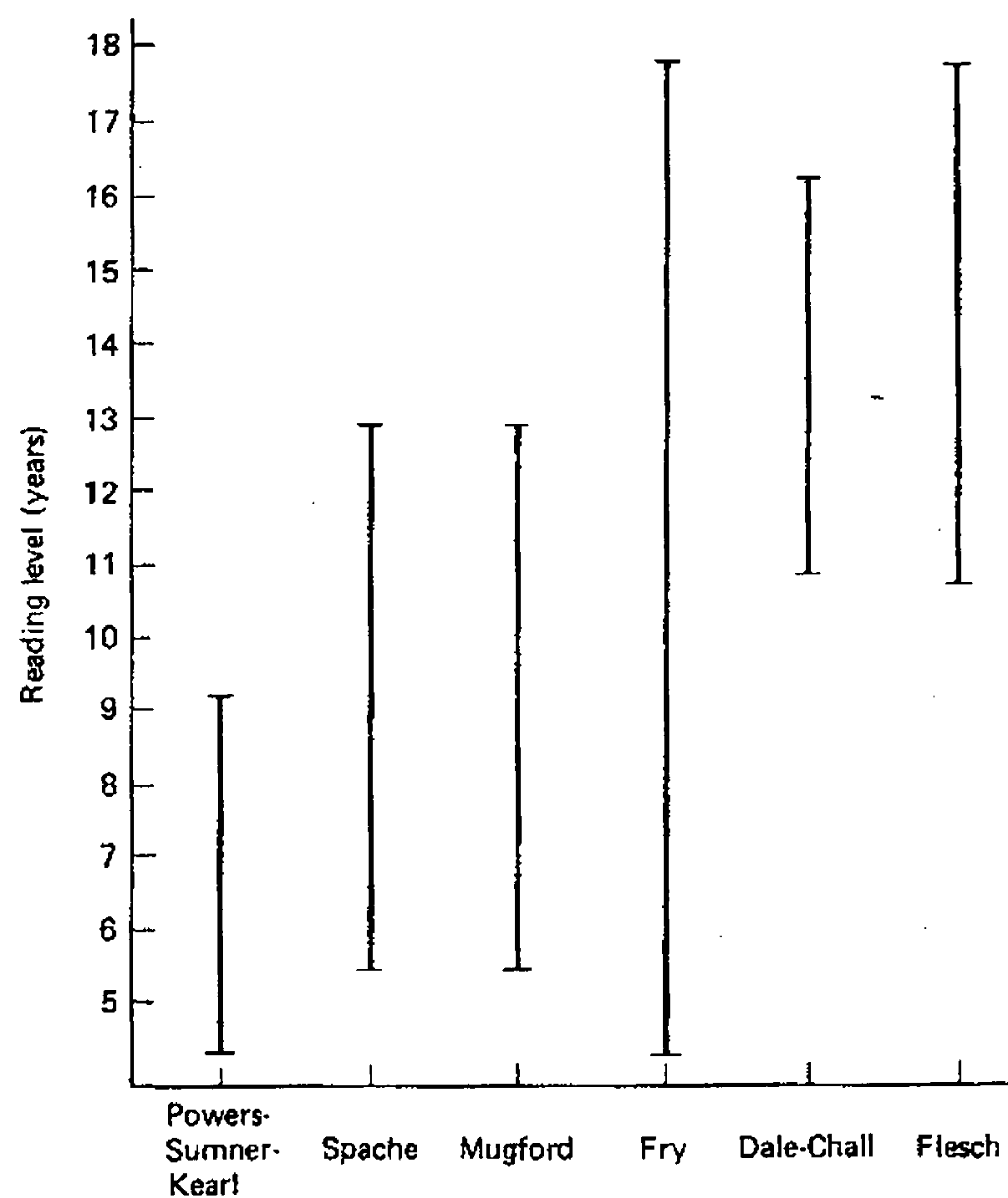
Since the first readability formula was developed for use by textbook writers in the 1920's, hundreds of formulae have been designed. For adult materials, Klare (1963) suggested three formulae according to three different criteria:

- a. the most accurate formula: the Dale-Chall (23, 24)
- b. the fastest formula to apply: the Farr-Jenkins-Paterson (30) simplification of the Flesch Reading Ease formula

- c. the most popular formula: the Flesch Reading Ease formula (33). This has the advantage of being the one most often used and is consequently the one on which the most research data is available (21-24)

Harrison (1980: 115) recommended 6 reliable readability measures in predicting reading level by using a figure:

Figure 4-6: **Harrison's recommended 6 reliable readability measures**



As it is shown in the picture, Harrison (1980: 61- 119) concluded:

- The Dale-Chall formula was the best overall, for it was the best in validity and one of the two highest formulae in age level accuracy, though it was the most time-consuming formula to apply in calculation.

- The Flesch formula was also a valid and generally reliable index of difficulty whose validity is quite high and whose age level accuracy is relatively good. It was useful since it was widely known and relatively straightforward to calculate.
- The Fry graph was a graph rather than a formula, but had the same validity and accuracy in predicating age level as the Flesch formula, which also produced valid and reliable results.
- Mugford's formula and chart was high on validity and accuracy at lower secondary level, but was less reliable above a reading level of thirteen. According to Harrison it appeared to be particularly valuable for assessing material for slower or failing readers.
- Two formulae, the SMOG and FOG indices were relatively less valid and precise than the formulae mentioned above, but they were easier to apply, particularly the SMOG formula.

(See 4.3)

Though the formulae developed so far have been designed for very different purposes, for different age groups and for different situations, they are all meant for native English speakers. Nothing has been designed for people learning English as a second or foreign language. What should be considered first is which formula best fits the purpose and situation of college English in two major characteristics: the predicative accuracy of the formula and the ease of its application.

Both Klare and Harrison recommended the Dale-Chall formula as the most 'accurate' and the 'best' overall. Furthermore, Bruce And Robin (1988) also thought highly of the Dale-Chall formula. They consider the Dale-Chall Formula one of the most popular readability formulae in current use. The Fry Graph and the Mugford Formula and Chart have also proved to be excellent in validity and in age level accuracy, but the Fry Graph is easier to apply than the Mugford Formula and is seen as the most straightforward ways of obtaining a readability index by Harrison (1980: 61) and the most popular manual aids in measuring readability (Klare, 1984: 686). The Elley Noun Formula sounds more suitable in the Chinese context because it solves the problem caused by unfamiliar vocabulary. And "It is most appropriate for children's prose designed for 8 –16 year old readers." "...the method does seem very profitable and useful to teachers"(Bentley, 1985: 11). As a result, the writer of this dissertation has decided to try out the Dale and Chall Formula, the Fry Graph, and the Elley Noun Formula.

#### **4.6. Conclusion**

This chapter summarises some important literature in the field of readability, which has been studied for more than half a century by English speakers. The theory of "Readability" was first developed in the 1920's to study the factors that make a text readable or the ways of judging materials or texts to see if they are easy or difficult for a certain group of readers. The term readability used in this thesis is different from the conventional readability, as it has been extended to a more comprehensive and extended sense concerning both reader factors and text factors. Zukaluk and Samuels (1988) name them 'inside head factors' and

'outside head factors'. The two factors are related to each other. Without the reader it is impossible to tell if a text is easy or difficult, and vice versa. Everybody gets discouraged and frustrated if what he or she is reading seems too difficult or unfamiliar. Readability matches materials to readers and makes sure that the right book reaches the hands of the right person at the right time (Gilliland, 1972).

According to Klare (1976), there were three solutions to the problem of whether a text is readable for a particular group of readers: guessing by experienced teachers and writers, testing, and using readability formulae. The first solution is often used, but because it is not based on any theory and does not involve any statistics, its validity and reliability are occasionally brought into question. The second solution is reliable but it involves participants in indicating the inconvenience in application. Readability formulae predict difficulty of materials by analysing the linguistic features of the materials and by using statistics to illustrate the ease of a text without involving the reader. Readability formulae have been widely used in a variety of situations where estimates of text complexity are thought to be necessary. They are particularly valuable when there is a large population of readers and there is a large quantity of reading material being published. This is why many publishers, writers, teachers, librarians and even readers find readability formulae preferable and useful.

With the development of readability theory, more than 100 formulae have been discovered in use in different situations and for different purposes. Only a few have been proved reliable and valid. Harrison (1980: 61- 119) discussed nine



formulae, and concluded that the Dale-Chall formula was the best overall for its validity and accuracy. The Flesch formula was also valid and reliable, as well as being relatively straightforward to calculate. The Fry graph, though not a real formula, was quite valid and accurate as well.

Three formulae are going to be tried out in this research. The Dale-Chall formula and The Flesch formula were both discovered in 1948, but the former is chosen for use in the dissertation because more people think highly of it (Klare, 1963; Harrison, 1980, Bruce and Robin, 1988). The Elley Noun Count is used because on the one hand it was developed recently in 1975, and on the other hand because it solves the problem caused by unfamiliar vocabulary. The Fry Graph is used because it is a graph rather than a formula, which provides a different way of measuring.

The concern is that readability formulae, no matter how valid and reliable, can only measure text factors, and not reader factors such as interest, motivation and prior knowledge. Nowadays, in foreign/second language teaching, more attention has been given to the readers' role as 'participants' in decoding and interpreting a reading text (as discussed in 3.2.3 and 4.2.). Recent research in reading and EFL teaching emphasises students' interaction by encouraging them to interpret and even to create the meaning of a text or a passage. Having realised the weakness of existing measures of readability (See 4.3.2), the research in this study proposes ways of refining it in the hypotheses and research questions described at the beginning of the thesis and this next chapter examines

the hypotheses and research questions in relation to the notion of extended readability.

## **Chapter 5 Research Methods, Data Collection and Data Analysis**

### **5.0. Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to testify the hypothesis and the research questions given in 1.2. The first part of the chapter is devoted to the discussion of research methods. To be more exact, it is devoted to a close study of quantitative and qualitative research methods. Having considered the different characteristics between both methods, it was decided to employ a combination of quantitative and qualitative studies not only out of necessity but also to go to a certain depth in the inquiry. Three readability formulae are tried out to obtain summarised numbers - typical of quantitative study - to be used as index to proper readability for selecting texts for Band 1 college English. An analysis of the linguistic features of the chosen texts with the checklist proposed by Leech and Short confirms from another angle that the application of the recommended three readability formulae have certain validity and reliable if used as indicator of readability of text selection for Band 1. A questionnaire containing the template units written by the writer of this thesis for the textbook project between Nottingham and Tsinghua universities has been tried out and modified three times in the study. Various results have been obtained from the subjects who have similar backgrounds. This indicates the significance of reader factors, which cannot be ignored in the reading process (See 3.2.3 and 4.2.1). In order to elaborate, enhance and illustrate the various results derived, it is necessary to interview some of the subjects - a typical feature in qualitative design to see both teachers' and students' responses to the templates proposed by the writer of this thesis. The concern is to test the hypotheses and research questions by

giving a complete picture in both summarised numbers (quantitative method) and organised words (qualitative research), but the weight lies on the latter.

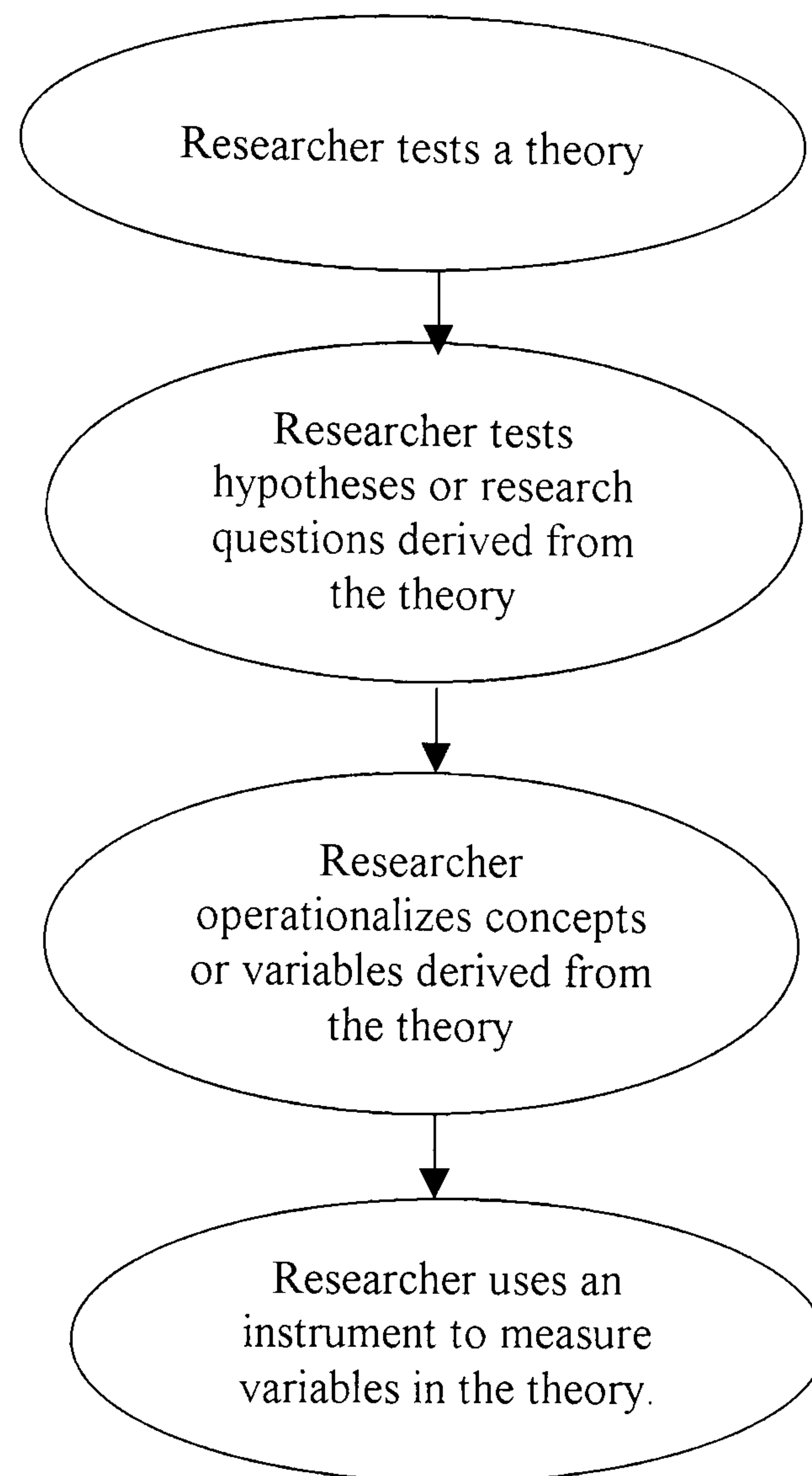
## **5.1. Research methods**

Research is one of many different ways of knowing or understanding. It is a process of systemic inquiry that is designed to collect, analyse, interpret and use data to understand, describe, predict, or control an educational, psychological, social or scientific phenomenon, and to empower researchers in such contexts. The exact nature of research is greatly influenced by the theory a researcher is investigating and by the importance he/she places on distinguishing his/her research from types of research (Mertens, 1998). There are two types of research methods commonly used, namely: quantitative research and qualitative research.

### **5.1.1. Quantitative research**

The difference between a quantitative study and a qualitative study lies in the placement of the theory. In a quantitative study, theory is used deductively and is introduced in the design process because of its importance in explaining the hypotheses, questions and objectives. Sometimes an entire section of a research plan may be devoted to explicating the theory base for the study. The objective is to test or verify a theory rather than to reflect on whether the theory is confirmed or not by the results in the study. Therefore the theory becomes a framework for the entire study by using hypotheses or questions derived from the theory. The deductive mode of research in a quantitative study can be shown in Figure 5-1 (Creswell, 1994: 81-88).

Figure 5-1 **The deductive mode of research in a quantitative study**



A quantitative research project emphasises closed-ended surveys and experimental designs and measures variables in a quantifiable way producing knowledge that focuses on outcomes, generalisations, predictions and casual explanations (Goodwin and Goodwin, 1996).

### **5.1.2. Qualitative research**

In a qualitative study, the place of theory is not very clear. It can be anywhere. Qualitative research methods are multiple in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to subject matter (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), producing

knowledge that emphasises process, extrapolation, understanding, and illumination (Goodwin and Goodwin 1996). Very often they are designed to provide an in-depth description of a scientific program, practice or setting (Mertens, 1998). Qualitative research “captures holistic pictures by words and is concerned with life as it is lived, things as they happen, situations as they are constructed in the day-to-day, moment-to-moment course of events. Qualitative researchers seek lived experiences in real situations... This is an attempt to ensure that data analysis will closely reflect what is happening.” (Woods, 1999: 2-3)

The following five features of qualitative research have been confirmed by many scholars (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992: 29-33):

- a. Qualitative research has a natural setting as the direct source of data and the researcher is the key instrument (Merriam, 1988; Creswell, 1994).
- b. Qualitative research is descriptive. That is, data is reported in words. (Locke et al., 1987; Merriam, 1988; Marshall & Rossman, 1989; Fraenkel & Wallen, 1990; Creswell, 1994)
- c. Qualitative researchers are concerned with process rather than simply with outcomes or products (Merriam, 1988; Fraenkel & Wallen, 1990; Creswell, 1994)
- d. Qualitative researchers tend to analyse their data inductively (Creswell, 1994).
- e. Meaning is of essential concern to the qualitative approach (Merriam, 1988; Creswell, 1994).

Above all, participant observation and in-depth interview studies in qualitative research tend to be exemplary.

However, the foremost criterion for judging whether a study is qualitative or quantitative lies in the fact that in a qualitative study, the researcher seeks believability, based on coherence, insight, instrumental utility (Eisner, 1991) and trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell, 1994). This is achieved in qualitative research through a process of verification, while in quantitative research traditional validity and reliability measures are emphasised.

Miles and Huberman think highly of qualitative data, which because of the form of words rather than numbers as in quantitative data have been more often employed in the fields of social sciences. “With qualitative data one can preserve chronological flow, see precisely which events led to which consequences and derive fruitful explanations” (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 1-2). According to Miles and Huberman words organised into stories are more concrete, vivid, meaningful and convincing than pages of summarised statistics.

### **5.1.3. Combined qualitative and quantitative designs**

Qualitative and quantitative approaches differ from each other in setting goals, designing research, collecting and analysing data and choosing methods to be used etc. Other authors like Eisner (1980), Guba & Lincoln (1982), Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Smith and Heshusius (1986) examined in detail the difference between the two approaches. However, Woods (1992) argues that some differences between quantitative and qualitative research have been exaggerated.

He indicates that some writers in the 1970's intentionally divided the two methods with quantitative research being seen strictly in the hypothetico-deductive mode for testing theories, and qualitative research being seen as an inductive method used for generating theory. However, qualitative techniques can also be used both for generating and testing theories, and it is possible and sometimes necessary for the two approaches to be combined.

Every decision he or she makes in the research process, including the choice of method, indicates a researcher's theoretical orientation. However, there are three factors, which are the basis for selection of research methods. They are: a. the researcher's view of the world, b. the nature of the research questions and c. practical reasons associated with the nature of research methods (Mertens, 1998). Cuba and Lincoln identify qualitative research as the preferred method for research involving the interpretive/constructivist paradigm when researchers want to gain an understanding of the constructions held by people in the context. Sometimes numbers and words are both needed if we are to understand the world better (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Researchers have to collect both qualitative and quantitative data and have to present both themes and statistical analysis in order to triangulate or converge findings, to elaborate on results, to use one method to inform another, and to extend the breadth of the inquiry. Rossman and Wilson (1984) proved that an 'integrated' use of methods does exist. This is the case with this thesis.



#### **5.1.4. The research design of this thesis**

The data collection in connection with this research is composed of four parts: a readability rating of the chosen texts; an analysis of language features of the chosen texts; a questionnaire and interviews. The first three are quantitative but the last is qualitative. Therefore, it is a combination of quantitative and qualitative designs.

**It is quantitative**, because

- It reviews existing literature (See Chapter 4) and is intended to verify the readability theory to be used for reading materials selection, which describes the established validity and reliability of three of the most commonly used readability formulae (See 4.5) as instruments for data collection (See 5.2.1). As readability formulae have been used so far only for ranking story books for native speakers, they might not be appropriate for Chinese college English students, even though the readability ranking results are valid and reliable, since the context is different (See 2.1). English, though widely learned, is still a foreign language as has been discussed in Chapter two.
- A checklist for language features from Leech is borrowed from which some numerical statistics are drawn (See 5.2.2).
- Questionnaires are also used in the data collection (See 5.2.3). As readability is dealing with readers, it would be unwise not to take reader factors into consideration (See 3.2.3; 3.2.4 and 4.2.1).

However, quantitative readability ratings and numerical descriptions of the language features of the chosen texts provide only one aspect of the reading

process and the results obtained are mechanical (5.2.1; 5.2.2 and 5.2.3). It is necessary to develop a new data collection instrument – interviews with informants (5.2.4 and 5.3.3), which is a typical method in qualitative research.

**It is qualitative** because

An interview is based more on humanistic values, involving personal contact with the reader - the intended user of college English textbooks - who will find the data from this qualitative method credible and a useful source of evidence. A questionnaire followed by an interview determines the meaning attached to the numerical ratings, and therefore adds depth and extends the breadth of the research (See 5.4). In this way the research has switched to qualitative methods, in which the researcher is the instrument for data collection, he or she decides what questions to ask, and in what order, so it is likely that he/she brings his/her value, assumptions, beliefs, interest and even biases to the research. The informants for the interviews are purposely selected as well (See 5.2.4 and 5.3.3).

The characteristics of a qualitative research problem described by Merriam (1988:120) suit the situation exactly in that the available readability theory and formulae are not wholly accurate and appropriate in the context of college English teaching in China (See 5.4). Naturally, the result of the study leads to the exploration and development of some further means of measuring readability for college English students in the EFL context in China.

## **5.2. Data collection and data analysis**

In doing scientific research, a sequence of interrelated steps have to be constructed. After a background study (Chapter 2), a review of literature (Chapter 3 and 4), and the formation of the hypothesis and the research questions (1.1), the next step is to collect data and to determine how to measure the data collected. Data analysis is of essence to the scientific procedure (Burroughs, 1971). A great variety of research tools have been developed to aid in the acquisition of data, employing distinctive ways of describing and quantifying the data, classified into two categories: qualitative method and quantitative method. Each is particularly appropriate for a certain purpose and in a certain situation (See 5.1). Best (1970:160-161) declared: “Because each type of data-gathering device has its own particular bias, there is merit in supplementing one with another to counteract bias and generate more adequate data”.

Data collection in this thesis involves readability ratings ( See 5.2.1) and an analysis of the language features of the chosen texts (See 5.2.2), carefully designed questionnaires (5.2.3 and 5.3), and interviews (5.2.4 and 5.3.3) to get further and detailed information for the research inquiry. Thus the data in this thesis is collected and analysed in both quantitative and qualitative methods, that is: in numbers as well as in descriptive words (5.4).

### **5.2.1. Readability rating of the six chosen texts in intensive reading**

According to Nunan (1995), the syllabus defines the goals and objectives as well as the linguistic and experiential content, instructional materials, and

coursebooks put flesh on the bones of these specifications (See 2.4). It is well known that materials are essential within the curriculum/syllabus (See 2.4.1) and are often the most tangible and visible aspect of it (See 3.1.1). The goals stated in the National Syllabus for College English are the requirements that all college students have to meet (2.4). With the development of telecommunications, particularly with the use of the Internet, published materials in English have been more widespread, and it has become a lot easier and faster for Chinese to find materials in English to read. Nevertheless, the four authorised published coursebooks have remained the most popular and most powerful devices in College English teaching all over China (3.1.4). This is due to the fact that the four coursebooks are complete “packages” for language learning and teaching, with precise indications of the work that teachers and students are to do; moreover, the four coursebooks are narrowly based on the ONLY syllabus available (3.1.4 and 3.3).

#### **5.2.1.1. Why intensive reading?**

The National Syllabus for college English emphasises that the students should have a fairly strong reading ability, together with a certain degree of ability in listening, speaking, writing, and translation so as to enable them to use English as a tool to exchange information (Revising Team 1999; See also 2.4.5.). Of the five skills, reading always comes first in the Chinese context because Chinese people have to learn English through reading. There are hardly any speaking opportunities for Chinese students (Rao, 2002). Although nowadays there are radio and television broadcasting news in English or English language programs, people still tend to learn the language through the very formal reading courses,

and it is through intensive reading that they can learn vocabulary, expressions, grammar structures, sentence patterns and everything about the language. Intensive reading, indeed, plays the most important and fundamental role in college English in the Chinese context (See 2.3; 3.2 and Rao, 2002).

Since intensive reading is so important, and authentic materials (3.1.2.1.1) in reading texts are taken for granted by both language teachers and students, textbook writers in China have to put great efforts into selecting reading materials. All the materials in the four authorised coursebooks are authentic or semi – authentic (See 3.3). Factors like grammar, vocabulary, length, contents and style are crucial and have to be taken into careful account (See 3.1.4 and 4.2.2). The National English Syllabus even lists the vocabulary and the quantity of words for intensive reading (See 3.1.6; Revising Team, 1999), because intensive reading has always been regarded as the cornerstone for all the other language skills in English teaching and learning in China (See 3.1.4 and 3.2.2).

#### **5.2.1.2. The chosen texts**

Tomlinson (1998) stated that it was useful to analyse about 10% to 15 % of a total material, ideally chosen around the middle part to get a quick impression of the general nature of the whole set of materials. All coursebooks for intensive reading book I in College English are composed of 10 or 12 units, so it was decided that one text from each should be suggested and that either unit 5 or unit 6 should be selected. Thus texts chosen to be compared and analysed are as follows:

- Liu, P (1999) Unit 5 Beavers *New English Course* (Third edition) Beijing: Tsinghua University Press (Appendix VI-1).
- Dong, Y (1997) Unit 5 A Miserable, Merry Christmas *College English* (Second edition) Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press (Appendix VI-2).
- Yang, H (1998) Unit 6 Hobbies *College Core English* (Second edition) Beijing: The Higher Education Press (Appendix VI-3).
- Revising Team (1995) Unit 5 From Cattle to Paper Money *Modern English* Beijing: The Higher Education Press (not available).
- Ying, H (1999) Unit 6 Shopping *New College English* (First edition) Beijing: Beijing Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (Appendix VI-4).
- Lu, Z (2001) Unit 3 “How to Search for What You Want”, a template for the textbook project between Tsinghua University and the University of Nottingham to be published by the Higher Education Press in 2002 (Appendix VII).

The first four texts are from the four authorised coursebooks for College English (See 3.1.4). The latter two are added for the reason that one is from a newly published coursebook, and the other is the template for a new series of textbook to be published imminently near. It is assumed that a comparison of texts from already recognised coursebooks, from an influential newly published coursebook, and from one to be published will provide a more convincing basis for materials selection for new coursebooks. The intention in rating these six texts with the three selected formulae are: to check if readability is applicable in college English. If similar results can be obtained from trying the three selected

formulae, there is validity and reliability in employing the formulae as an **indicator** for materials selections for college English in China; the other is to see what level college students can be rated in comparison with native speakers. Although readability has been widely used in English speaking countries, it has never been tried in the EFL Chinese context.

### **5.2.1.3. Three readability formulae to be employed**

As discussed in Chapter 4 Section 5, three formulae are to be tried out in the data collection of this study. They are: the Dale and Chall Formula, the Fry Graph, and the Elley Noun Formula.

1. \* The Dale-Chall formula (1948) uses a word list called the Dale list as a basis for predicting vocabulary difficulty. The list is composed of 3000 words, which are best known to American eight-year-olds (See Appendix VIII). The formula, though time-consuming, has shown up well in validation studies, and is as follows:

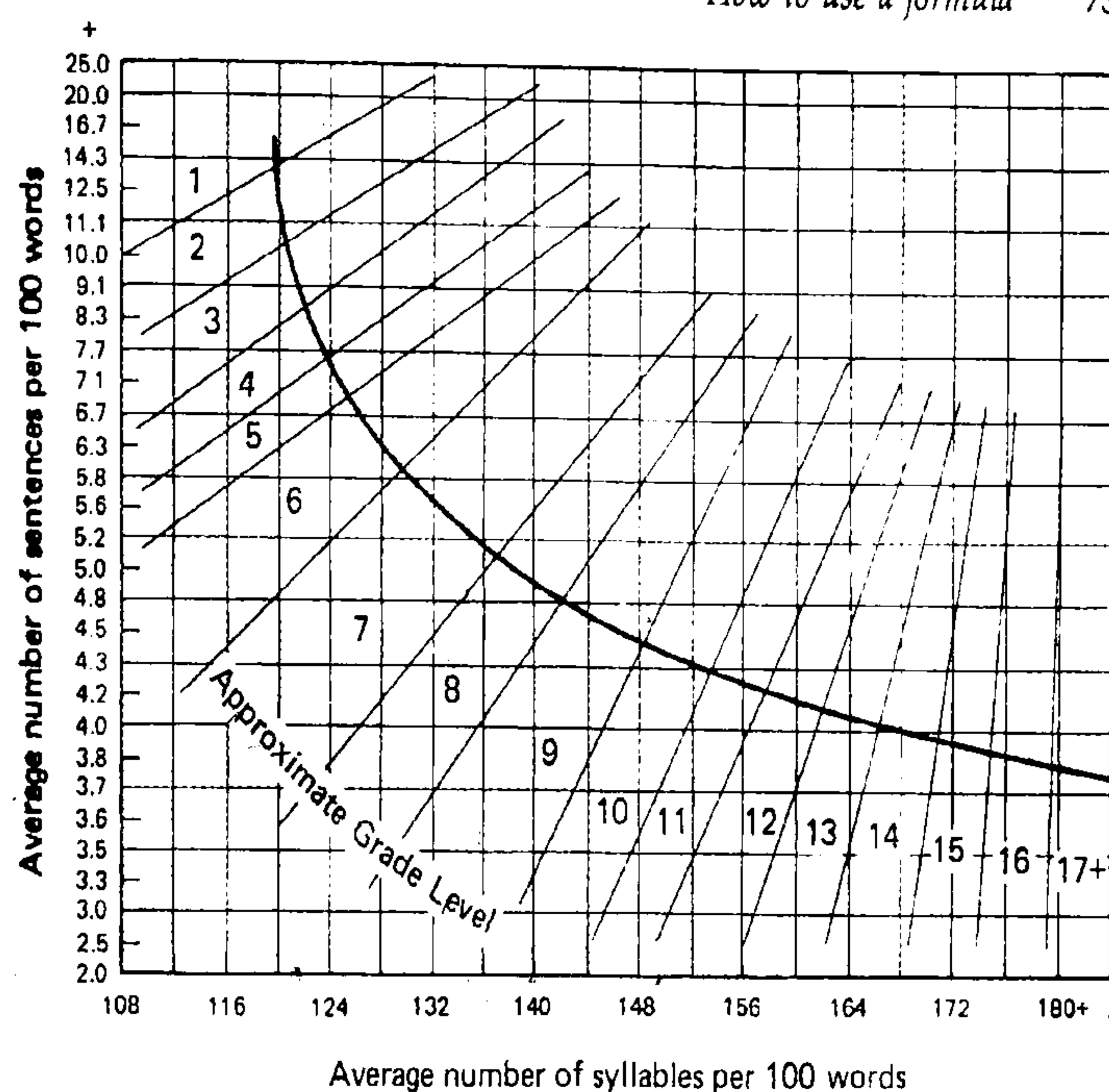
$$\begin{aligned} \text{US grade} &= (0.1579 \times \text{PERCENT UFMWDS}) \\ &+ (0.0496 \times \text{WDS/SEN}) \\ &+ 3.6365 \end{aligned}$$

UFMWDS = unfamiliar words

WDS/SEN = average number of words per sentence

UK reading level = 5 + US grade (Harrison, 1980: 74-77)

2. \* The Fry graph (1977) is one of the most straightforward ways of obtaining a readability index. Its graphical form saves time on making calculation and offers visual information, which helps understand clearly and accurately. (Harrison, 1980: 73-74)



3. The Elley Noun Count was created by Professor Elley who graded 2000 words according to their frequency of usage (See Appendix IX). In his formula, all nouns appearing in a passage are counted. Bentley (1985) thinks highly of the formula by commenting: "This method seems to overcome some of the difficulties which occur with judging unfamiliar vocabulary... It is most appropriate for children's prose designed for 8-16 years old". Despite it being unable to account for unconventional sentence structures, as a high density of ideas and frequent use of idioms etc., the formula does seem very profitable and useful to teachers.

#### 5.2.1.3.1. An analysis with the Dale-Chall formula

The Dale and Chall formula suggests choosing 100 words randomly, then counting the percentage of unfamiliar words and the number of words per sentence. To get a more precise result, 100 words have been chosen from the beginning of the text and another 100 words have been chosen from the final part of the texts.



### **New English Course (NEC) Unit 5: Beavers**

Beginning 100 words: percentage of unfamiliar words 10; Sentence L: 15.625

W/S

Last 100 words: percentage of unfamiliar words 16; Sentence L: 20.6185 W/S

**Average UFW: 13**

**Average Sentence Length: 18**

**Readability Dale and Chall: 6.5**

**Age level: 12-13 years**

### **College English (CE) Unit 6 A Miserable, Merry Christmas**

Beginning 100 words: percentage of unfamiliar words 2; Sentence L: 7.1428

W/S

Last 100 words: percentage of unfamiliar words 6; Sentence L: 13.46 W/S

**Average UFW: 4**

**Average Sentence Length: 10.3**

**Readability Dale and Chall: 4.8**

**Age level below 9**

### **College Core English (CCE) Unit 6 Hobbies**

Beginning 100 words: percentage of unfamiliar words 7; Sentence L: 19.88 W/S

Last 100 words: percentage of unfamiliar words 10; Sentence L: 20.51 W/S

**Average UFW: 8.5**

**Average Sentence Length: 20.196 W/S**

**Readability Dale and Chall: 5.98**

**Age level:** 10-11 years

**New College English (NCE) Unit 6 Consumer Behavior of Yong People**

**Beginning 100 words:** percentage of unfamiliar words 15; Sentence L: 15.87

**W/S**

Last 100 words: percentage of unfamiliar words 28; Sentence L: 29.76 W/S

**Average UFW:** 21.5

**Average Sentence Length:** 22.8

**Readability Dale and Chall:** 8.2

**Age level:** 16-17 years

**Template for the text project (Temp.): How to Search for What You Want**

Beginning 100 words: percentage of unfamiliar words 16; Sentence L: 15.79

**W/S**

Last 100 words: percentage of unfamiliar words 15; Sentence L: 15.686 W/S

**Average UFW:** 15.5

**Average Sentence length:** 15.2

**Readability Dale and Chall:** 6.8

**Age level:** 12-13 years

**Table 5-1: An analysis with the Dale-Chall formula**

	Level	Beginning 100 words		Ending 100 words	
		No. of UFW	S Length	No. of UFW	S Length
NEC	6.5 12-13	10	15.625	16	20.6185
CE	4.8 <9	2	7.1428	6	13.46
CCE	5.98 10-11	7	19.88	10	20.51
NCE	8.16 16-17	15	15.87	28	29.76
Temp.	6.77 12-13	16	15.79	15	15.686

Note: because the writer does not have an access to the book *Modern English* at the moment, only five of the chosen texts are analysed.

### 5.2.1.3.2. An analysis with the Fry Graph

The Fry Graph counts the number of sentences and the number of syllables in a chosen 100 words passage. To get a more precise result, 100 words have been chosen from the beginning part of the text and another 100 words have been chosen from the ending part of the text. The result is shown in Table 5-2:

Table 5-2: An analysis with the Fry Graph

	Level	Beginning 100 words		Ending 100 words	
		No. of sentences	No. of syllables	No. of sentences	No. of syllables
NEC	7/9=8	6.4	139	4.58	149
CE	2/6=4	14	128	7.46	136
CCE	7/9=8	5.03	139	4.875	147
NCE	9/17=13	6.3	154	3.36	181
Temp.	7/8=7.5	6.63	140	6.37	148

### 5.2.1.3.3. An analysis with the Elley Noun Count Formula

The Elley Noun Count formula counts all the nouns that appear in a text or three chosen paragraphs that are long enough to contain more than 30 nouns respectively. Add the mean noun frequency rating and then divide it by the number of nouns. Because only the text from NEC contains three long paragraphs that are more than 30 nouns, so the nouns that appear in the 5 chosen texts are counted from the beginning to the end.

### NEC Unit 5 Beavers

Nouns in the whole passage 90

452 is divided by 90 = 5.0 level: 10-12 years old

### **CE Unit 5 A Miserable, Merry Christmas**

Nouns in the whole passage 66

261 is divided by 66 = 3.9545 8.5- 9.5 years old

### **CCE Unit 6 Hobbies**

Nouns in the whole passage 88

362 is divided by 88= 4.1136 9-10 years old

### **NCE UNIT 6 SHOPPING**

Nouns in the whole passage 142

697 is divided by 142 = 4.908 10-12 years old

### **Template for Tsinghua: How to search what you need**

Nouns in the whole passage 58

345 is divided by 48 = 5.9 12-14 years old

**Table 5-3: An analysis with the Elley Noun Count**

	Number of nouns in the text	Points graded by frequency of usage	Mean Noun Frequency rating	Approximate Age Range
NEC	90	452	5.02	10-12
CE	66	261	3.95	8.5-9.5
CCE	88	362	4.1	9-10
NCE	142	697	4.9	10-12
Temp	58	345	5.9	12-14

#### 5.2.1.3.4. A comparison of the three results:

If we put the three analysed results together, the comparison is more obvious.

Table 5-4: A comparison of the results from the three formulae

	The Dale & Chall		The Fry Graph		The Elley Noun Count	
	Re. rating	Age range	Re. rating	Age range	Re. rating	Age range
NEC	6.5	12-13	8	13	5.02	10-12
CE	4.8	<9	4	9	3.95	8.5-9.5
CCE	5.98	10-11	8	13	4.11	9-10
NCE	8.16	16-17	13	18	4.9	10-12
Temp	6.17	12-13	7.5	12.5	5.9	12-14

#### 5.2.1.3.5. Comments and discussion:

Table 5-4 shows that the analysed results of three different readability formulae coincide consistently with those of the analysis results of the language features which will be discussed in 5.2.2. CE is the easiest text, and suits children under 9 years old. NCE is the most difficult text, and suits children above 13 years old. The other three texts NEC, CCE and the Template are appropriate for children between 10 – 13 years old, which is reasonable. Although they are between 17 or 19 years old, students in Band I of College English in China should have a level of English equal to children of 11-13 years old in Britain, because English becomes a compulsory course only in year one of secondary school (Pupils' average age, 12-13). Some may have learned English in primary school, but in a limited way. When they start secondary school, they have to start from the very beginning.

This is only a relatively mechanical analysis (See 4.3), and the formulae used were created in the context of English native speakers, mainly to be used for ranking stories targeted at native English speaking children (See 4.1), which is

totally different from College English teaching in China (See 2.1 and 3.1.3). Therefore, it is not wise to borrow these formulae as they are (See 4.6), although they provide some basis.

### **5.2.2. An analysis of the language features of the chosen texts**

The analysis is to be based on language features, such as vocabulary, grammatical items, sentence length and rhetorical function. The results will be compared with those that have been obtained from applying the three chosen formulae in order to prove, from another point of view, if the suggested three readability formulae have the validity and reliability to be applied to materials selection for college English in China.

#### **5.2.2.1. The approach to an analysis of the language features of the chosen texts**

To have a very brief general idea of the language features of the chosen texts, this section bases its approach mainly on lexical categories and grammatical categories in the checklist provided by Leech and Short (1981: 75-82).

**Lexical categories** are used to find out how the choice of words involves various types of meaning.

**General:** an overall view about language in use. Is the vocabulary simple or complex? Are words short (Anglo-Saxon) or long (from Latin origins), formal or colloquial, descriptive or evaluative, concrete or abstract, everyday or from a particular register, literary or figurative, with many adjectives or without many modifiers?

**Nouns:** Are the nouns abstract or concrete? Are there any proper names or collective nouns?

**Adjectives:** Are adjectives frequently used or not? What kinds of attribution do the adjectives refer to: physical, psychological, visual, or evaluative?

**Verbs:** Do verbs play an important part? Are they involved with states or movements? Are they used for physical acts, speech acts, psychological states or perceptions? Are they transitive or intransitive?

**Adverbs:** How many adverbs are used in the text? Are they functioning as adverbials of manner, place, time, degree, etc.?

**Grammatical categories** are to find out the ways words are organised or structured and the effects this organisation or structure could achieve.

**Sentence types:** What sort of sentences does the writer use?

**Sentence complexity:** Are the sentences simple or complex? What is the average length (in number of words)? Are there any compound sentences or comparative sentences? What kind of complexity is used: co-ordination, subordination or paradoxes?

**Verb phrases:** How are the verbs structured? Are they used in the present tense or in the past tense; in progressive aspect or in perfect aspect; in active voice or in passive voice? Do they take auxiliaries?

**Word class:** How frequent are the minor words, for instance, prepositions, pronouns, determiners, auxiliaries, interjections used?

#### **5.2.2.2. Language Features of the Chosen Texts**

This section presents the results of the language features of the chosen texts (Appendix VI-1-4 and VII) analysed with the checklist discussed in the above

section. These results remain consistent with those obtained from the application of the three chosen readability formulae discussed in the previous section, therefore confirms that the chosen readability formulae can be applied to text selection for college English.

The National English Syllabus (Revising Team, 1999) makes a clear statement as to the number of words that students are required to learn in each band and the quantity of reading students have to do in intensive and extensive reading. For Band 1, the number of words that students are required to learn is approximately 550 words, and the quantity for intensive reading is 6000 words. This determines the length of each unit and the length of the books, and even the number of new vocabulary contained in each unit (Table 5-5).

The National English Syllabus (Revising Team, 1999) provides a wordlist which marks clearly words that students have learned before they enter universities and words that students are required to learn in college English. Words that are not listed are words that are not required (Table 5-6).

Students in college English are non-English major students, and Band 1-4 for the first two years of college are the foundation parts. Normally students only concentrate on basic types of writing such as argumentation, description and exposition (Table 5-7). After students finish Band 4, they will focus on reading academic articles in their specialised subjects. Other types of writing are hardly touched, which explains why genre is not discussed in the study.



Table 5-5: A comparison of text and sentence length in the chosen texts

Items	NEC 10 units	CE 10 units	CCE 12 units	ME 12 units	NCE 12 units	Template 10 units
T Length	471 w	746 w	648 w	562 w	806 w	524 w
S Length	19.6w/s	12.43w/s	19.6w/s	20.81w/s	20.18 w/s	17.5 w/s
L S Length	37 w	40w	41w	34w	34 w	44 w
S S Length	5w	2w	7w	9w	9 w	5 w

Table 5-6: A comparison of new vocabulary in the chosen texts

Voc.	NEC 10 units	CE 10 units	CCE 12 units	ME 12 units	NCE 12 units	Template 10 units
Required	33	28	21	25	54	32
Not Required	12	13	3	3	14	10
Total	450	410	288	336	816	420
Rate of UFW	9.6%	5.5%	3.7%	4.7%	8.4%	8%

Table 5-7: A comparison of rhetorical functions

	NEC	CC	CCE	ME	NCE	Template
Styles	Argumen- tation	Description	Argumen- tation	Exposition	Argumen- tation	Exposition

Table 5-8: A comparison of lexical categories

	NEC	CE	CCE	ME	NCE	Template
P Noun	0	4	5	31	3	3
A Noun	7	7	16	2	32	3
Adj.	30	14	43	14	44	18
Adv.	10	15	12	8	21	8

Table 5-9: A comparison of verbs

	NEC	CE	CCE	ME	NCE	Template
Modal V	5	9	17	1	6	14
Link V	11	13	21	17	11	7
Trans. V	16	39	32	15	37	24
Intrans. V	7	48	23	9	12	26

Table 5-10: A comparison of grammatical items

	NEC	CE	CCE	ME	NCE	Template
Passive Voice	23	3	2	15	5	5
Inverted order	0	0	2	0	0	0
Emphatic	0	1	0	1	0	0
Dir. Speech	3	15	0	0	0	0
Exclamation	0	2	0	0	0	0
Comparative	0	0	0	0	10	9
Superlative	0	0	0	0	10	7
Imperative	0	0	0	0	0	4
Subjunctive	0	0	0	0	0	5

### 5.2.2.3. Comments and discussions of the results

The chosen six intensive reading texts for College English have been used as an aid to teaching /learning college English, whose contents are principally determined by the requirements of the National English Syllabus. The aims for Band I are stated precisely in the syllabus: to train the students' ability to read, to teach them some basic reading skills. Of the 550 new words students are to learn, 350 words are to be used in the five skills; Apart from 6000 words for intensive reading, students also need to cover 2,5000 for extensive reading. (Revising Team, 1999) (See 2.4.6; 2.4.7 and 3.1.5).

The six chosen coursebooks contain 10 or 12 units. There seems to be a standard pattern in the subdivision and the length of the first four coursebooks. From Table 5-5, it is clear that all the chosen texts meet the requirements for intensive reading as far as quantity is concerned. Concerning text length, Table 5-5 shows that New College English exceeds what is required (See 3.1.5; Also the 1999 version of the National English Syllabus).

Table 5-6 gives an idea of vocabulary coverage in which there is a great variety. *New College English*, with 68 new words altogether exceeds what is required by the syllabus (See 3.1.5). College English by contrast, has only 24 new words, and therefore fails to meet the requirement. The reason for this is that those texts are not written by the teachers who selected them. They are actually authentic or semi-authentic, and they provide the basis for a real-world perspective, allowing the teacher to be quite specific in giving an initial description of a text (See 3.1.2). The difficulty order according to the percentage of new words is:

Easiest					Most difficult
<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; align-items: center;"> <span></span> <span style="flex-grow: 1; border-bottom: 1px solid black; position: relative;"> <span style="position: absolute; right: -10px; top: -5px; border-top: 5px solid transparent; border-bottom: 5px solid transparent; border-left: 10px solid black;"></span> </span> <span></span> </div>					
CCE	ME	CE	Temp.	NCE	NEC
3.7%	4.7%	5.5%	8%	8.4%	9.6%

As is studied in 4.2.2 and 4.4.3, the more new words a text has, the more difficult it is likely to be.

In the last decade, teachers have become increasingly interested in the potential of describing texts through reference to the context in which the text was produced. In reading the texts, students are acquainted not only with the language but also with information such as social and cultural backgrounds (See 3.2.4), so as to set up the relationship between the writer as ‘informant’ and the reader as ‘learner’ (3.2.3). “Beaver” from *New English Course* is an introduction to the living habits and the engineering skills of beavers. “A Miserable, Merry

Christmas” from *College English* describes a child's inner emotion in asking for a gift on Christmas Day. “From Cattle to Paper Money” from *Modern English* introduces how money has developed through history. “Hobbies” from *College Core English* argues that a hobby is an interesting activity, which you turn to for pleasure. “Shopping” from *New College English* studies the buying behaviour of young people. “How to search for what you want” from the template for the new textbook project tells the reader that the Internet functions like a big library. One has to use the search engine to look for a specific title. These six texts, though different in language choices and register, introduce cultural and background knowledge to the students with a purpose of familiarising the students with social contexts, new technology and the natural world (See 3.2.4; 4.2.1).

Table 5-7 lists the rhetorical functions of the chosen texts, which indicates the variety of different writing styles. As a result of different styles, sentence length varies. Apart from CE (description), which has the average sentence length of 12.43 words, all the other texts have considerable sentence length between 17.5-20.8 (Table 5-5). Generally speaking, longer sentences are more difficult than short ones (See 4.2.2 and 4.4.4). CE has a great deal of direct speech, which makes the text more like a conversation and explains why sentences in the text are short and easy, but it introduces the cultural context of how westerners celebrate Christmas, which Chinese people do not do normally (See 3.2.4), which might be the reason it was selected.

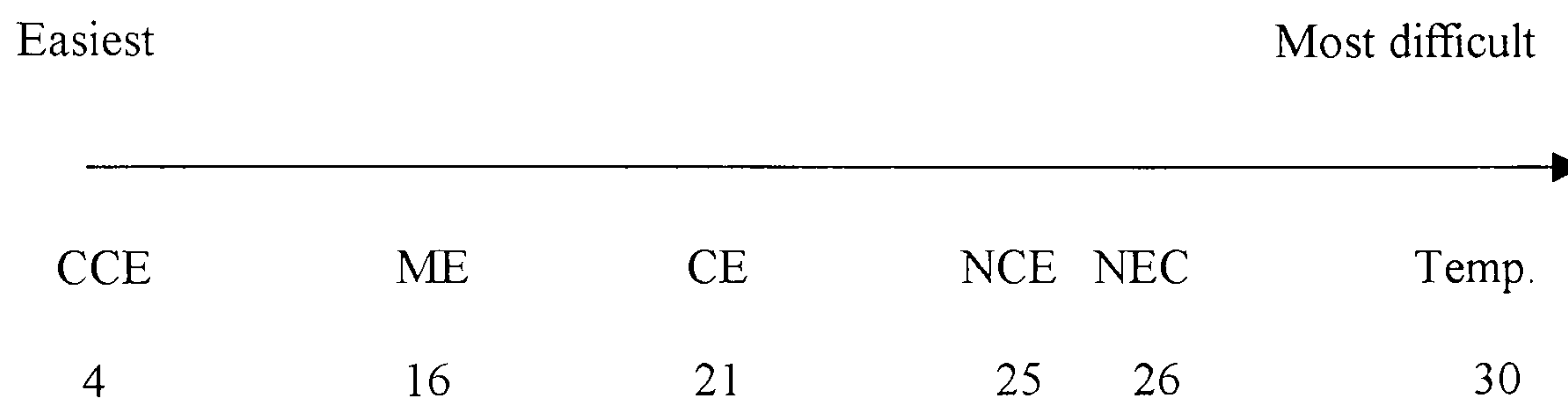
Easiest				Most difficult
CE		Temp.	NEC+CCE	NCE+ME
12.4w/s		17.5w/s	19.6w/s	20.18-20.8w/s

In the comparison of lexical categories shown in Table 5-8, it is concluded that NEC, CCE and NCE have done a good job in argumentation. Being an argument, those texts need many modifiers and evaluators. It turns out that NEC has employed 30 adjectives, CCE 43 and NCE 44. NCE, with 32 abstract nouns used, must be difficult for the students to read (See 4.4.3). CE is the narration of an event that took place at Christmas time, using simple everyday Anglo-Saxon words and proves to be easier than all the other texts. ME reveals the fact of money development and has to be exact with many proper names of places, nations and countries.

CE uses 9 modal verbs to express the feelings and emotions of the characters in the story. CCE uses 17 and the template uses 14 to express people's assumption, attitudes and opinions towards hobbies and new technology, the Internet respectively (Table 5-9).

Table 5-10 shows a very interesting phenomenon, which is the importance of grammar learning. It is obvious that all texts are intended to teach the students certain grammar items. For instance: NEC and ME pay attention to passive voice. CE emphasises direct speech. NCE intends for the students to practise the comparative and superlative degrees as well as passive voice. The template puts

weight on a variety of grammar items: from comparative, superlative degrees to passive voice, imperative sentence patterns and the subjunctive mood. Only CCE does not seem to have any particular purpose because it does not contain many grammatical items. Perhaps inverted order is the focus of what the students learn, but only two appear, which is not enough to attract students' attention. This is a defect in this unit in CCE, as grammar always plays an important role in EFL learning in Chinese context (See 3.1.3), especially for beginners and intermediate students. As far as grammar items are concerned (See 4.2.2), the difficulty order is like this:



On the whole, the six chosen texts, though with different language features and writing styles, are able to meet the requirements stated in the National syllabus for college English because they provide students with opportunities to learn certain vocabulary and grammar items as well as expose them to various writings. However, some texts are easier and some are more difficult. For example: CE is easier because it has the shortest sentence length, only 12.43 words per sentence; CCE does not have enough new words and is weaker in grammar teaching; NEC is more difficult because it has the longest text length and it contains the most new vocabulary.

Both the readability rating of the chosen texts using the three most popular readability formulae, and the analysis of language features according to the checklist provided by Leech and Short, have proved that language features such as word difficulty and sentence length play an important part in selection of coursebook materials for college English. However as they measure language features only in a mechanical way, they have not, and as a matter of fact, cannot draw us a whole picture of all the elements that influence the readability of texts (See 4.2 and 4.3.2). Readability formulae can be used only as an indicator to text difficulty. To provide more scientific criteria, existing readability formulae have to be used together with subjective opinions about other text features such as organisation and adjunct comprehension aids, as well as many elements in reader factors (See 4.2 and 5.4), the solution to which will be given in Chapter Six.

### **5.2.3. Template design**

Having studied the background of college English and the literature reviews on coursebook study, reading process and readability, this section will be devoted to template design to be studied in the data collection in the next chapter.

#### **5.2.3.1. Audience of Band I college English**

Upon entering universities, students are to take a placement test given by the College English Teaching and Research Association of the city or of the province. According to their performance in the test, they are classified into different groups of Band 1, 2, 3 and even 4. Band 4 is the best group. Band 1 is the opposite. Some universities do have poorer students than Band 1, who may

be minorities or students with special talents in sports, music or other areas. According to the National English Syllabus, Band 1 is the starting point for college English, and the lowest level in college English (Revising Team, 1999).

### 5.2.3.2. Constraints

As is pointed out in 3.1.1, coursebooks embody what has been stated in a syllabus. Therefore the requirements of the syllabus act as a framework for coursebook design.

Table 5-11 gives the requirement for Band 1, which has to be the backbone in books targeting at Band 1 students and also constrain text selections.

Table 5-11: **Required achievement for Band I**

Vocabulary	Reading	Listening	Speaking	Writing	Translating
550	Intensive texts amounting to 6000, 60wpm; Extensive texts amounting to 25000, 80wpm	Follow an English language class; understand simple dialogues and conversations, catch the main ideas	Basic classroom English; ask and answer questions based on a given text	Able to make notes, answer questions and write outlines of a given text; write an essay of 100 words in half an hour	Able to translate English articles easier than the texts in the coursebook into Chinese, 250 wph; able to put simple structured Chinese sentences into English, 200 wph

College English Tests Band 4 and Band 6 are still the constraints to ‘process’ and ‘interactive approaches’, because they test students' comprehension of a text in multiple-choice format rather than the strategies necessary to the process of reading which then lead to complete understanding.



### **5.2.3.3. The design of the templates in pre-piloting study and piloting study**

The template units used in the study have been tried out twice in pre-piloting study and in piloting study. The following two sections will introduce how the texts were selected and how the exercises were designed.

### **5.2.3.4. Templates for pre-piloting study**

Two templates were offered in pre-piloting study conducted by Chinese college English teachers who were visiting scholars in Nottingham University (See 5.2.4.1). The templates integrate all the five language skills of speaking, listening, reading, translating and writing (Appendix XI). The intention is to achieve an acceptable balance between relevant skills, and integrate them so that work in one skill area helps the other in order to train student's communicative ability both in oral and written form. The texts chosen are authentic and have reached the level of readability (See 5.2.1.3) and met the requirements of the official syllabus. They have also been proved by many teachers from Tsinghua University and Nottingham University in terms of interest, contents and background knowledge. As far as progress is concerned, the principle is: listening is prior to speaking and reading is prior to writing and translating. As thinking is the most advanced and most difficult skill, it is put at the end of a unit. See 5.2.4.1 for details of pre-piloting study.

### **5.2.3.5. Template for piloting study**

The result of pre-piloting study (5.2.4.1) indicates that the integrated templates used are not practical at the moment in the EFL Chinese context. Many universities divide teachers into two different groups of listening/speaking and

reading/writing. It is also recommended by teachers from Tsingua University and editors from the High Education Press that new coursebooks be classified into listening & speaking and reading and writing. Also for the reason of being more precise, the template for piloting study ( Appendix XVI) concentrates on reading and writing with an emphasis on communicative functions as well as language forms ( See 5.2.4.2).

Of the four skills in learning a second language, particularly in learning English as a second or foreign language, reading is by far the most important (Carrel, 1988). In the case of college English as a foreign language, students learn English for academic purposes, which make extensive use of materials written in English. Therefore, it is critical and paramount to develop an ability to read English at a reasonable rate and with good comprehension. Thus, English teaching in China has always dictated the primacy of reading over every other language skills, which is made very clear in the National English Syllabus (Revising Team 1999) (Also see 2.4.5; 2.4.6 and 2.4.7).

The traditional and the structural approaches in language teaching have had a great influence upon college English teaching in China. Emphasis has been given to grammar forms and accuracy in reading (2.3 and 3.1.3). However, starting from the late 80's, top priority has been changed to fluency, although grammar structures are still kept as significant aims. This is due to the fact that College English Tests Band 4 and Band 6 have been used as the only means to evaluate both teaching quality and students' English proficiency. Consequently, most current English teaching is test-oriented. Both teachers and students are

keen on doing simulated tests rather than concentrating on learning the language. Each year there are about one million students taking CET Band 4 and Band 6, which indicates the importance of these exams to the students. High marks have been pursued, while the practical use of the English language and communicative competence, the final goal of teaching, have been neglected since they are time-consuming and of no use in examinations (2.2.4 and 2.3).

This situation is unsatisfactory. First of all, it is believed that there is no single right way to evaluate both teaching and students' proficiency. Secondly, CET Band 4 and Band 6 are not necessarily representative samples of what the students have been taught and are expected to learn. Thirdly language is best viewed as a skill. It is possible to know a lot about a language without being able to use it (Weir, 1993). Furthermore, the overall purpose of English evaluation is to improve language teaching and enhance language learning (Genesee and Upshur; 1996), rather than to achieve high marks in exams.

This new textbook intends to offer a set of materials, which would overcome the side effects of the current test-oriented teaching mode and to promote a motivation to learn the language in real communication. It tries to find a way of loosing the stranglehold of a purely structural/grammar approach and to introduce 'process approach' or 'interactive approach' or 'task-based approach' in some exercises, which are expected to lead students outwards from the textbook. Therefore, some of the exercises and activities are open-ended, to provide freedom for students to express themselves. It is understood that revolutionary reforms do not take place within a fortnight and that it is

impossible to break away from the long-standing tradition of product approach all at once. However, a mixed range of exercises including ‘product’ and ‘process’ is expected to lead to comprehension as well as to different ways of approaching texts.

#### **5.2.3.6. Proposed layout for Book I *Reading and Writing***

Book One *Reading and Writing* is composed of 10 units categorised according to themes, to be finished within one term, approximately 70 hours altogether. Each unit contains three parts: Part I is for intensive reading, part II and III are for extensive reading. At the top of each unit, a brief guide is given to prepare students for the subject. The most distinguished features of the book lie in exercise design, which combines ‘product’ and ‘process’ approaches and also different exercises for different units, so that students cannot predict and do not get bored with similar activities. There is a Teacher’s Book to accompany it, with not only keys to exercises but also instructions for teachers on how to use the material as well as how to organise a class.

#### **5.2.3.7. Templates for the study**

To give students a clearer picture of the whole book of Band I *Reading and Writing*, another template Unit 9 (Appendix XIX) was used in the study. They were constructed in the following organization: receptive skill followed by productive skill, i.e. reading is prior to translating and writing. ‘Thinking’ is put at the end, as it is newly introduced to stimulate students to participate and ‘learn to learn’, which provides students with opportunities and freedom to extend a text as much as they can.

Reading passages are used as an introduction or input to the productive skills of speaking, translating, writing and thinking. It is hoped that the vocabulary, grammatical structures and writing techniques used in the texts can be practised again and again so that students should have learned how to use them by the time they finish the book.

Reading starts with pre-reading questions to get students prepared. For instance, the template Unit 3 is on computers, and Part I for intensive reading is entitled “How to search for what you want”, so the pre-reading questions are as follows:

1. Do you use the Internet? If yes, how often do you use it?
2. What kind of information do you usually search for on the Internet?
3. If you want to search for certain information, what do you do first?

After discussing these questions associated with the title of the reading passage, students will be ready to approach the text with certain schemata in mind and with questions of their own to which they would like to find answers.

supplies strategy and skill practice, and linguistic development, as well as

- a. Questions presented in “Comprehension Check” are considered while-reading questions as they help learners understand the writer’s purpose, the text structure and the content (Rivas, 1999:16). They check if the students understand what they have read and provide the students with a clear signpost through the next section (Hill, 1997).

Though the text in the template is followed by while-reading questions, a typical characteristic of the product approach, attempts have been made to design exercises in a more process-based way. For instance: exercises use sentences, words, phrases and concepts from the text to facilitate students' comprehension, therefore functioning as a kind of anticipation. This is said by Alderson (1980: 138) to be typical of a process approach, whose focus is on techniques which will help students to deal independently with any text in their subject areas, by giving them ways of approaching texts. In this way, questions asked are genuine comprehension questions rather than factual questions with an aim to increase students' general knowledge and to develop their ability to read critically.

“Presentation”, “Translation” “Writing Tasks” and “Thinking” in the template can be labelled in the post-reading phase, which help students to consolidate what they have read as well as to relate the text to the learners' experience, knowledge, and opinions. (Rivas, 1999:18)

The productive skills of presentation, translation and writing tasks are introduced after the receptive skills of reading. The last stage is to develop thinking. The philosophy here is to integrate the language skills - especially speaking and writing - after successfully understanding the reading text. “Think” is introduced for the first time, an ability to 'read beyond the lines', which Grant called "projective reading" (Grant, 1987: 61). The skill has the advantage of relating the reading passage to real life - and in particular to student's own opinions, knowledge, imagination and experience. For the last decade, lots of reading materials:

- a. have concentrated too much on understanding the plain sense of what is stated in the text
- b. have been used simply as a way of exposing the students to vocabulary
- c. have degenerated into a purely academic exercise, divorced from real life and from the experience of the students.

However, the objectives in teaching reading go far beyond these. Apart from the basic comprehension skill of understanding what is stated in the text, students need to develop the ability to read between lines and to read beyond lines, which has been neglected as a direct result of too many multiple-choice exercises. The Chinese scholar Confucius once said it would be better for an instructor to teach students how to fish rather than simply give them fish, which is termed as 'learner autonomy' by (Ellis & Sinclair 1989: 10) (See 6.1.3). Muller-Verweyen (1999: 79-88) argues that materials should provide tasks and exercises which encourage autonomy by prompting learners to adopt their own skills and strategies and to reflect on the learning process, so that they can gain confidence in solving problems.

So 'thinking' tasks provide students with a good chance to use the text in the light of their own experience and by encouraging them to process to the deeper level of a text.

Part II and III are to be used for extensive reading whose main purpose is to enlarge the students' vocabulary. So the texts are a bit easier and longer, and

have fewer exercises, compared with Part I (See Appendix VII for Template Unit 3 and XIX Template Unit 9)

#### **5.2.4. Questionnaire design**

Best (1970: 161) commented that “ A questionnaire is used when factual information is desired.” “Questionnaire research seems to be very popular among educational researchers in general and ELT research in particular”, because researchers can benefit from a questionnaire's many advantages (McDonough & McDonough, 1997:171). For instance:

- They are precise and clear.
- They can be used on both small and large scales.
- Data can be gathered in different time slots.
- Information can be gathered from other schools and even other countries.

Having become aware of their drawbacks, Weir & Roberts (1994:152) added six more advantages:

- They are cheap and cost- efficient.
- They allow wider sampling.
- They ask everybody the same questions.
- They provide anonymity.
- They give more time to think about answers.
- They may prove easier to analyse.

In planning and operationalizing a questionnaire, researchers first have to specify the primary objective of the questionnaire; then decide what to cover and check if all elements related to the central purpose are included. The next



step is to prepare the wording and ask appropriate questions. There are two forms of questionnaires: closed form and open form questionnaires. The former is restricted, prescribing the range of responses from which the respondent may choose. It has the advantage of being easy to fill out, straightforward to code, and relatively objective as it keeps the informants on the subject (Best, 1970; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). Meanwhile it does not enable the informants to add any remarks, qualifications and explanations to the categories (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). The open form questionnaire is unrestricted, and calls for a free response in the informant's own words. It has the advantage of being able to provide in-depth responses, allowing the informants to explain and qualify their responses. On the other hand, this type of question is difficult to code, interpret and summarise in the research report (Best, 1970; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). Many questionnaires include both types of questions to serve different purposes. The questionnaires in this study use mainly closed form questions, with only two open form questions at the very end, because subjects do not have a good command of English, and they would not answer the questions at all if they were asked to respond freely, especially in their own words. The results have proved the assumption of the researcher.

#### **5.2.4.1. Pre-piloting study questionnaires**

In order to design proper templates for Band I college English, three pre-piloting questionnaires have been produced. The first pre-piloting questionnaire (Appendix X) was based on the two initial templates written by the writer of this thesis (Appendix XI). The second pre-piloting questionnaire is on teachers'

perceptions and experience of the grammar items that affect students' ability to comprehend (Appendix XII). The third pre-piloting questionnaire is on topics that students may find interesting and types of articles and writings that students may find difficult (Appendix XIII).

#### **5.2.4.1.1. Pre-piloting questionnaire on the two initial templates**

This questionnaire consists of two parts with an emphasis on the reading text and exercises selected and designed by the readability discussed in the previous chapters. Part one asks background question about the subjects and Part two concentrates on the two given templates. The two initial templates try to integrate all the language skills, to achieve a balance between knowledge about the language and practice in using the language. Each template is composed of three parts: listening and speaking; reading, writing and translating; and thinking. "Thinking" for the first time is treated with special attention, and the purpose of this is to encourage students to enter into a dialogue with the writer and to participate in the interaction between the reader and the writer. Exercises are designed with an emphasis on students' productive skills rather than receptive skills to provide students with opportunities to communicate through the target language.

#### **Subjects for the pre-piloting questionnaire on the two initial templates**

Seven Chinese visiting scholars from the School of English Studies and the School of Education and Centre of English Language Education in Nottingham University took part in the questionnaire. As visiting scholars in Nottingham, they have attended lectures, seminars and observed classroom activities. They

are also college English teachers from different universities, some from key universities like Tsinghua University and The University of Science and Technology in Beijing, some from ordinary universities like Beijing Architecture Institute, Northern Industrial University, Northwest Industrial University, Dalian University and Southwest Jiaotong University. The furthest is from Nanchang, Jiangxi Province. They are all experienced in college English teaching, four have taught for more than 10 years, two for more than 5 years and 1 for more than 3 years.

**The result and discussion are as the following:**

**Positive comments:**

**General:** Five teachers think the overall impression of the templates is favourable, two think it is partly favourable. Six think the templates can reflect or partly reflect their students needs and interests though they do not have enough objective exercises for CET Band 4. Six think the templates achieve an acceptable balance between knowledge about the language and practice in using the language, and an acceptable balance between the relevant language skills. Six think the templates contain or partly contain enough communicative activities to enable students to use the language independently. Six think the templates are reasonably well graded and well structured. Five think each unit is well balanced for every language skill. Five think that parts of the templates have the right level of difficulty, but generally they are a bit difficult.

**Each Skill:** Five like “reading”, three like “thinking”, and one likes “speaking” because there are open-ended exercises and the materials selected as texts are

new and interesting (3) and the exercises are well organised (4) and innovative (5). Three think “jig-saw listening” is new and interesting, but one thinks it is too difficult. All seven people find “Thinking” necessary because it is innovative and challenging to their students. Four think the intensive reading texts are just right in length, two prefer shorter texts.

**Negative comments:**

Four think the whole templates require more time to prepare, two think parts of the templates do, for instance: reading, but one has a different opinion. Five think the sound distinctions in exercises A, B and C are not necessary and two do not like matching questions and answers in Exercise D. Two think ‘describe a school’ and ‘Main idea check’ are not necessary.

Exercises that involve too much productive skill like speaking and writing are too difficult, especially for those from second and third class universities because productivity is the weakest point of their students. This illustrates that **questions asked in a text have a significant influence upon readability.**

**Expectation and suggestions:**

Four teachers expect textbooks to follow the official syllabus and prepare students for international communication through English. Two expect textbooks to be more relevant to students’ communicative needs and one still wants textbooks to prepare specifically for CET Band 4 and Band 6, which is due to the influence CET has upon college English teaching (See 3.1.2). **Four like textbooks to be separated into two parts: listening and speaking; and**

**reading and writing, as teachers in most universities are divided into two groups: with responsibility for listening and speaking; or reading and writing.** The assumption is that teachers have less preparation since they are already heavily loaded as a result of the shortage of English teachers. Only two prefer to have a single book with all the skills integrated in it. Five like textbooks to have a variety of writings, but one likes to have more newspaper articles and one likes to have more magazine articles. Five expect different exercises in different units. **It is too dull - they say - to have the same exercises all through the book.** Three suggest having more multiple choice questions and **paraphrasing** in reading comprehension. **Vocabulary is still quite crucial.** Teachers do not like to have too many new words that are not required in the syllabus. Five expect to have only 10-20%; two are more generous, they expect 30-40% (See 3.1.6; 4.2.2. and 5.2.2). Five like to have make-up sentences in vocabulary teaching. And four want to add complete sentences in grammar exercises indicating that **grammar is still needed in college English.** (See 3.1.3 and 5.2.2.3)

#### **5.2.4.1.2. Questionnaire on Grammar items**

This questionnaire is on teachers' perceptions and their experience of the grammar items that affect students' ability to comprehend since grammar has always been considered important and grammar approach has been dominating college English teaching so far. In order to give a complete systemic picture of the grammar in English, the writer of this dissertation borrowed the Grammatical Summary from the National English Syllabus (1999) and used it as the questionnaire (Appendix XII). Meanwhile it is clear that the summary might

be too abstract because the items are just listed there without any explanation or illustrations.

Nine teachers did the questionnaire, eight of them were college English teachers and one taught English majors. Only one of them came from a key university, the rest were from ordinary universities all over China. They all had at least three years of teaching experience.

**The following is the result:**

**Table 5-12: Result of Part One in the questionnaire on grammar items**

Grammar Items	Difficulty
Nouns	2
Pronouns	2
Determiners	3
Numerals	3
Tense	3
Passive Voice	4
Phrasal Verbs	3
Infinitive	4
V-ing Forms	4
V-ed Participles	4
Modal Verbs	3
The Subjunctive Mood	5
Prepositions	4
Adjectives and Adverbs	3
Agreement	4

**Table 5-13: Result of Part Two in the questionnaire on grammar items**

Grammar Items	Difficulty
Basic Sentence Patterns & Elements	2
Noun Clauses	3
Direct & Indirect Speech	2
Adjective Clauses	3
Apposition	3
Adverb Clauses	3
It	2
There be	1

Table 5-14: **Result of Part Three in the questionnaire on grammar items**

Grammar Items	Difficulty
Co-ordination	2
Parenthesis	2
As	3
Negation	3
Inversion	4
Emphasis	3
Ellipsis	4
Substitution	3
Separation	3
Transformation of sentences	3

Table 5-15: **Result of Part Four in the questionnaire on grammar items**

Grammar Items	Difficulty
Punctuation	2
Word-formation	3

**Discussion:**

Difficulty is rated from 1-5. 1 is the lowest and 5 is the highest in difficulty level. From the above four tables, it is not hard to draw a conclusion that sentence structures and word order are not very difficult for Chinese learners except “Inversion” and “Ellipsis”, because Chinese and English have similar sentence structures and word orders. But because there are no “Passive voice”, “Infinitive”, “V-ing form”, “V-ed forms” “Subjunctive Mood” in the Chinese language, they are harder to learn. Also there are more prepositions in English than in Chinese, so they are not easy either. Agreement between the subject and the predicate needs a lot of practice for Chinese students. **To conclude, grammar items that the Chinese language does not have are more difficult to learn for Chinese learners.**

#### **5.2.4.1.3. Questionnaire on topics that students may find interesting and types of articles and writings that students may find difficult**

The third questionnaire (Appendix XIII) is composed of four parts: the background knowledge of the subjects, the topics in which teachers think students are interested, the third part is on types of articles that teachers think are difficult for the students, and the last part is on types of writing that are difficult for the students. Eight teachers participated in doing it. Seven were the same subjects who did the second questionnaire.

The result of the questionnaire on the topics can be classified into three groups: topics obtained more than 4 points as shown in Table 5-16; topics that got more than 3.5 as shown in Table 5-17, and topics under 3.5 not listed because they are considered least important. Table 5-18 shows types of articles that are difficult for the students. Table 5-19 lists types of articles that might be difficult for the students:



Table 5-16: Topics that are labelled over 4 in interest ranking: (21 topics)

Topics	Points
Detective movies	4.25 (3-5)
Action Movies	4.125 (3-5)
Modern Technique	4.125 (2-5)
Environmental protection	4.875 (4-5)
Culture Shocks	4.125 (3-5)
Customs and habits	4.5 (4-5)
Keep fit in health	4.25 (2-5)
Professions in employment	4.25 (3-5)
Income and expenses	4.1428 (3-5)
Job hunting	4 ( 2-5)
Languages	4.25 (3-5)
Modern means of communication	4.83 (4-5)
Educational systems of different countries	4.125 ( 2-5)
Students' life	4 ( 3-4)
Campus activities	4 ( 2-5)
Social manners	4 (3-5)
Table manners	4.125 (2-5)
Feelings	4 ( 3-5)
Emotions	4.25 ( 3-5)
Sense	4 ( 3-5)
Academic presentation	4.375 ( 3-5)

Table 5-17: **Topics that are labelled over 3.5 in interesting ranking (42 topics)**

Topics	Points
Football	3.87 (2-5)
Volleyball	3.5 (2-5)
Travel in China	3.875 (1-5)
Travel around the world	3.5 (0-5)
Shopping for food	3.875 (3-5)
Shopping for clothes	3.5 (2-5)
Shopping for books	3.75 (3-5)
Shopping for computers	3.75 (2-5)
Cinema	3.875 (2-5)
Romantic movies	3.875 (2-5)
Western movies	3.625 (3-5)
Light music	3.75 (3-5)
Population	3.635 (2-5)
Divorce	3.5 (1-4)
Marriage	3.875 (1-5)
New inventions	3.625 (2-5)
New equipment	3.5 (2-5)
Wild life	3.875 (2-5)
People's opinion	3.625 (2-5)
Natural resources	3.75 (3-5)
Sea development	3.5 (3-5)
Marketing in business	3.75 (2-5)
Buy behaviour	3.5 (3-4)
Banking in finance	3.625 (2-5)
Risk in finance	3.5 (2-5)
Share and stocks	3.625 (2-5)
Insurance	3.5 (2-5)
Court	3.5 (2-5)

Table 5-18: **Types of articles that might be difficult**

Types of articles	Difficulty ranking
Poem	4.625 (3-5)
Academic	4.428 (3-5)
Newspaper article	3.5 (2-4)
Essay	3.375 (2-5)
Magazine	3.375 (2-5)
Advertisement	3.125 (1-5)
Novel	2.375 (1-3)
Story	1.5 (1-3)

Table 5-19: **Types of writings that might be difficult**

Types of writing	Difficulty ranking
Argumentation	3.875 (3-5)
Exposition	3.875 (3-5)
Contrast	2.875 (1-4)
Description	1.875 (1-3)

Discussion:

There are two interesting discoveries here. One is that teachers' perceptions are sometimes very close and sometimes very different. In ranking difficulty according to types of articles and types of writings they are pretty close. However, they differ widely in judging advertisements, which is understandable because advertisements can be very different. But very often they show a great variance in deciding which topic students may be interested in. This is because they put their own feelings, emotions, hobbies and subjective opinions into their judgements; and also because the question itself is not easy to answer. Even students in the same class do not show the same interest in the same topics, as has been seen in 4.4.1. The other discovery is that teachers are very interested in issues like modern techniques and customs and topics related to people and culture.

#### **5.2.4.2. Piloting questionnaire**

The above three pre-piloting questionnaires have laid a solid foundation for the second draft of the template in selecting materials in terms of language difficulty such as vocabulary and grammar structures, as well as topics that might motivate students' interest and types of articles that students may find difficult. They also provide some ideas in exercise design. Above all, the suggestion of dividing the book into two: speaking and listening; reading and writing has been

accepted after consultation with teachers from Tsinghua University and editors from the Higher Education Press. Therefore, the second draft of the template used in piloting study concentrates only on reading material selection and exercise design. Writing has been taken into account, but the requirement for writing in Band I is not very great.

The piloting questionnaire is the second drafted template focusing on readability in reading materials selection and textbook design for college English is composed of two questionnaires formed mainly on the basis of closed questions with only a couple of open questions. Closed questions are used for straightforward and relatively objective answers and open questions are raised to obtain students' comments. One questionnaire is for students (Appendix XIV) and the other is for teachers (Appendix XV). Each questionnaire consists of three parts. Part I is the second drafted template for Band I Reading & Writing Unit 3 (Appendix XVI) prepared for the textbook project between Nottingham University and Tsinghua University. It has exercises on comprehension, vocabulary, translation, writing and thinking skills. It includes questions both on facts (Comprehension Check II, Vocabulary) and on the deeper meaning of the texts (Comprehension Check I, Presentation and Thinking). Part II is composed of comments on the selection and the design of the texts by asking about the subjects' general impressions of the templates. Part III is concerned with subjects' personal background, such as their purpose in learning, an evaluation of their/their students' language skills and their comments on their currently used textbooks.

#### **5.2.4.2.1. Piloting study**

Before the questionnaires were sent back to Beijing, China, the writer of the thesis did a piloting study among 6 Chinese students and 4 Chinese college English teachers in Nottingham to make sure that all the questions both in template Unit 3 and in the questionnaires for teachers and students were explicit and reasonable.

##### **5.2.4.2.1. 1. Subjects chosen for the piloting study:**

The piloting study was undertaken in Nottingham on 14 September 2001 among 6 Chinese students, and 4 experienced College English teachers from China. Of the six students, two are undergraduates from Tianjin and Heilongjiang, who had studied in Chinese universities for one year before they came to Britain and are currently undertaking undergraduate study in Nottingham in October 2001. Four are Chinese university graduates from Shanghai, Yangzhou, Nanjing and Wenzhou who are going to begin an MA programme in Nottingham. Three are male and three are female. Two started learning English in primary schools and four started in secondary school.

The prime reason for choosing those six students is that they all had taken College English in China; even the two undergraduates had studied College English for 2 semesters. They were all taking English language courses in the Centre of English Education in Nottingham University when they undertook the piloting study. They have experienced both Chinese College English and English as Foreign Language in Britain. It is expected that they are able to make

comments on College English in China as well as making a comparison between College English in China and English as a Foreign Language in Britain.

The four Chinese College English teachers who participated in the piloting questionnaire were specifically chosen from MA program in English Language Teaching in Nottingham University. They are from Beijing, Hangzhou, Weifang, and have just finished their MA study and are about to leave for Beijing. They are not only experienced in College English teaching but also have learned methodology theories in Britain. It is hoped that they are able to give useful reflections on College English teaching after one-year of study in Britain.

#### 5.2.4.2.1.2. Results and discussion of the piloting study

In the piloting study, only one template, Unit 3, was used. The following are the results and a discussion of the piloting study:

Table 5-20: **Piloting result of Passage A of Unit 3**

		Marks	Ranging
Comprehension	Answer questions	8.8	8-10
	Complete sentences	8.7	8-10
Vocabulary:	a. Word tree	4.5 words provided	2 - 7
	b. Complete sentences	7.3	5 - 10
Translation:	a. English to Chinese	6.6	4 - 9.5
	b. Chinese to English	8.6	7 - 9.5

Notes:

- a. The full marks for each exercise is 10 points.
- b. The template was done in 70 minutes without any instructions.
- c. Because of limitation of time, students did not do 'writing', 'presentation' and 'thinking', but they were asked how they think of 'presentation', and their answers are positive. According to them 'presentation' includes the

comprehensive abilities of understanding, expressing oneself, thinking, and being brave. For ‘thinking’, they have suggested group discussion, writing summaries, outlines and conclusions.

From the above table it seems that the students are really poor at providing words in a word tree exercise. The average number of words they provided was 4.5, among which half are websites, not words. This is because they are not used to this type of exercise, which requires them to do active searches in their minds; moreover, they have never been trained to do so. Again, students’ translation from English into Chinese is not satisfactory. First of all they do not know the vocabulary or they only know a single meaning of a word, **illustrating the importance of word difficulty in readability**. Secondly, they do not have a complete understanding of the text. This has something to do with the fact that they haven’t had any instructions. Thirdly in translation from English to Chinese, the translated Chinese sentences are not idiomatic, nor smooth, not to mention any skills.

Table 5-21: **Piloting results of Passage B and C of Unit 3**

Passage B			Passage C		
	Marks	Ranging		Marks	Ranging
Paraphrase	0.5	0-3 (only one did it)	Information Transfer	5	3-8
Translation	3	0-8			
Vocabulary	5.3	2-8	Vocabulary	?	0-9

As mentioned above, the students’ translation from English into Chinese is very poor due to the small size of their vocabulary. Besides they also needed training in paraphrasing, which requires vocabulary and understanding as well as rewriting. Finding words with adjective and noun suffixes in Passage C does not appeal to them either, for they have been trained passively rather than actively

doing exercises. They might be good at ticking one best answer from four choices but not in thinking on their own. Finding words with adjective and noun suffixes in Passage C is actually not hard, but they do not bother to do it, since it takes time to go over the text.

**Students' general impression of the template Unit 3:**

1. Only one student answered YES and one teacher answered 'partly' to the question about whether his/her overall impression of the contents and layout of the template was favourable. Others overlooked it because of the table following it, which indicates the question should be placed after the tables.

2. Most students and teachers think the three chosen passages were interesting.

Details are shown in the following table:

**Table 5-22: Piloting students and teachers' general impression of Unit 3**

	Passage A	Passage B	Passage C
Very interesting	Stu. 1		Stu. 1
Interesting	Stu. 1; Tea. 2	Stu.3; tea.1	Stu. 3
Fairly interesting	Stu. 3; Tea.1	Tea. 2	Stu. 1; Tea. 2
Moderate		Stu. 1	
Boring		Stu. 1	Tea. 1

3. Six students think passage A is easy or fairly easy, because they are familiar with the content, and they have been using the Internet. Four students think Passage B and passage C are right in difficulty level. Teachers seem to have different opinions from the students and they disagree among themselves.



Table 5-23: **Piloting students and teachers' impression of readability of**

**Unit 3**

	Passage A	Passage B	Passage C
Difficult			Tea. 1
Fairly difficult		Stu. 1; Tea. 1	
Right in difficult level	Tea. 1	Stu. 4	Stu. 4
Easy	Stu. 5; Tea. 1	Stu. 1; Tea. 1	
Fairly easy	Stu. 1	Tea. 1	

4. **Students find vocabulary the biggest problem in their reading;** they don't seem to pay enough attention to content knowledge:

Table 5-24: **Piloting students and teachers' comment on language difficulty**

**and content knowledge of Unit 3**

	Passage A	Passage B	Passage C
Vocabulary	Stu. 2	Stu. 3	Stu. 3; tea. 1
Sentence length		Tea. 1	
Grammar		Stu. 1	Stu. 1
Content knowledge (e.g. I don't know much about computers and the Internet in this unit)	Stu. 1; Tea. 1	Stu. 1	Stu. 1; Tea. 2

5. All students find that discourse signals such as 'finally' (last paragraph of Passage A) and 'the first' (paragraph 4 in Passage B) help them understand the text absolutely, while only one teacher thinks they help a little bit.
6. More than half of the students and teachers consider 'presentation' and 'thinking' encourage them/students to think about the deeper meaning of the text.
7. In comparison of the texts in this template with the textbooks they used in China as intensive reading materials, over half of the students find that the texts in this template
- a. are more thought provoking and interesting. (4 students)

- b. are more challenging and requiring more interaction with the materials on the part of the students in terms of a subjective response and an understanding of connotations rather than denotations of language (3 students and 2 teachers).
  - c. focus more on encouraging students' response rather than informing only (3 students and 2 teachers).
  - d. offer a different kind of training rather than being exam-conscious (3 students).
8. The template does not require more time to study / prepare compared with the textbooks they have used.
  9. Three students feel that 'thinking' takes more time though it does not ask any particular questions.
  10. Students do not seem to prefer any specific exercise, but all teachers have showed great interest in 'presentation', and half like 'thinking' and 'word tree'.
  11. Most teachers and students like the template because exercises encourage their students/them to think and learn to learn and materials are new and interesting.
  12. Most students and teachers think the template has just enough exercises.
  13. Most teachers and students think the template reflects their /their students' needs and interests.
  14. Most teachers and students think 'presentation' and 'thinking' best reflects their students' / their needs and interests.
  15. All students and teachers agree that the template is well-balanced for reading and writing skills.

16. Three teachers out of four want to add grammar exercises, especially making up sentences.
17. Most students and teachers prefer to have different exercises in different units.
18. Three out of six students ask for summary writing exercises.
19. Students propose word matching, outline writing and word games in exercises.

The teachers' questionnaire has 6 extra questions, the following is the result:

All four teachers agree that the template achieves an acceptable balance between *knowledge about the language*, and *using the language*, and it also achieves an acceptable balance between the relevant language skills, and integrates them so that work in one skill area helps the others. Three teachers think that the template, as a reading and writing book, contains enough communicative activities to enable the students to use the language independently, which is well-graded and well-structured. They like 'presentation' and 'thinking' because they are innovative, necessary and encourage students' creativity. The template does not need to put more exercises for CET Band 4 and 6, which suggests that teachers do not favour test-oriented teaching. Two teachers suggest more paraphrase and making up sentences for exercises.

In conclusion, there are some important findings in the piloting study concerning both presenting the questionnaire and the results and comments from the subjects. For instance, the first question in front of three tables was neglected. Students need to enlarge their vocabulary in size as well as in multiple meanings of vocabulary, which is shown in both vocabulary exercise and translation from

English into Chinese. All students rely on discourse signals in comprehending the texts, perhaps because of low English proficiency (See 4.4.5). Teachers do not depend on them very much (Only one mentions it). Teachers loved ‘thinking’ and ‘presentation’ because they require more involvement, interaction and creativity from the students. Students did not express their preference for any exercises. When asked about their comments on ‘thinking’ and ‘presentation’, they replied that they were interested. There are clear mismatches between teachers’ and learners’ opinions as to which activities were important in the learning process.

#### **5.2.4.2.1.3. Result of subjects’ personal background in the piloting study**

Five students learn English in order to find better jobs. Some students also mentioned going on with further study and reading English books. But to communicate with foreigners is mentioned only once and nobody studied English to pass exams or do translation work. They all have either average or high motivation. Three think their English is poor, and two think it is fairly good; only one goes for good. Four think their reading skill is fairly good, two go for poor. But they all think that they can learn a lot from reading, and that reading is important or very important. What is interesting is that five of them think their writing skill is their best language skill, only one thinks his reading is the best. As to the biggest obstacle in their English study, four regard vocabulary as the most difficult; grammar, long sentences and uninteresting topics are also mentioned twice. Cross-cultural reference is being considered only once but unfamiliar content is not taken into consideration at all.

All six of them used *College English* by Fudan University. Half think the textbook is interesting and half think it is boring. Five give positive answers to the question concerning readability; only one thinks it is easy. Two expect their textbooks to follow the official syllabus closely; two prefer it to be more relevant to their communicative needs and two expect it to prepare them for international communication though their main objective in learning English is to find a better job in the future. They would all like to have more newspaper and magazine articles in their textbooks, and half are willing to accept 10-20% more vocabulary and another half 30-40 % more vocabulary out of the National English Syllabus.

Of the four subject teachers, three are from ordinary universities and one is from a key university. All of them have taught reading in College English and have at least three years experience in teaching. Most of them have class sizes of 40 students or so. They share the impression that their students' objective in learning English is to pass examinations, in spite of the fact that students themselves do not admit this. Three teachers think their students are motivated and their general English and reading skills are good or fairly good and students learn a lot through reading. They all agree that reading is important. As to the biggest obstacle in reading, three consider vocabulary, two mention cross-cultural references, and one mentions sentence length. Nobody considers grammar and content knowledge. This is mainly due to very general topics covered in College English textbooks, which also suggests, to some extent, that college English teaching still focuses on language skills. The importance of interactive reading and readers' factors has not been generally acknowledged,

which is the reason why this research has been chosen. Three of the teachers have used *College English* by Fudan University, all of whom think it boring because texts are too old, exercises are test-oriented without sufficient variation in style and content and do not help develop students' communicative ability. One has used *New English Course* by Tsinghua University, but does not like it either for the same reasons. There is one teacher who has tried *New College English* by Zhejiang University, and thinks it is interesting because the texts are new, authentic and attractive to students and have many exercises that students can participate in. This might be true as the book was only published in 1999. One thing is clear: teachers want textbooks to have exercises which encourage students' participation and help develop students' communicative ability. They expect textbooks to be more relevant to their students' communicative needs. Like the students, most teachers prefer to have more newspaper and magazine articles in their textbooks. Half want to put in more science fiction. Contrary to the students, teachers accept only 10-20% more new words than is required in the National English Syllabus.

#### **5.2.5. Interview**

An interview is a purposeful conversation between two or more people directed by an interviewer in order to get information from an interviewee. In qualitative research, an interview is used to gather descriptive data in the subjects' own words so that the researcher can develop insights into how subjects interpret the questions concerned. The information gathered through interview will be either the dominant strategy for data collection or to be used in conjunction with

participant observation, document analysis or other techniques (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992).

There are two approaches in qualitative interviews: the structured or the unstructured. The structured interview focuses on particular topics or is guided by some general questions. It guarantees that you get comparable data across subjects, but there is no way for a researcher to find out how the subjects themselves structure the topic at hand. The unstructured approach employs the more free-flowing, exploratory interview to get a general understanding of a range or perspectives on a topic. Different types of interviews can be used at different stages. Generally speaking at the beginning of a project, it is better to use unstructured interviews to encourage subjects to talk in the area of interest and then probe them more deeply. After the investigation work has been done, a structured interview is needed in order to get comparable data across a larger sample or to focus on particular topics that emerged during the preliminary interviews (ibid.).

The purpose of interviewing the informants in this thesis is to find out more information about readability in intensive reading materials selection and textbook design for college English from the students' point of view. Students' assumptions, beliefs, evaluations and opinions are of great importance here. Therefore a partially structured interview is employed. Besides the interview is conducted in Chinese because good interviews are those in which the subject is at ease and talks freely about her points of view (Briggs, 1986). Chinese college English students still have language barriers in using English and in expressing

themselves in the target language. If they were interviewed in English, possibly they will only give 'yes' and 'no' answers. But the most important thing in qualitative interview is to avoid questions that can be answered by 'yes' or 'no' or ways that informants can only reply with 'yes' or 'no' answers. Probing questions that require explanations and urge descriptions should be employed, if students are expected to describe or explain, it is better to use their native language. They feel more at ease when they express themselves in their mother tongue. Of course the interviewer is aware that "Interviewing requires flexibility" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992: 97).

#### **5.2.5.1. Interview Questions**

After summarising and discussing the piloting study, the writer interviewed one subject student to find out some remaining queries on 19 Sept. 2001. Interview questions are pre-determined and are made sure to be 'clear', 'precise' and 'motivating' (Denzin, 1989). Although questions are predetermined, considerable flexibility is given to follow-up questions in order to urge and encourage the student to speak more of her mind. The following are the questions and they are asked in Chinese, referring specifically to certain doubts:

1. Why do you think the piloting students filled in very few words (2-7 words only) in the 'Word Tree' vocabulary exercise in Passage A, and many of them are websites words like Yahoo, Sohu instead of real words? Do you think they do not know many words connected with the Internet or that they are not used to this kind of exercises? Are they not trained to work on their own like this or don't they bother to do the exercise because it is of no use?



2. Which is more difficult, translation from English into Chinese or from Chinese into English? Why? Is from English into Chinese more difficult? Why is it more difficult, is it because there are new words, or because you know only one or two meanings of a word but not all, or because you do not understand the sentence completely, or because you do not know how to put it into proper Chinese?
3. Why did not the subjects do paraphrase exercise in Passage B? Is it because they were unable to do it, or because they did not have enough time, or they did not understand the sentences?
4. The subject students have made some grammar mistakes, is it because they are careless, or they haven't learned or they do not have enough practice or they think it does not matter to make mistakes in grammar?
5. Do you think content knowledge is important in reading comprehension? Is a reader's background knowledge useful in understanding a text?
6. Why do you like to put more newspaper and magazine articles in textbook?

#### **5.2.5.2. Results of the piloting interview**

The following are the interviewee's answers to the questions asked:

1. We have never seen a 'word tree' exercise. In doing it, my first response is to write some websites which I have often used. I know a lot of words concerning the Internet and computer (Given words like 'server' 'download' 'keyboard'), but they escaped me as I am not used to thinking in English. I am sure others also know these words as they all use the Internet and computer. Some of them are even better than me. Another factor is that in China we use computers and the Internet in Chinese language rather than in

English. We do not have many opportunities to communicate in English. It takes time for us to switch from Chinese to English. **This suggests the lack of communication in the target language in English teaching as well as in daily life.**

2. Translation from English into Chinese is more difficult because the fact is that very often we understand some meanings of a word but not all, which results in the fact that our Chinese version does not exactly match the English. When taking exams, all we need is to understand the main ideas not all the details. I know which option to choose if I were given multiple choices and we are seldom checked or tested in the form of translation. I never liked translation. It is true that all textbooks contain translation exercises, but teachers never do it. They leave them to us and we seldom try them. **This suggests students need to enlarge vocabulary as well as multi-meanings of the same vocabulary. It also reveals a fact that teachers do not correct homework like translation very often.**
3. I did not do a paraphrase because I did not see it. I know how to do it because I have done it in the Centre of English Education for two months and I know it is important in academic writing. When I start my MA I need to read books, understand them and rewrite them in my own words. **The biggest achievement in CELE for me and for the others is writing and paraphrasing, which we lack in our university study.** IELTS is better than TOEFL because it has both multiple questions and other forms of questions which require productive skills.

4. I know I make grammar mistakes, so do others. They seem to be habitual mistakes such as the past particles, -ing forms and subjunctive mood. I have no idea how to avoid them. In reading, sentence length is important, but not sentences that have compound structure. **Instead, sentences with many clauses that we do not have in our mother language are the ones that are really difficult to comprehend.**
5. Yes, students' knowledge about the content and the background of an article is important in understanding a reading text. I often use the Internet, so Passage A is easier for me. The reason I did not choose them as the obstacles in reading is: first my English is not good enough to read any other subject books and I will not bother to do it. Second, in China, **all textbook articles are selected from very general topics.** I have never come across any articles with specific content knowledge. Third, I have always wanted to come abroad to study, so I have always been aware of cultural background knowledge. We students are not bothered about content and cultural knowledge. They are problems for teachers who write textbooks. If they want us to read/use their books, they will consider the problems carefully. **Students' interest and motivation are of great importance.** If I am attracted by a topic or a book, I'll try to read it, even if there are words that I do not understand, I will check them in a dictionary. I like topics that are related with our life, and topics that are popular among young people.
6. I like newspaper and magazine articles because they are about international and current affairs, which we know about, so the contents are not too difficult and the language is not too hard either. Some literary works with

cultural background are too difficult for us, I am a law student, so I would never dream of reading English poetry.

### **5.3. The questionnaires for the study**

The piloting study resulted in two modified questionnaires involving wording, phrasing and even formatting, though the changes are minors (See Appendix XVII and XVIII). Also another template Unit 9 (Appendix XIX) is added to the questionnaires to give informants an idea of how current trends of teaching and research will be introduced gradually to the new textbook project. The piloting study illustrates that one template unit is not enough to show the whole picture of the innovative ideas and exercises that will be adopted in the new textbook project. As a result, the third drafted template Unit 3 and another template, Unit 9 together with modified questionnaires form the full questionnaire for the study.

#### **5.3.1. The chosen subjects for the study**

The modified questionnaires containing the third drafted template Unit 3 and the new template Unit 9 were undertaken in Tsinghua University, Beijing, from 5 Nov. to 12 Nov. 2001 among ten college English Band 3 students and their teacher. The students did their Band 1 last year and have finished one year of university study in Tsinghua. The reasons for their selection as the subjects instead of Band 1 students are: first of all, they have had more than one year experience in learning college English so they can compare the templates with the textbooks they have used. Therefore they are more capable of making comparative comments. Secondly, since they are in Band 3, their level of language competence is higher than Band 1 students. They are likely to have

more proficiency to do the templates without any instructions from the teacher. As the two templates are relatively long and will take about 10-12 contact hours if brought into class, these subjects have to do the templates after class without any instructions from their teacher. Thirdly, Band 1 students in Tsinghua University did not start their college English until the end of Sept. 2001. They are not yet familiar with college English by the beginning of November 2001, the time when subjects were chosen to do the templates. Nor have they gathered enough experience in college English to make appropriate comments.

Normally, as students enter universities in September each year, they will be given a placement test to divide them into different groups of Band 1, 2, 3 and 4. Band 4 is the highest group and Band 1 is the basic group. Band 1 is the starting point of college English according to the National English Syllabus. Normally students start from Band 1. As Tsinghua University is one of the top universities in China, only 50 % of students start from Band 1. The other 50 % of students are distributed in three other groups. There are hardly any who have not reached Band 1 level in Tsinghua. Universities of some second or third classes might have some students whose proficiency is lower than Band 1. Another thing that should be borne in mind is that there are no big differences within each group of students, only about 5 marks difference or even less out of 100 marks. Their teacher has 8 years of teaching experience in college English from Band 1 to Band 4.

### 5.3.2. Results and discussion of the study

This section first lists the results of the templates and then discusses the results of the template units as well as discussing the template design. Since the results are various, interviews are necessary in order to achieve greater depth in the inquiry.

#### 5.3.2.1. Results of the two template units:

##### Unit 3

Table 5-25: Test results of all the exercises in Unit 3

	A				B		C		Tot. out of 80		
	Comprehension		Vocabulary		Tran. to Chi.	Tran. to Eng.	Tran	Voc.		Inf. Tran	Voc.
	Ans.	Compl.	Word tree	Compl							
1	10	10	5 words	6	9.5	8	7	8	7	9 words	65.6
2	9	10	5	6	9	9	6	8	10	34	57
3	9	8	5	6	8	9	6	6	9	19	61
4	10	10	5	8	8	8	6	9	10	18	69
5	10	8	5	10	9	9	8	9	10	13	73
6	10	8.5	5	10	10	9	8.5	7	8	25	61
7	7	10	5	6	10	9.5	9	8	8.5	12	58
8	4	8	3	9	8	8	6	6	8	21	57
9	8	10	5	9	9	9.5	9	5	5	7	61.5
10	9	8	5	8	7	7	6	7	6	0	58
Ave	8.6	9.1	4.8	7.8	8.8	8.6	7.2	7.3	8.2	13.9	62

Table 5-26: Test results of Passage A, Unit 3

		Marks	Ranging
Comprehension	Answer questions	8.6	4-10
	Complete sentences	9.1	8-10
Vocabulary:	a. Word tree	4.8 words provided	3 - 5
	b. Complete sentences	7.8	6 - 10
Translation:	a. English to Chinese	8.8	7 - 10
	b. Chinese to English	8.6	7 - 9.5

Table 5-27: **Test results of Passage B and C, Unit 3**

Passage B			Passage C		
	Marks	Ranging		Marks	Ranging
Paraphrase	0	No one did it.	Information Transfer	8.2	5-10
Translation	7.2	6-9			
Vocabulary	7.3	5-9	Vocabulary	13.9 words	0-34

The above tables coincide with the comments the students give as to the language difficulty of the three passages in Unit 3. Passage A is easier than Passage B and C. Details are shown in the following table:

Table 5-28: **Students' general impression of Unit 3**

	Passage A	Passage B	Passage C
Difficult	Stu. 1		Stu. 1
Fairly difficult		Stu. 5	Stu. 3
Right in difficult level	Stu. 5	Stu. 5	Stu. 6
Easy	Stu. 3		
Fairly easy	Stu. 1		

Four students think Passage A is easy or fairly easy, five think it is right in difficult level, only one thinks it is difficult. Passage B and C seem all right with only one exception who thinks Passage C is difficult.

Nearly all the students think the three chosen passages in Unit Three are fairly interesting, interesting and very interesting. Only two students think Passage B is moderate. See the following table for details:

Table 5-29: **Students' impression of readability of Unit 3**

	Passage A	Passage B	Passage C
Very interesting	Stu. 3		Stu. 1
Interesting	Stu. 5	Stu. 5	Stu. 6
Fairly interesting	Stu. 3	Stu. 3	Stu. 3
Moderate		Stu. 2	
Boring			

Above 50 % of students find vocabulary the biggest problem in their reading of Unit 3; another 20-30 % of students find long sentences difficult. Not many students consider grammar a difficulty, and only two think the contents in Passage C are difficult. This may be because most students in Tsinghua University use computers and the Internet. From the exercise of writing an email, they mention that there are good computer facilities in Tsinghua University and every two students have a computer.

**Table 5-30: Students' comment on language difficulty and content knowledge of Unit 3**

	Passage A	Passage B	Passage C
Vocabulary	Stu. 5	Stu. 6	Stu. 5
Sentence length	Stu. 2	Stu.3	Stu. 3
Grammar	Stu.2	Stu. 1	
Content knowledge (e.g. I don't know much about computers and the Internet in this unit)			Stu. 2

The total marks of all the exercises in Unit 3 are 80. The average marks for the ten subjects is 62, the highest mark is 73 and the lowest mark is 57. This indicates that the passages are more or less right in difficulty level. Though those ten subjects are Band 3 students, they did the templates without any instructions and supervision from the teacher. For Band 1 students, their English proficiency is lower than Band 3 students, but they will have teachers explain all the language difficulties to them before they do the exercises.

Unit 9:



**Table 5-31: Test results of all the exercises in Unit 9**

	A					Tran	Writing	B		C		Tot. out of 110
	Comprehension		Vocabulary					Trans	Voc.	Comp.	Voc.	
	Ans.	Pred	Compl	Make	Gap							
1	8	8	7	8.6	6.2	8	5	5	6.8	8	7	77.6
2	7	7	4	8.6	6.2	9	5	5	8.7	8	3	71.5
3	8	7	3.5	7.8	7.7	8	6	5	7.4	9	8	67.4
4	8.5	3	5.5	5.9	8.9	9	6	9	8	9	6	78.8
5	7	9	7	8	7.7	9	0	7	10	4	8	76.7
6	4	2	7	7.2	6.5	8	6	7	6.8	8	8	70.5
7	7	3	9	6.6	5.9	8	7	5	8.7	9	9	78.2
8	9	7	7	7.3	5.3	7.5	7	7	8.7	9	6	77.8
9	4	4	6	8.6	4	7	5	6	8	5	5	62.6
10	7	8	6	7.9	6.5	8	6	7	6.5	5	8	75.9
Ave	7	5.8	6.2	7.7	6.5	8.2	5.3	6.3	7.2	7.4	6.8	73.7

**Table 5-32: Test results of Passage A, Unit 9**

		Marks	Ranging
Comprehension	Answer questions	7	4-9
	Prediction	5.8	2-9
Vocabulary:	Complete sentences	5.8	3.5-9
	Make up sentences	7.7	5.9-8.6
	Gap-filling	6.5	4-8.9
Translation:	English to Chinese	8.2	7-9
Writing		5.3	0-7

**Table 5-33: Test results of Passage B and C, Unit 9**

Passage B			Passage C		
	Marks	Ranging		Marks	Ranging
Translation	6.3	5-9	Comp. sentences	7.4	4-9
Vocabulary	7.2	6.5-10	Vocabulary	6.8	3-9

All students think Passage A in Unit 9 are right in difficult level or fairly difficult. Nine students have the same feeling for Passage B, only one thinks B is difficult. Seven students think Passage C is right in difficulty level or fairly difficult but three think it is easy.

Table 5-34: **Students' general impression of Unit 9**

	Passage A	Passage B	Passage C
Difficult		Stu. 1	
Fairly difficult	Stu. 5	Stu. 4	Stu. 4
Right in difficult level	Stu. 5	Stu. 5	Stu. 3
Easy			Stu. 3
Fairly easy			

Students find the unknown vocabulary the main problem in their reading of Passage A and C; Six find sentence length confusing in Passage B. They do not care much about grammar and only one notices content knowledge in Passage B:

Table 5-35: **Students' impression of readability of Unit 9**

	Passage A	Passage B	Passage C
Vocabulary	Stu. 9	Stu. 3	Stu. 6
Sentence length		Stu.6	Stu. 2
Grammar		Stu. 1	Stu. 1
Content knowledge (e.g. I don't know much about computers and the Internet in this unit)		Stu. 1	

Most students think the three chosen passages in Unit 9 are interesting. Details are shown in the following table:

Table 5-36: **Students' comment on language difficulty and content knowledge of Unit 9**

	Passage A	Passage B	Passage C
Very interesting	Stu. 5	Stu. 2	Stu. 2
Interesting	Stu. 3	Stu. 4	Stu. 4
Fairly interesting	Stu. 1	Stu. 3	Stu. 3
Moderate	Stu. 1	Stu. 1	Stu. 1
Boring			

### **5.3.2.2. Discussion of the results of the two template units**

Because students did the templates out of school, no one has done 'presentation' in Unit 3, only two did 'thinking' in Unit 3. They suggested translation, group discussion on how to choose a disc and what the main ideas of the text are.

For 'thinking', they have suggested group discussion, writing a summary and outline and conclusion. They all have done 'prediction' in Unit 9. Though it is the first time for them to do 'prediction', six actually did quite well with above 7 marks out of 10, four failed with less than 4. The average is 5.8, which is a reasonable performance for students undertaking this exercise for the first time. One student attempted to do presentation in Unit 9, but because the exercise needs team-work and is suitable for oral practice, he listed only two sentences like 'He is wearing a black shirt.' 'He is a male from Beijing'.

Four have predicted the ending part of the story in 'Thinking' in Unit 9. Two said the teacher would go to see the girl to check if she is still working hard and to give her more encouragement. The other two did not think the teacher would go to see the girl because he did not want to disturb her. It is strange that no one mentioned that the teacher might fall in love with the girl student. Perhaps there is some background here. It has never been considered proper for a Chinese teacher to fall in love with his student. Although things like this do happen, no one likes to mention it. And students are not supposed to think too much of romance. Even if they might have thought about it, they would not state it openly.

Students haven't provided many words in the word tree exercise. Nine provided 5, one provided 3. And they write down literary words instead of websites. The reason for this might be that the students are not very clear about how to do this exercise. They think five is enough because there are only five rays. Whether this is the case or not will be checked in interviews. Most students did quite well in the word formation exercise. The average number they found is 13.9. One has not found any for the reason unknown. Another one only provided 7. All the rest 8 students found more than 12, and the most is 34 words.

Students' abilities are least successful in summary writing. The average score is 5.3 marks, because one has not written anything, and three got 5 marks. Generally, college English students are not very good at writing due to insufficient training. The failure in paraphrase exercise is another example.

All the other exercises seem to be quite satisfactory.

### **5.3.2.3. Results and discussion of the study**

In Template Unit 3, the subjects show better ability in 'complete sentences' than 'answer questions' in comprehension check. This is because the former asked mainly questions on facts which students can find in the text while the latter asked questions on opinions and comments. The result also shows that students still need to enlarge vocabulary, improve in translation from English into Chinese and paraphrase exercise, especially paraphrase which involves rewriting in the target language.

All the subject students think their overall impression of the contents and layout of the template units favourable or partly favourable. They also find discourse signals helpful in understanding the text, although to different degrees. It is interesting to find that they are more fond of familiar and traditional exercises like 'Translations' (8 students), 'Answer questions in comprehension checks' (6 students). Innovative exercises like 'prediction' (4 students) 'thinking' (2 students only) 'presentation' (1 student) and 'information transfer' (3 students) attracted less than 4 students' attention, **which indicates that changes or reforms have to be introduced little by little in new textbook writing.** Three students like 'writing' and one likes 'complete sentences with information given in the text for comprehension'.

However, there are still nine students who think that the template units are more challenging and require more interaction with the materials on the part of the students in terms of a subjective response and an understanding of connotations rather than denotations of language compared with their currently used textbooks. Three think the template units are more thought provoking and interesting in spite of the fact that eight students think the template units require more time to study. Seven have the feeling that exercises take more time; four think the reading messages require more time.

As to which part of the template they like most, five students go for text passages. Four have chosen answer questions in comprehension, four favour translation and three favour 'thinking'. All the other parts have not attracted more than two students.

The students seem to be very conservative. They haven't shown any interest in any reforming and inventive exercises. Are they simply not interested in any changes in language learning or are they so practical that they only concentrate on exercises that appear in their examinations? This state of mind will be explored further in the interviews.

After all, they like the templates because the chosen materials are new and interesting (6 students), and the exercises encourage them to think and learn to learn (7 students).

Eight students think the templates have just enough exercises while two students think there are too many. They all agree that the templates reflect their need and interests. Seven think reading comprehension most reflects their needs and interests. Four also consider vocabulary exercises favourably. Only two care for 'thinking'. All of them agree that the templates are well balanced for reading and writing skills. Eight students noticed the difference between the two templates. Six commented on the different exercises in the two units. Unit 9 asks students to do more writing and by doing so it goes deeper therefore it is more difficult than Unit 3. One noticed the writing style difference of the texts: daily vs. scientific. One complained about the number of new words in Unit 9.

Four students want to add more grammar exercises such as 'complete sentences' 'making up sentences' and 'fill in blanks'. They all expect textbooks to have different exercises. Most students like the idea of introducing new exercises such as 'give a title to a passage' and 'cloze'. Three students have given other

comments. One said: “ no textbook is perfect, but these two templates are better than what I am using now”. Another said: “The template has one topic in each unit and they are interesting”. The third student complained that the new templates had too many new words.

#### **5.3.2.4. Results of the subjects’ personal background in the study**

Of the ten students, two are female and eight are male. They are all undergraduates from 4 different departments of science and engineering ageing between 18 and 20. None is majored in computer science. Eight started learning English in secondary school and two started as early as the fourth year in primary school. More than six of them learn English for further studies, to prepare for exams and tests and to find better jobs in future. Nine think they have average or high motivation for learning English. Seven students think their English is poor or very poor, but only four students think their reading skill is poor, six think their reading is fairly good. Four regard their reading as their best skill. No one thinks his/her speaking is the best skill. Only two students don’t think they can learn much from reading, all the rest have opposite opinions. Nevertheless they all think reading is important or very important.

It is quite interesting that seven people say that long sentences are the biggest obstacle in their reading; five also mentioned unknown vocabulary. Two mentioned unfamiliar content knowledge.

Since they are all from Tsinghua University, they all use *New English Course* as their textbook. Six find their textbooks interesting and very interesting, four

think they are boring. Six think the reading passages in their currently used textbooks are right in difficult level; four think they are difficult or very difficult.

Six wish their textbooks to follow the official syllabus in a creative manner, which proves the writer's statement in Chapter 1 that the National Syllabus plays a significant role in coursebook writing. Five hope that their textbooks will prepare them for international communication through English.

Students cannot get agreement as to what kind of texts they like most in their reading coursebooks. Four favour magazine articles, another four prefer science.

Students expect their textbooks to have more vocabulary than what is required in the National Syllabus. Five expect 10-20% more, four expect 30-40% more, which gives more freedom to the textbook writers.

The teacher as stated in the chosen subject is very experienced, although she is less than 30 years old. She loves her job as a teacher and enjoys teaching. She also spends time in class observation and textbook compilation. So she is qualified to represent college English teachers.

### **5.3.3. Interview questions and the result discussion of the study**

After analysing the result of the templates and the questionnaires, an interview is conducted with 3 subject students and their teacher to clarify some remaining problems.



These questions are to be asked in the interviews in Chinese, referring to specific doubts:

1. Why have you only filled in five words for the 'Word Tree' vocabulary exercise in Passage A? Is it because the five rays misled you to think that five are required or is it because you are not able to provide more? Is the exercise new to you? What do you think of the exercise?
2. Why didn't you and the other students do the paraphrase exercise in Passage B Unit 3? Is it because you are unable to do it, or you do not understand the sentences well enough? Or do you understand the sentences but do not know how to put them into good English?
3. Normally, unknown vocabulary is the biggest obstacle for students in reading, but in the questionnaire more than half of you consider long sentences the biggest difficulty in reading, why? From Unit 9 Passage B translation exercises, there are three sentences there. The third sentence is the longest, but you have translated it more correctly than you did with the first and the second sentences which are shorter. How do you explain this?
4. Which exercises encourage you to think about the deeper meaning of the text? Eight of you choose 'translation'; six choose answer questions in 'Comprehension Check'. Why? Not many of you mentioned 'presentation', 'thinking', 'prediction' and 'information transfer'. Have you had these kinds of exercises before? Could you please make some comments on these exercises?

5. Nine students think the template units are more challenging than the textbooks you are using. Which part is more challenging, the reading passages, or the exercises?
6. Have you noticed that the template units introduce some new exercises? What are they?
7. Have you noticed the differences in exercise design in the two units? If so, what are the differences?
8. Do you think readers' prior knowledge is important in reading comprehension? Is it useful in understanding a text?
9. Why do you prefer more newspaper and magazine articles in a textbook?

**The following are the results and discussions:**

All three interviewees and the teacher like 'Word Tree' vocabulary exercise in Passage A, because it is new, helps students review related words they have learned as well as encouraging them to enlarge their vocabulary. They did not provide more than 5 words because a. The rays misled them to think that five is required .b. They are not familiar with this type of exercises and it takes time to search for words in their brain. The habit of thinking in the target language has not been formed yet.

The students complained that they never did paraphrasing, one admitted he did not even know the word, the other two understood what ‘paraphrase’ meant, but did not know how to paraphrase the sentences. The teacher confirmed that ‘paraphrase’ is unfamiliar to her students, who have always been taught passively, they need to be activated (See 3.1.2 and 6.1.3). However, her remarks are ‘the exercise is sufficient in helping students understand a text’. This confirms the result of the piloting interview; which goes like ‘Our biggest achievement in the two months language training course in CELE is writing summary and sentence paraphrase which we lack in our university study in China’.

Students consider long sentences the biggest difficulty in reading. By ‘long sentences’ they mean structure complexity, particularly structures that do not exist in the Chinese language or contradict Chinese expressions, not necessarily long in literary meaning. Long sentences with clear structural relationships are not difficult, but those with many clauses are. Of course discourse signals, conjunctions and other cohesive references are helpful.

Both the teacher and the students think that ‘translation’ and ‘answer questions’ are traditional and students feel comfortable. ‘Presentation’, ‘thinking’ and ‘prediction’ are completely new and the students have not been trained and are not sure how to do them. ‘Information transfer’ has been used occasionally. They agree that ‘prediction’ helps in developing students’ imagination; ‘presentation’ is particularly good in inviting students to speak and discuss; ‘thinking’ and ‘information transfer’ push students to go over the text and

exercise students' scanning ability. Compared with the currently used textbook, which have more objective exercises, these new exercises are more subjective with emphasis on students' productivity, leaving more freedom and space for the students to explore. They also demand more help and guidance from the teacher. However, one student expresses his uncertainty that English is only a foreign language which is different from one's native language. He recalls that his Chinese teacher in high school taught Chinese in this way but it is not necessary to go so deep in English learning.

As discussed in 3.1.3 and 6.1.3, college English teaching in China is still quite traditional, grammar translation is still very popular in the classroom. Although communicative language teaching approaches were introduced in the early 80s', students still prefer traditional classroom work because of an unwillingness to participate in activities, grammar-based exams, teachers' lack of training and low English proficiency (Rao, 2002). Against this, students as well as teachers must change their concepts towards English teaching (Markee, 1997) that linguistic competence is only a tool but not a final end. Instead, communicative competence is what college English teaching is aiming to achieve, as is stated clearly in the 1999 version of the National English Syllabus (Revising Team, 1999), although English is only a foreign language.

The teacher and the students think the templates are more challenging than the textbooks they are using. Reading passages are not easy, but they are very interested in the topics, especially the one on computers. But the main challenge lies in subjective exercises, which demand students' productive skills such as

speaking in ‘presentation’ and writing in ‘prediction’, which proves that exercise design can affect the readability of a text.

All the interviewees noticed the new exercises introduced in the templates such as word tree, presentation, thinking, prediction etc. Three students showed interest in these new exercises, but they expressed their dependence on their teacher for more guidance and classroom atmosphere. They also needed co-operation from classmates. Otherwise, they would choose more traditional exercises like ‘translation’, ‘true or false questions’, which they are more familiar and feel more comfortable with. The teacher also pointed out that the students have been trained too long in doing receptive exercises (See 3.1.3 and 6.1.3). To change the situation, reform in coursebooks and classroom teaching and more qualified teachers are required.

They found out the two units do not have the exact same set of exercises. Unit 9 has more subjective exercises, which require more writing and speaking. They like email writing rather than summary writing. They prefer word tree to word formation, which consumes too much time. They like information transfer, which requires them to sum up but not to copy exactly what it is in the text.

They all commented that readers’ prior knowledge is useful in understanding a text. They declared that the template ‘On Computer’ could be difficult if they did not use computers and the Internet in their daily life. One suggested that even reading in Chinese would be helpful in understanding background knowledge or content knowledge.

Students prefer more newspaper and magazine articles in a textbook because they are up to date, close to life; but the teacher prefers to have a good variety of writing, newspaper, magazine articles as well as scientific and literature works.

#### **5.4. Summary and discussion of the findings**

The research has been carried out in three steps: pre-piloting study, piloting study and the main study. The data is collected in the following five aspects:

1. In order to check if readability is applicable in college English in the EFL Chinese context, six texts are chosen to be rated with three popular readability formulae. Four out of the six chosen texts are from authorised coursebooks, and one is newly published and one is to be published. The result is the English level of college students in comparison with native speakers is between 11-13 age children. This result is suggested to be used as an indicator of language difficulty for materials selection for college English (5.2.1).
2. An analysis of the language features of the chosen texts with the checklist provided by Leech and Short is used to support the recommendation of the three readability formulae to be used as index of language difficulty. As Grammar teaching has been dominating college English, both teachers and students are worried if only word difficulty and sentence length are counted but not grammar items. This analysis proves from the point of view of language features that the three chosen formulae have certain validity and reliability, although they do not claim to consider grammar, many items are actually counted if sentence length

is measured, which is the longer sentences, the more difficult they are likely to be (5.2.2).

3. Questionnaires in pre-piloting study are composed of three questionnaires:

a. Questionnaire on the first drafted two templates integrating speaking, listening, reading and writing skills is undertaken by seven Chinese visiting scholars in Nottingham University. The main reason to choose them is on one hand, they are experienced college English teachers, and on the other hand, being visiting scholars in Nottingham, they have opportunities to attend lectures and they have the ability to compare college English with EFL in Britain. The findings are: questions asked in a text have a significant influence upon readability; vocabulary is quite crucial and grammar is still needed in college English coursebooks. They also suggest that coursebooks be divided into two: speaking and listening and reading and writing for practical reasons. (5.2.4.1.1).

b. Questionnaire on grammar is undertaken because grammar is still needed in college English according to the subject teachers to find out what items are more difficult for Chinese learners. The concept is grammar is essential of a language, especially in intensive reading of foreign language learning (5.2.4.1.2). This explains why an analysis of language features is needed in the second step of the research (5.2.2).

- c. Questionnaire on topics that students may find interesting and types of articles and writings that students may find difficult. As discussed in 3.2.3 and 4.2, reading is an interaction between reader and text. Readability in this thesis has been extended to reader factors. Readers' interest, motivation and prior knowledge are to be taken into consideration. Teachers' subjective comments and opinion are used as an aid in materials selection (5.2.4.1.3).
4. Questionnaire in the piloting study consists of the second drafted template concentrating on reading and writing, two modified questionnaires, one for teachers and one for students. The pre-piloting study has laid a foundation for the second draft of the template which limits language skills into reading and writing. Exercises in the second draft template have been improved based on the comments and opinions obtained from questionnaires on grammar and topics that students may find interesting and difficult. An interview is done in the piloting study to find out the reason why students did not do some exercises. This piloting study is undertaken in Nottingham University among six Chinese students who have experience of college English for at least one year, and experience of English language training for two/three months in Britain. It is expected that responses to the second draft template from those students who are able to reflect their English learning in China benefit the main study (5.2.4.2.1).



5. Questionnaire in the main study contains the third drafted template and another new template focusing on reading and writing, a questionnaire for teacher and a questionnaire for students and three interviews. The second template is added to provide a whole picture to students. The study is undertaken among 10 students and one teacher in Tsinghua University. The response from the teacher is very positive, but students show moderate interest. To find out the exact reason for this three students and one teacher were interviewed, which indicates students' uncertainty of related factors such as teacher's guidance, classmates' cooperation and classroom atmosphere (5.3).

Although the results of the research vary, a fact has been revealed that readability plays a significant role in materials selection and coursebook design (General hypothesis). Band I students of college English have a level of 11-13 year old children in English speaking countries (See 5.2). Their vocabulary and grammar knowledge are limited (See 2.4.6; 3.1.6; Revising Team, 1999). Measurement of readability in language features is essential. However, as it is discovered in the language feature analysis, the questionnaires and the interviews, language difficulty such as vocabulary size and sentence complexity is not the only factor that affects students' ability to comprehend. Apart from language features, readability also includes other elements such as organisation, task design or adjunct comprehension aids as well as interest, motivation and prior knowledge in reader factors (Research question 1). The following table summarised all the factors that have influence upon students' ability to comprehend, in which the bold parts can be measured by conventional

readability formulae while the rest are not covered by any formulae so far according to Zukaluk and Samuels (1988).

## Readability

Outside head factor	Inside head factor
<b>I. Text factors / text characteristics</b>	Reader factors
<b>A. <u>Semantic elements:</u></b>	A. <u>Interest</u>
<b>Easy / hard words</b>	B. <u>Motivation</u>
<b>Short / long words</b>	C. <u>Language skills:</u>
<b>Familiar / unfamiliar words</b>	D. <u>Text topic familiarity/prior knowledge</u> Background knowledge
<b>B. <u>Syntactic elements:</u></b>	
<b>Type of sentences</b>	
<b>Length of sentences</b>	
<b>Number of clauses</b>	
<b>C. <u>Text organisation:</u></b>	
<b>II. <u>Adjunct comprehension aids</u></b>	
Instructional objectives.	
Task design	

Though fluent readers often rely more on semantic than syntactic information, it is still necessary for them to become aware of the relationships between the parts that constitute a text, such as lexical reiteration, reference, substitution, ellipsis and conjunction (Williams, 1983). How sentences and paragraphs are linked together. Halliday & Hasan (1976) name it 'texture'; and Dubin & Olshtain (1986:148) call it 'textual features', which are concerned with the description of discourse. Reading is a problem-solving behaviour that actively involves the reader in the process of deriving and assigning meaning. While interpreting the text, the reader is drawing on contextual information that contains semantic, syntactic as well as discourse constraints (Cziko, 1978:472-489; Smith 1971). Discourse constraints are those provided by the topic of the

text and its development. Each language has its own logical connectives and other elements of cohesion (Papalia, 1987:70). Specific hypothesis that discourse markers such as 'next' 'finally' 'on the other hand' that signal the arrangement of meaning in the text help develop learners' sensitivity to text structure so as to reduce text readability, has been proved true in both the questionnaires and the interviews.

It is also obvious from the above that task design or adjunct comprehension aid contributes to comprehensibility, which writers of coursebook can highlight to facilitate students by providing meaningful pre-, post- and while-reading tasks that involve readers' participation so to promote their thinking about the text. (Specific hypothesis). All the interviewees pointed out that the new exercises 'word tree', 'presentation', 'thinking', 'prediction' etc. promote their thinking and engage them in deep consideration of the text but take more time. They need proper classroom atmosphere, co-operation from classmates and guidance from the teacher. As they have always been trained passively, and almost all the current examinations and coursebooks ask questions in objective forms or superficial subjective exercises (See 31.3), students do need training and practice in doing the above mentioned communicative tasks which require response and interaction in the target language (Research question 4).

There are many factors related to the ease or difficulty of understanding materials (Gray & Leary 1972). For instance: the degree of subject's prior knowledge of the content also have a significant effect upon their comprehension scores (1988: Klare). Readability is the result of an interaction

between a set of particular text characteristics and the information processing characteristics of individual readers (General hypothesis; See also 3.2.3). McKay (1986:192) concluded: “What is critical in selecting a text is to examine it for both its linguistic and its conceptual difficulties” from the point of view of the reader. In the piloting interview, the interviewee commented that she did not care so much about the conceptual/ content knowledge not because it is not important but because coursebook writers have to deal with things like this.

It is true that text features such as word difficulty and sentence length, can be estimated by readability formulae, but there are a number of other factors also affecting readability that have to be taken into account. Readability is a key factor in determining the selection of reading materials, but the conventional readability formulae have to be modified with recent research into the relationship between lexico-grammar and discourse organisation. Moreover, as reading is a reader-text interaction (See 3.2.3), factors like interest, motivation and prior knowledge of the reader (See 4.2.1) that affect the measurement of ease and difficulty of a text need to be investigated as well (General hypothesis) to provide more accurate means of measurement.

## **5.5. Conclusion**

The hypotheses and the research questions given at the beginning of the thesis are tested in this chapter in a combination of both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Quantitative method summarises language difficulty (word and sentence length) of the chosen texts in numbers measured by applying three conventional readability formulae. The result is that students in Band I of

college English in China should have a level of English equal to children or 11-13 years old in Britain (See 5.2.1). The checklist provided by Leech and Short suggests that various lexical categories and grammatical categories can also affect language difficulty for Chinese learners.

However, as discussed before (See 3.2), factors which have an effect upon readability are not only limited to text characteristics. “Text factors alone cannot determine readability; readers’ prior knowledge and understanding influence comprehensibility and recall” (Zukaluk & Samuels, 1988:128). To obtain a complete idea of what impact other elements have on students’ decoding of a text, in-depth interviews described in organised words in qualitative research based more on humanistic values, involving personal contact with the informants have been employed.

The research proves that existing readability formulae provide objective and statistic judgement of a reading text by measuring word difficulty and sentence length which can be used as an index in materials for texts. Other important factors such as organisation, exercises in the ‘outside head factors’ and all the elements in the ‘inside head factors’ like interest, motivation and prior knowledge, if used properly, are able to aid students in their ability to comprehend as well as in their developing communicative competence. Thus, the measurement of readability should go beyond a mechanical analysis based on formulae or language features only. It should also consider other factors such as organisation, task design and interest, motivation and prior knowledge. All

those findings will be of great help in proposing new criteria for materials selection and coursebook design which will be formed in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 6. Conclusion and implications**

### **6.0. Introduction**

This chapter discusses the significant findings in relation to the hypotheses and research questions of the thesis. Then it moves on to the rationales proposed for material selection and coursebook design, as a result of verification of the hypotheses and research questions developed from Chapter 5. The proposal has been extended and modified in the following six aspects: requirements of the National English Syllabus, authenticity, interesting topics and substantial content, right level in language difficulty, opportunities to use prior knowledge and exercises leading to deep, personal engagement. Exercises or tasks are designed to check students' understanding as well as to lead them to think about the deeper meaning of a text. The chapter also discusses the strengths and limitations of the study. Implications for further research are presented as well. Concluding remarks are given at the very end of the chapter.

### **6.1. Significant findings**

The quantitative and qualitative analyses of the data, which were gathered through the application of three highly regarded formulae (5.2.1), an analysis of language features of the chosen texts (5.2.2), questionnaires and interviews on the templates (5.2.3 and 5.2.4), indicate that readability is a key factor in determining materials and coursebook selection for college English in China. But since there are many other factors influencing students' ability to comprehend, the existing readability formulae have to be modified in the light of

recent research into the relationship between lexico-grammar and discourse organisation (General hypothesis).

The findings suggest that the difficulty of words and sentence complexes measured by readability formulae provide a basic category for materials selection for Band I college English. However, the findings also underline that traditional readability formulae cannot be used exclusively or mechanically as they only measure surface structures, neglecting the critical functions of discourse signals, cohesive ties at a macro-level, and considering no cognitive processing factors influencing the comprehensibility of a text (Huggins & Adams, 1980; Zakaluk & Samuels, 1988). Ease of reading can be manipulated by highlighting a greater use of discourse signals in the text (Specific hypothesis) and by pre-, post-, and while-reading tasks which promote thinking about the text (Specific hypothesis). Modern research on language teaching regards the reading process as a matter of reader-text interaction (3.2.3 and 4.2.1). Therefore, 'thinking skill' activities are recommended in asking questions and designing tasks as they facilitate students' interaction with the text and the development of language awareness (Specific hypothesis).

### **Addressing the research questions of the study**

#### **Research question 1: What factors that affect readability?**

In the case of college English in China, students have a very moderate English proficiency (1999, Revising Team), equal to children of 11-13 in native speaking countries (5.2.1). Word difficulty and sentence complexity are major problems in their learning. In addition to these factors, there are also other

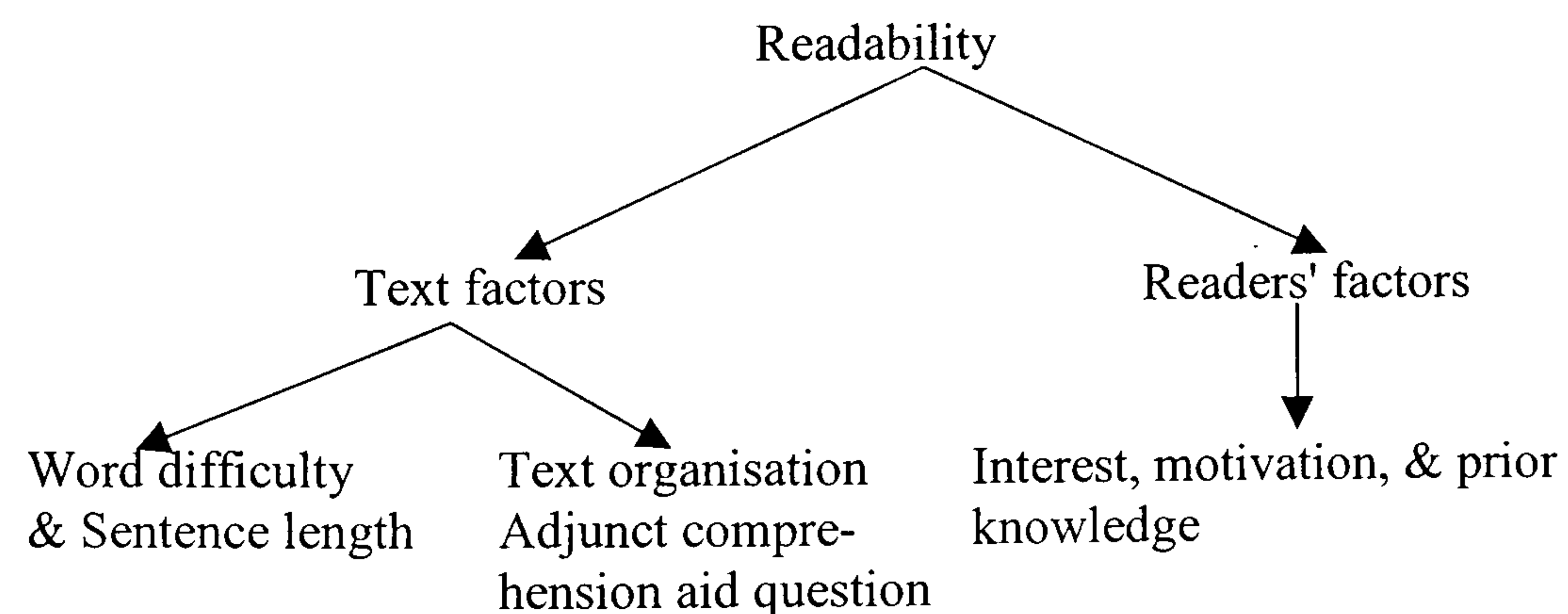


elements influencing students' performance in reading. As far as language features are concerned, discourse signals and cohesive ties in organisation and questions in adjunct comprehension aids are introduced. According to the questionnaires and interviews, college students depend greatly on them as their reading ability is limited.

Recent research on reading focuses more on readers' interaction with the writer (3.2.3 and 4.2.2). Interest, motivation and prior knowledge of the reader play important roles in reading. It has been found in both the questionnaires and the interviews that students are more motivated by the topics they are interested in and feel more comfortable with articles they are more familiar with (See 5.2; 5.3 and 5.4). No matter how well it is written, a book can never gain its value if readers do not show any interest in it.

The elements and the relationships among the elements found in the research are summed up in Figure 6-1:

Figure 6-1: The relationships among the elements found in the research



Thus the term ‘readability’ is used in a more comprehensive sense (Also see 4.2).

**Research question 2: Is readability applicable in materials selection and coursebook design for college English in China?**

Although readability has been widely used in English speaking countries, it has not been explored before in the Chinese context. This study testifies that readability is applicable in the EFL Chinese context by rating six chosen texts with three popular readability formulae (5.2.1.3). The language features of the same chosen texts analysed with the checklist provided by Leech and Short confirms the validity and reliability of the results obtained from the formulae. Interviews undertaken in both the piloting study and the main study reveal that the readability used in a more comprehensive sense as in this thesis is not only applicable but also beneficial in materials selection and coursebook design for college English (5.2.4 and 5.3.3).

**Research question 3: How to design tasks which help develop students’ communicative competence?**

As discussed in 3.1.2.2, the success or failure of a textbook depends largely on the exercises accompanying the text. This is particularly true in the EFL Chinese context, because Chinese coursebook writers choose authentic materials as texts rather than writing texts themselves for the authenticity of materials. They design exercises. The approaches they use in raising questions and designing tasks influence how teachers instruct and how students learn. For instance, the currently used coursebooks in college English employ many multiple-choice

questions which focus more on receptive skills than on communicative ones. That is why involvement and interaction between text and the readers have not been developed. As the ultimate goal of learning a language is to communicate, exercise design should first of all provide students with opportunities to use what they have learned, and to communicate in the target language whenever and wherever possible. Exercises in ‘interactive reading’, ‘task-based approaches’ and ‘thinking-skill activities’ invite students to use their knowledge, experience and opinion to process and interact with the text and to communicate with the target language both in spoken and written forms.

**Research question 4: What are students’ and the teacher’s responses to the third drafted templates proposed by the writer of this thesis?**

In order to see both students’ and teacher’s responses to the third drafted templates, four interviews were carried out in the study, of whom three interviewees were students and one was a teacher. The interviewees expressed their approval of the selected texts because they are interesting and challenging. They also noticed the differences in task design between the currently used coursebooks and the proposed templates. The main difference lies in the fact that the template units have more exercises which require more student participation and demand more productive skills than the currently used coursebooks. For instance: ‘presentation’, ‘prediction’, ‘writing emails’, ‘paraphrase’ and ‘thinking activities’. The teacher liked these subjective exercises and she thought that her students needed this kind of training. The three students showed interest, but they also expressed concern that they needed teacher’s guidance, cooperation from other students and a proper atmosphere in

doing this kind of exercises. As a matter of fact, they felt more at ease with much more familiar exercises like ‘translation’ or ‘true or false questions’. One student expressed his uncertainty if it is necessary to learn English in this way. After all English is only a foreign language. The template units are not perfect and have not enough revolutionary changes out of some constraints from the National Syllabus and from the current teaching situation. However, it is hoped that the templates could raise the issue that college English needs further reform and improvement towards communicative competence.

## **6.2. Proposed rationales**

Based on the brief overview of the significant findings in the previous section and the theoretical principles in text selection and coursebook design discussed in 3.1.2, it is proposed that the rationales for materials selection and task design for the coursebook project between Nottingham University and Tsinghua University should be extended and modified as follows:

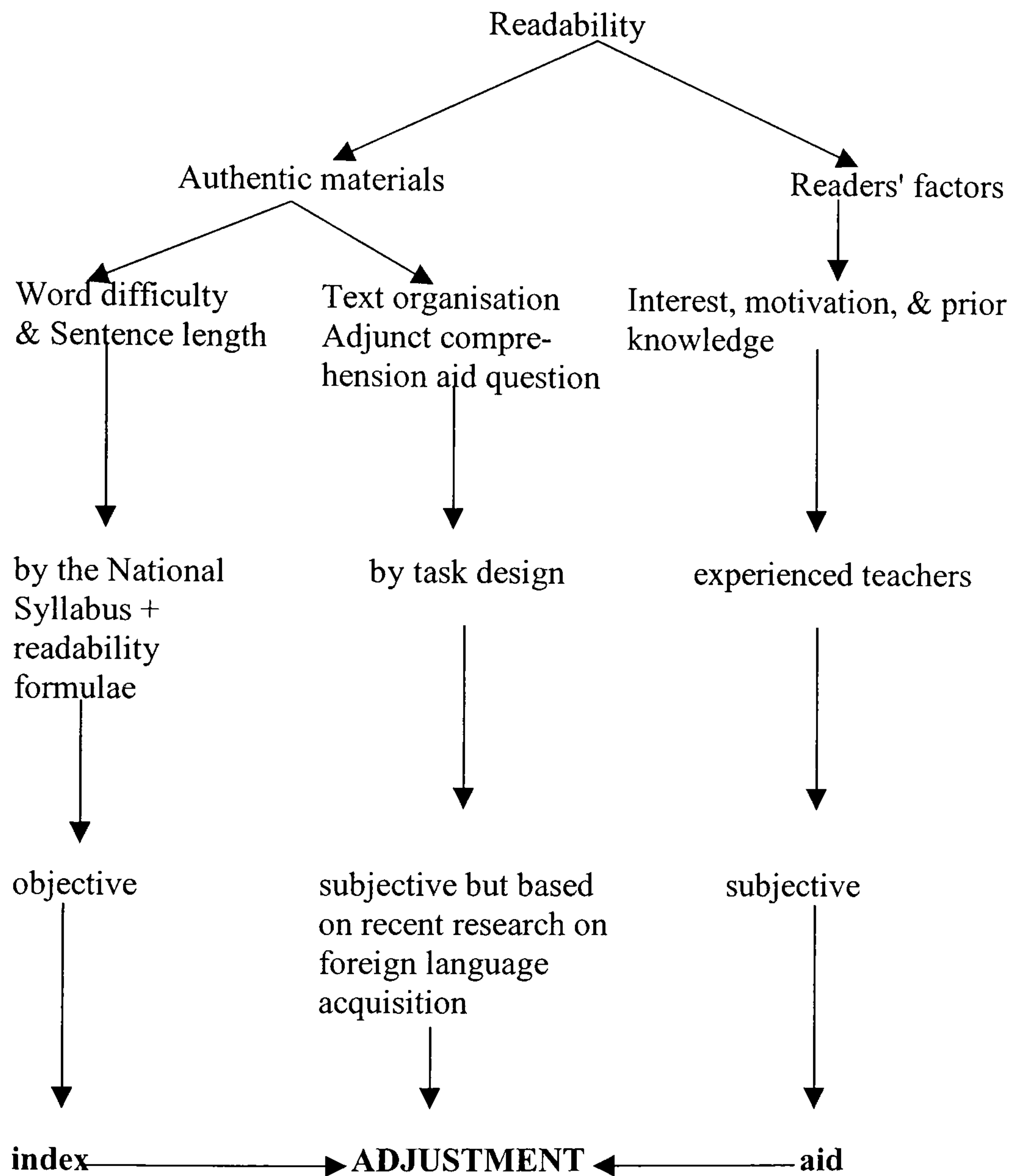
1. Do the textbooks meet the requirement stated in the national English syllabus? (See 2.4; 3.1.6)
2. Are the chosen passages authentic (3.1.2.1.1)?
3. Do the texts have interesting topics and substantial content? (4.2.1 and 4.4.1)
4. Are the texts right in difficult level from the linguistic point of view? (4.4.2; 4.4; 4.5; 4.6; 5.2; 5.3)
5. Does the design of the textbooks provide students with opportunities to make use of their prior knowledge and to explore more? (3.2.4; 4.4.2; 5.3)
6. Do exercises try to lead the students to deep, personal engagement? (4.4.6)

The following are suggested procedures:

- A. First choose passages from authentic materials according to the requirements for the number of new words and the length of texts as stated in the National English Syllabus. Do not substitute easier words for harder ones and shorter sentences for longer ones to keep them authentic unless they are really rare.
- B. Use readability formulae to measure word difficulty and sentence complexity. If the results are within the age level of 11-13, the passages are appropriate in terms of language difficulty (5.2).
- C. As new words and sentence length alone cannot determine readability, perception and experience have to be borrowed in judging the possibilities of students' interest, motivation and prior knowledge (3.2.3; 3.2.4; 4.2; 5.2.3; 5.2.4 and 5.2.5).
- D. Adjunct comprehension aids are what coursebook writers have to explore.
  - *To check comprehension:* to check how well the students have understood the text, and what needs to be more fully explained.
  - *To help the students read the text:* good questions should focus students' attention on the main points and lead them to think about the meaning of the text.

The procedures of proposed rationales can be illustrated in the following diagram:

Figure 6-2. The procedures of proposed rationales



### 6.3. Significance of the study

The study has been carried out to propose rationales for textbook writing for college English in China (6.2), having employed readability (4) and recent research into the process of reading (3.2.3) as a framework. The study also

presents a picture of college English teaching by providing a survey of special features of college English teaching (2.2 and 3.1.3) and by highlighting the impact of three versions of the National English Syllabus (2.3). It is hoped that coursebooks written with the proposed rationale (6.2) will serve as a very effective agent of change and bring about reform to college English teaching in China (3.1.1).

In spite of the progress made in college English in the last two decades (2.2) and the fast development of EFL teaching in the world, college English has remained quite traditional, with teachers functioning as knowledge transmitters and students as recipients being passively fed by their instructors (2.3). Coursebooks, though viewed as the most important means of classroom teaching, have never been studied seriously (3.1.1). There is no single book published on the study of coursebooks for college English; and there are very few articles either. This research is by far the most complete and systemic work on the study of coursebook writing for college English.

The study is original in its attempt to use readability for materials selection and coursebook design for college English in China. Although, the research is based on a small scale of data-collection (5.2), the questionnaires and the templates have been revised twice and tried out twice (5.2.3 and 5.3) among subjects who are teachers and students experienced both in college English and in EFL in Britain in pre-piloting study and piloting study. Their ability in comparing the difference between college English and EFL in Britain provides a useful insight

in judging the templates drafted and supports the validity and reliability of the findings (5.4).

### **6.3.1. Strengths of the study**

There are three significant points to stress as to the strength of the study:

- The first point lies in the fact that the research is based on a text-reader model of readability. It argues that readability is an interaction between text characteristics and reader resources, and that the two factors are dependable on and interrelated with each other. Therefore, it attempts to investigate readability from both the point of views of the linguistic elements of a text and the cognitive process of the readers. Reading involves more than an information search or straightforward comprehension. It involves emotion such as appreciation of word and intelligence in coping with various views from the reader as well. “Current SLA research orientations can be captured by a single word: complexity. Researchers have begun to realise that there are social and interpersonal as well as psychological dimensions to acquisition, that input and output are both important, that form and meaning are ultimately inseparable, and that acquisition is an organic rather than linear process.” (Nunan, 2001: 91)
- The second point is that the research tends to view limitations of current coursebooks as stemming from lack of adjunct comprehension aids or tasks which are not properly designed (3.1.4 and 3.3). According to McRae (1991), the readability level of a text depends largely on what students are asked to do. The tasks or activities set will not only determine what students



get out of the reading, but also how they go about it. Good exercises will bring a series of responses from the students and will result in cognitive learning, personal experience, linguistic knowledge, cultural awareness and classroom interaction. Current English teaching and coursebooks in college English still employ the 'form-based' approach, which analyses the language into an inventory of forms to be presented to the learner and practised as a series of discrete items. "There is an assumption that there is a direct relationship between 'input' and 'intake', that what is presented can be mastered directly and that it will, as a result of that mastery, become part of the learner's usable repertoire." (Willis & Willis, 2001:173). But research on second language acquisition (Nunan, 2001) shows that intake does not equal input. "What is consciously learned is not necessarily incorporated into spontaneous language production" (Willis & Willis, 2001:173). A task-based approach is recommended in exercise design for it involves communicative tasks to be carried out by learners in the target language (Willis & Willis, 2001). Communicative tasks are described as pieces of classroom work which engage students in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form (Nunan, 1993) (See 3.1.2.1).

- The third point is the argument that a greater use of discourse signals and cohesive ties in organisation facilitate ease of reading. Conventional readability formulae only measure new vocabulary and sentence length, neglecting organisation including cohesive ties, discourse signals, repetition

of arguments which makes a text easier to process and hence more readable. The organisation of an article reveals the cohesive structure of a text which serves as a roadmap to understanding the syntax of discourse concerned with the interrelationships of ideas expressed by the writer (Binkley, 1988) (See 5.4).

### **6.3.2. Limitation of the research**

- “One thing readability formulas will never be able to judge is an individual student’s motivation to read a particular bit of writing” (Fry, 1988: 87). Even very experienced teachers cannot come to the same conclusion as to which topics students might find interesting (5.2 and 3.1.4) and it is impossible to find topics that will appeal to all the students in college English. Therefore it is impossible to provide objective measurements for variables like individual reader factors.
- It is not possible to get a completely satisfactory yardstick for measuring exercise design either. A task-based approach is recommended in asking questions because it is believed that this approach ‘helps develop students’ interpretive and inferencing skills, particularly interpretation of the relations between forms and meanings’ (Carter, 1996) and will ideally lead students to language awareness, text awareness and culture awareness. The problem is that these questions are subjective and often open to all possible answers, which depend largely on the knowledge and art of teachers. The ways in which teachers present texts, illustrate things and manage classes vary, and will impose different effects upon students in enhancing their resources and promoting comprehension goals.

- The readability theory formulated in this study is based on Zuckaluk and Samuels' argument that the readability of a text is an interactive function between text characteristics and reader resources. As they consider both text difficulties and reader resources such as interest, motivation and prior knowledge, it is time consuming to apply this readability in materials selection and coursebook design for college English.
- Evidence from questionnaire feedback from both teachers and students has underlined the cultural context in China regarding both textbook design and teaching methodology. It is a clear limitation to the research that there is resistance to innovation in the cultural context that has been explored. For this reason, the teaching template involves only a modest introduction of new ideas. Attention to cohesive items and discourse organisation and questions which encourage thinking skills are therefore counterbalanced by a traditional focus on traditional features of vocabulary knowledge and comprehension.

#### **6.4. Implications for further research**

It is a shortcoming of this study that the template design has not received a unanimous welcome. Future research will need to explore more effective ways of linking familiar question design to new task and question design which has widespread and unqualified support. Future research will also need to interview a wide range of college students and teachers and determine more precisely preferences for question types, how best to help orient students and teachers to

new types of task and how to supervise Chinese traditions of information transfer with a cultural context in which learners become more autonomous and begin to think more for themselves, and exchange as well as transfer information. Overall, change needs to be introduced slowly and with respect for different cultural traditions of teaching and learning.

Research into current second language acquisition and foreign language teaching emphasises an interaction between task variables, personality factors and interactional dynamic that underlines the complexity of the learning environment, and the difficulty of isolating psychological and linguistic factors from social and interpersonal ones. Future research is expected to develop towards this direction which will lead to a challenge for syllabus designers, coursebook writers and classroom teachers of how to develop programmes that integrate task-based teaching with form-focused instruction (Nunan, 2001). This is particularly challenging to Band I college English for although Band I students of college English are not complete beginners, they have only a 1800-2000 word vocabulary in English. It is suggested that further research should explore the extent to which one can implement task-based teaching with Band I students to establish the appropriate balance and 'mix' between tasks which have non-linguistic outcomes and exercises which have linguistic outcomes, a combination of task-based and form-based approaches. A task-based approach involves communicative tasks seen as having the capability of bring about an outcome through the exchange of meanings. Therefore language development is prompted by language use, with the study of language form in aid for itself. But when students have a very limited vocabulary and knowledge of grammar, it

will be very reasonable to achieve a balance between language development while, at the same time, recognising that there is no direct relationship between language instruction and language learning (Willis & Willis, 2001).

Necessary teacher training is essential in carrying out any change in college English teaching. What good teaching entails, how knowledge is demonstrated, and if various kinds of classroom activities are available to the students, all these will affect students' learning. No matter how communicative the tasks are in a textbook, if teachers keep on dominating the class, transmitting knowledge to students, leaving no room for students to get personally involved or interact with the text, spontaneous response and meaning creation from the students can never take place.

As expressed by Brumfit & Carter (1986), the competence of reading cannot be 'taught' but 'caught'. The role of a teacher is not as an instructor but as an intermediary between author, text and receiver (McRae, 1991; Also 2.3). Consequently, a teacher cannot command or instruct specific responses from students. Instead, they train students by direct intervention, for example, with questions and answers. Moreover, they demonstrate the process of responding to a variety of texts and various ways of making possible appropriate responses, and then create the conditions for students to achieve successful learning (Brumfit & Carter, 1986). It is the students, not the teachers, who are actually involved in meaning creation in the process of reading by integrating their own needs, understanding, and expectations with a written text (ibid.). Brumfit and

Carter (1986:34) also warn us: "... it is dangerous to be too simplistic about what is accessible to whom"

### **6.5. Concluding remarks**

This study has been conducted to devise proper rationales in materials selection and coursebook design for college English in China. It intends to use coursebooks as an agent of change which can bring improvement to college English teaching.

It has been argued in Chapter 2 Background, History and Syllabus Design, although progress has been made in college English compared with what it was 20 years ago, there is still a lot to improve. This can be seen from the questionnaires on the need analysis for the revision of the National English Syllabus (2.4.4). After the Cultural Revolution in 1976, when universities resumed normal operation, college English was actually initiated. Over the last two decades, it has experienced four stages: resurrection, improvement, advancement and making a step forward. The needs of the students, the expectation of teachers and employers have been transformed from the very basic requirements in late 70s to early 80s (See 1980 version of the National English syllabus), to receptive skills from 1985 to 1998 (See 1985/1986 version of the National English Syllabus) and to communicative ability of "exchanging information in the target language" in 1999 (See 1999 version of the National English Syllabus) (See 2.2).

In spite of students' enhanced language proficiency, changes in needs and interests, and the higher requirement of the National Syllabus (3.1.6), college English teaching has remained traditional, concentrating on studying grammar and structures, providing no opportunities to use the language as a means of communication (3.1.3). Coursebooks are supposed to be written by authorities and regarded as knowledge input by both teachers and students (See 3.1). The function of a teacher is that of a knowledge transmitter who feeds students with what is written in books. All students are asked to do is to memorise and reproduce the knowledge in objective questions. Such methods in English teaching have not done much to develop students' skill in interactive reading, nor in learning to learn. "Reasoning, intuitive and deductive processes are not generally made to work very hard in reading comprehension - the thinking skill is left undeveloped" (McRae, 1991: 47). As a result, students become dependent on teachers and books for everything in learning (See 2.3).

The key issue in the reform of college English teaching lies in the change of the relationships among the teacher, the learner and the coursebook. As reading is a reader-text interaction (Carrell, Devine & Eskey, 1988; Swaffar, 1988; Crandall, 1995; Nuttall, 1996; Also 3.2.3), students should interact with coursebooks, while teachers are only intermediaries between author, text and receiver (McRae, 1991:97), helping students acquire autonomy for themselves (Holec, 1981:23), for "the purpose of teaching is to enable students to learn" (Doff, 1988: 283).

According to Van den Akker (1988), a highly structured written textbook has the potential to be a very effective agent of change in an educational system, as it can introduce new ideas and provide a complete picture of the changes to both teachers and learners through its formats and exercises. New series of coursebooks are called for to bring forward changes and reform to college English (See 3.1.1).

Current materials selection and coursebook writing for college English are only based on the perception and the intuition of experienced teachers who are too heavily loaded to study any current development and findings in linguistics or language teaching research (3.3). Besides, they embody their interpretation of how English should be taught in the books they compose, in which priority is given to passive learning (3.1.3; 3.1.4 and 3.3). With the development of college English in China (2.2 and 2.3), it is essential to select materials with some theoretical criteria. The theory of readability is proposed (See 3.3 and 4) since readability has a long history of research and application (Chall, 1988) in grading stories and textbooks for children in English speaking countries (4.1).

Findings obtained from both quantitative and qualitative analyses of the data, which were gathered through readability formulae (5.2.1), a language feature analysis (5.2.2), questionnaires (5.2.3) and interviews (5.2.4), reveal that readability is a key factor in determining materials selection and coursebook for college English in China. And readability is not only composed of text characteristics such as vocabulary and sentence length, but also organisation, exercises designed and interest, motivation, prior knowledge of the reader (See



4.2; 5.4). Therefore, it has been argued in this thesis that existing measures of readability have to be modified in line with recent research into the relationship between lexico-grammar and discourse organisation as well as recent research on second language acquisition which encourages students in comprehending, manipulating, producing and interacting in the target language.

Based on the above findings and literature reviews, the following principles in materials selection and coursebook design for college English are proposed:

- Textbooks have to meet the requirements stated in the National English Syllabus. (See 2.4; 3.1.6)
- The chosen passages need to be more authentic. (3.1.2.1.1)
- The chosen texts have to be interesting in topic and substantial in content. (3.1.2.1.2 and 4.4.1)
- The texts have to be right in difficulty level from the linguistic point of view. (4.2.2; 4.4; 4.5; 4.6; 5.2; 5.3)
- Task design should provide students with opportunities to make use of their prior knowledge to interact with the text. (3.1.2.2; 3.2.3; 3.2.4; 4.2.1; 4.4.2; 5.3)
- Exercises should explore ways of leading students to a deeper, more personal engagement. (4.4.7; 5.4 and 6.2.6).

The National English Syllabus establishes major criteria for coursebook writers to determine priorities in teaching of each stage, while the duty of coursebook writers is to select appropriate texts and design meaningful exercises to enable teachers and students to work efficiently towards the final objectives.

As discussed in Chapter 3, coursebooks on college English, though viewed as the most important means of classroom teaching, have never been studied seriously. There is no single book published on coursebook study, and articles are few and far between too. This research, though it is acknowledged to have shortcomings, is a complete and systemic work on the study of coursebook writing for college English. It is hoped that the findings in this research can provide meaningful rationales for coursebook production, which will serve as an agent of change through formats and exercise design, and may consequently begin to improve college English teaching in China.

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