

# An Evaluation of Classroom Climate in the Computer-assisted Language Teaching

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**ABSTRACT:** Computer assisted teaching (CAT) has been widely used in College English Teaching (CET) in China, while whether CAT is conducive to its classroom climate finds few studies. Based on the data obtained from interviews and focused description, this paper attempts to evaluate the classroom climate in College English Teaching with CAT. The main findings are: 1) Teachers' perceptions of a good classroom climate with CAT are different from that of the students'; 2) classroom climate indicators show that the intellectual aspect of the classroom climate is positive, while the emotional and physical aspects are not very satisfying. Suggestions for language teachers on how CAT can help to build and maintain an effective classroom climate beneficial to students' learning and growing are offered in the last part.

**KEYWORD:** Computer-assisted Language Teaching; Classroom Climate; College English Teaching

## 1 THE INTRODUCTION

Computer technology has become a great aid to language teachers, particularly on college campuses. In China, almost all college English teaching nowadays is conducted with CAT, and Cai (2004:17-20) thinks this is a new breakthrough in the history of CET in China [2]. Mao (2007:26) shows his worry about teachers' ability to conduct CAI though [5]. So far, few studies have been found to explore the issues and situation of classroom climate with CAT. Classroom climate research, as described by Anderson (1982), is the stepchild of psychological and classroom research [1]. The research, in part, is dedicated "to conceptualizing, assessing, and investigating what happens to students during their schooling (Fraser & Fisher, 1994:23) [3]. Classroom practices have indicated a positive classroom climate is needed for effective learning. Therefore, an evaluation of the classroom climate in computer-assisted language teaching is of great significance. The objectives of this study are to check the teachers' and students' perceptions of their classroom climate in College English Teaching, and how CAT can help to create a physically and psychologically healthy, academically effective classroom climate.

## 2 RESEARCH DESIGN

### 2.1 *Research questions*

Richards, Platt & Platt (2000:66) have defined the classroom climate as: (in teaching) the affective aspects of the classroom, such as the feelings generated by and about the teacher, the students or the subject matter, along with aspects of the classroom itself that contribute positively or negatively to the learning atmosphere[6]. Based on this definition, this study tries to explore the following three questions: (1) What are the teachers and students' perceptions of a good classroom climate; (2) How can language teachers become good classroom climate leaders; and (3) How can CAT help to build and maintain an effective learning climate.

### 2.2 *Subjects*

10 students studying for their bachelor's degrees in arts, science, engineering and business in the authors' university were interviewed with 2 semi-structured questions. 5 students were in their first year and 5 were in their second year. 5 teachers aged from 28 to 50 were interviewed with 2 semi-structured questions.

## 2.3 Methods

### 2.3.1 Semi-structured interviews

2 pilot interviews were made before interviewing the 10 students. Questions for students are:

(1) Are you satisfied with computer-assisted teaching and classroom climate? Why and why not?

(2) What kind of classroom climate in the computer-assisted teaching do you like?

Questions for teachers are:

(1) What do you think of the classroom climate in your classroom?

(2) Have you tried to create a positive classroom climate in your teaching? And what are them?

All the interviews are made in Chinese. After the transcription, the data related to the research topic was chosen and translated into English.

### 2.3.2 Focused description

The authors visited and observed 8 teachers' classroom teaching, and all the teaching was conducted in the multimedia classroom. Each class lasts 100 minutes with 10 minutes break in between. The ages of the teachers range from 28 to 50. Interviews were made after the class. Teachers were encouraged to use the introspection. The contents in Classroom Climate Checklist (see <http://www.njpbs.org/resources/documents/ClassClimateIndicatorChecklist1-11-10.doc>) are the foci of class observation and note taking [8]. Classroom Climate Checklist (CCC) contains 5 scales and 41 items. In fact, there are many instruments developed to measure classroom climate. The reason of choosing CCC is that it is complete and easy to be operated.

## 3 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Results from interviews of students

#### 3.1.1 Feedback about the actual classroom climate

The answers to whether they are satisfied with CAT and the classroom climate vary. The results from the interviews reflect intellectual, emotional, social and physical aspects of classroom climate.

In terms of the intellectual aspect, the students all agreed that CAT contains rich information (maybe too much to be fully used) and they are often authentic. Beautiful colors and pleasant sound did bring a lot of enjoyment and excitement. Teachers often spoke for most of the time while the students did not have enough skill practice time. There was sometimes no feedback from the teachers, or feedbacks were short and simple. Learning tasks were often not very motivating and challenging.

With regard to the emotional aspect of classroom climate, students all felt very safe as teachers seldom criticized the students even when they could not

answer certain questions. What was less is the atmosphere of encouraging risk-taking and receiving support when events intrude on learning. In some classes, teachers just stayed in front of the computers, clicking the mouse. And if there was a need to ask questions, some teachers would search the name list. After one or two semesters, some teachers still only knew the monitors' or the study supervisor's names.

About the perspective of social aspect of classroom climate, students generally felt that teachers were approachable, resourceful and responsive to questions. Students had opportunities to work together, but there was not enough teacher-student communication. Even at the break, some teachers would often have some English movies on instead of talking with the students.

As to the physical environment, students felt ok about the classroom equipment. There was not much disruption or barriers to learning in the classroom. One student mentioned a phenomenon that his teacher often had their classroom curtains down for a clearer screen, which too often made him drowsy.

#### 3.1.2 Students' perception of an ideal classroom climate with CAT

Words like interesting, relaxing, encouraging, friendly, equal, motivating, effective, meaningful were mostly mentioned. Students expect to learn in a climate that both the teaching and teaching materials are interesting, the PPT presentation is dynamic and the words on it are big enough, the learning environment is relaxing and friendly, learning activities are effective and meaningful, and teachers are encouraging, motivating and can treat everybody equally. Students' perception mainly involves emotional and physical aspects of the classroom climate.

### 3.2 Results from interview of teachers

#### 3.2.1 Teachers' perception of the classroom climate

Teachers being interviewed said that they had been trying every effort to create a climate conducive to learning. A great deal of time has been spent in downloading pictures, film clips and articles from the Internet and reediting them to make the courseware look nice and attract students. So far, they had both successful and unsuccessful teaching experience and stories in the process. They all felt that it is more difficult these days to arouse students' interest because some students are often distracted by their cell phones. 3 teachers worried about their classroom climate as often they could see some students sleeping or unmotivated. In fact, it is not easy to give a whole picture of their classroom climate as it involves too many parameters. For example, classroom climate sometimes is decided by

learning tasks and learning materials. If the tasks or text contents happen to be most students' interests, the classroom climate will appear to be positive; classroom climate is also affected by class cohesiveness. Teachers who teach two classes with the same methods and materials may find two kind of different classroom climate: one is positive and active, while the other is negative and passive.

### 3.2.2 *Methods used to create certain classroom*

Teachers being interviewed perceived a good classroom climate as follows: full attendance, quick response to teachers' questions, all the tasks being carried out smoothly, students are attentive and disciplined in the class, every students are fully engaged and actively participate in the learning activities, group work is effective and can foster a team spirit, and both teachers and students feel happy and fulfilled after the class. To achieve the above, they had tried many means to improve their classroom climate, and the most frequently used methods were: telling English jokes and short stories, playing games, editing English role plays, making presentations, debates, discussion, pair work and team work, supplementing teaching materials that can arouse students' interest.

When talking about how they make use of computers especially since they all teach in a multimedia classroom, they answered almost the same, besides using the courseware, they also showed English movies or let students listen to English songs. Their students were encouraged to have autonomous learning with computers in school's language lab. One teacher mentioned he often used emails to communicate with his students.

Teachers' perception of a good classroom climate mainly involves intellectual and social aspects of classroom classmate, while they neglect students' personal emotions and the physical aspect of a classroom. Though they have tried very hard to make use of some methods, they seldom reflect whether these methods are effective.

### 3.3 *Results form focused description*

The checklist has provided teachers with an opportunity to reflect on the strength and weakness of their class climate and what they should improve in their classrooms (see table 1). In the scale of Class and Activity Start Up, 4 items are in place, and 6 items are to work on; in the scale of Transitions, 4 items are in place, and 1 item are to work on; in the scale of Instructional Process, 6 items are in place and 3 items are to work on; in the scale of Group and Independent Work Activities, 4 items are in place and 4 items are to work on; in the scale of Student-Teacher Interactions, 5 items are in place and 3 items are needed to work on (see Table1). The table shows that there are 25 items in place and 16 items are to

work on in total. Though items in place are 61%, a slight over the average, it is not a very satisfying figure. In the first scales, the scores show that we teachers sometimes neglect to make good use of the starting part of a class. The scores in scales 2 and 3 are also not very positive, and there is much work to be done in improving our classroom climate.

Table 1. Result of classroom climate checklist

Items	In place	To work on
Class and Activity Start Up	4	6
Transitions	4	1
Instructional Process	6	3
Group and Independent Work Activities	6	3
Student- Teacher Interactions	5	3
Total	25	16
Percentage	61%	39%

## 4 IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

### 4.1 *Teachers as Classroom Climate Leaders*

Ginott thinks that a teacher is the decisive element in the classroom by stating "It is a teacher's personal approach that creates the climate. It's a teacher's daily mood that makes the weather. A teacher possesses tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous (1976:3)"[4]. The fact in our computer-aided college English teaching is that our teachers' influence is too often neutral (leaving the disinterested student disinterested) or negative, therefore, a teacher who can create a good climate is strongly demanded.

To be a successful climate creator, a teacher should show concern about students' emotional, social and academic needs instead of just standing or sitting nearby the computers. Teachers should teach with enthusiasm and choose proper words in giving feedbacks. Teachers who know and can speak out students' names contribute to a good teacher-student relationship. Even when failures occur, teachers should provide a continual support and encouragement so as to protect students' self-esteem regarding their learning.

In addition, an effective teacher adjust classroom climate according to intended goals. With the help of the computer and the well prepared courseware, he can create a competitive classroom climate to motive the students by encouraging them to compete with one another; he can create a cooperative classrooms climate to enhance students' achievement by developing co-operative learning skills; he can create an individual classroom climate to help the development of independent learning skills by emphasizing on individual work with a minimum of teacher intervention.

Some physical aspects of classroom climate that affect our students' ability to concentrate and maintain attention also influence classroom climate. It is a pity that our teachers could not do much in this aspect because teachers usually have no control of the size of their classrooms, and they are unable to change the seating arrangement since the seats have been stabilized on the ground.

#### 4.2 *CAT in helping to create a good classroom climate*

Computer technology has been used as an aid to our teaching for many years. Yang (1998:60) thinks that the prominent characteristic of computer-aid language instruction as a media is that it offers exploratory mode of learning [7]. Teacher need to spend much time in exploring the software and in learning how to use it to maximum effect. We should also be aware that the computers are just tools facilitating teaching and learning, and they are not the focus of the lesson. Five suggestion of using computers effectively to create a beneficial climate to English learning are offered as follows.

Plan the lessons in advance: Decide which parts need to be shown on screen. Typical parts include the introduction of teaching objectives, warm-up activities, important language points, video clips and summary (an assignment if there is a need).

Select materials to be displayed on computer carefully: Materials to the subject matter, such as English video clips, listening materials, speaking or discussion activities, etc., should be selected and prepared well. Materials with pleasing colors and sound are welcomed by the students.

Get the computer ready before class: Make sure to upload all the prepared materials ahead of class time. It often spoil students' mood if they wait for too long after they are ready to have class.

Involve the students: Encourage the students to present their team work with computers. Students are very creative when they have a chance to display their work with PPT in front of their classmates.

Combine computers technology with network: Establish a chat room via a campus computer network, which can increase some social and affective connections among the students and between teachers and students. Students can help each other when they visit those rooms and teachers can also stay in the chat room to answer questions, thus it creates an easy way to exchange information.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

Classroom climate is one of the important factors affecting students' academic achievement and social performance. Language teachers should make good use of computers to maintain an orderly environment in which academic goals are emphasized. Limitations of this study are that the number of the subjects is relatively small and the structured questions may not be very scientific. Further research is expected.

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