

(Yi YANG)

### **Introduction**

During September 2003, I taught a short-term intensive course on educational research methods at the Foreign Language School of Xi'an Jiaotong University (XJTU). The Overseas Young Chinese Forum (OYCF) Education Teaching Fellowship sponsored the course. The audience consisted of master students and some young faculty members specializing in applied linguistics. The lectures were held in an auditorium with multimedia facilities. The number of attendees ranged from 30 to 80 people for each session. All lectures were conducted in English using PowerPoint.

### **Course Design**

This course was designed to be an introduction to a variety of approaches used in educational research. Before I went to China, a professor at XJTU commented on my course design. She confirmed the relevance of the course content but suggested that I use more examples of foreign language education given the specialization of the audience at the Foreign Language School. I planned four lecture sessions, two computer sessions, and suggested reading materials (all about foreign language education) for each session. Since the school did not own these materials, I donated three books and several journal articles to the Reference Room of the Foreign Language School.

Class One was about research design, in which we compared the qualitative and quantitative research paradigms, illustrated steps in conducting empirical research, discussed ethics in empirical research, and presented types and sampling methods of both quantitative and qualitative research. I also talked about several important issues pertaining to academic writing in English, especially the purpose of a literature review and the appropriate ways of citing sources. These are, as many previous studies on English writing have shown, often weak links for Chinese students and scholars. In addition, I introduced some Internet resources for English language teachers.

Class Two focused on qualitative methodology. We discussed the basic principles of qualitative research, validity concerns and approaches to enhance trustworthiness, techniques in conducting interviews and observations, ways of analyzing narrative data, and how to write up a qualitative report. As examples I used a number of books and dissertations submitted to the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Class Three was about the design of experiments and questionnaires, including different types of educational experiments, the validity of experimental studies, strengths and weaknesses of questionnaire studies, ways of constructing questionnaires, and questionnaire data coding and analysis.

Class Four concerned certain basic statistical concepts widely used for educational research. I lectured on descriptive statistics (e.g. central tendency, variability, shape of

distribution) and inferential statistics (e.g. t-test, chi-square test, correlation). I also demonstrated how to set up a dataset and do some analysis with Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), a widely used statistical package in the U.S.

Class Five was a computer session, where students practiced using SPSS. Some students used the dataset I provided, most students brought their own data. I held two separate computer sessions due to the space limit of the computer lab and students' time conflicts,

### **Students' Evaluation of the Course**

Students generally seemed to be highly interested in this course. On the last class, 30 students filled out the Students Feedback Form. The following is a summary of their opinions.

Regarding the relevance of the course, students in general considered the content practical, and useful for their future research and thesis writing in the foreign language education area. Some students, while talking to me in private, said their previous research was conducted with little scientific guidance. After taking this course, they were able to consider the pros and cons of various research methods. Those who had already collected data for their theses wished they had taken this course earlier so that they could have collected better data for statistical analysis. Students had heard about SPSS, but no teacher was able to teach it. This course helped them to get familiar with this highly useful statistical tool.

Most students felt satisfied with the length and intensity of the course. Due to the non-credit nature and the short-term schedule of the course, I did not make the reading mandatory and did not assign any homework. This to some extent interfered with students' understanding of the course content. Some students wished that I could teach more statistics, as it was difficult to learn on one's own.

In terms of the teaching method of the course, it was mostly teacher-centered, given the structure of the auditorium, the large audience, and the volume of course content. On occasion I tried to ask questions in class, but in each instance literally no one responded. Students seemed more willing to interact with me after class. They asked for copies of my PowerPoint files and for advice on their own research. Most students felt that the lecture format was acceptable, or even desirable. But some students did suggest that there be more student participation in the classroom.

While many students thought the level of difficulty was appropriate, some felt that the technical terms were difficult to understand and that the pace was a little too fast for note taking. They wished I had spoken more slowly and given them more time to view the PowerPoint slides.

In general, students appreciated the OYCF Teaching Fellowship program and valued the opportunity to learn from an overseas scholar. They hoped that more such lectures would be offered in the future.

## **Other Teaching Activities on the Trip**

In addition to this course, I also gave three free seminars on this trip.

***“Listening to Learners’ Reflections on Language Acquisition” at Xi’an Jiaotong University.*** The seminar was about the findings of my dissertation, which explored some Chinese students’ perceptions of their prior English learning experiences in China based on how they actually used English in the U.S. The majority of the attendees were English instructors and graduate students concentrating on English education. To some in the audience, this qualitative type of research seemed new but very interesting, and perhaps something they could use in their own research.

***“Suggestions on Learning English in China” at Xi’an Translators College.*** Xi’an Translators College is a private college of less than 20 years old and is striving to create an East Asian Harvard. The president of the college said such lectures were still very rare at their college but definitely much needed. Due to the limited space of the auditorium, only those English majors in their junior or senior year were allowed to attend. But the lecture was videotaped and was to be broadcast to the whole college. I suggested on ways to improve listening, speaking, reading, and writing, based on my research findings in the U.S. I delivered my talk in English, and the students seemed to understand it very well. They were extremely active in asking questions about life as a graduate student in the U.S. and effective ways of learning English in China.

***“Educational Research Methods” at the Foreign Language Department of Tsinghua University.*** I presented issues pertaining to research design, including the qualitative and quantitative research traditions, pros and cons of several widely used research techniques, ethics in empirical research, as well as cultural differences in academic writing. The audiences were scholars and graduate students specializing in applied linguistics. They were interested in the method I used for my thesis, and how American schools handle plagiarism.

## **Summary**

A good command of educational research methods will tremendously enhance a researcher’s ability to design a study, collect data, analyze data, and write a report. Improved research will eventually boost the quality of educational practices. However, this area is still underdeveloped in China. When I was a graduate student in China in the mid-1990s, no such courses were offered at Xi’an Jiaotong or Tsinghua universities. I did my master’s thesis research at Tsinghua University based entirely on intuition. Currently, both universities are offering courses on educational research methods, but the number, variety, and depth of the courses are by no means comparable to those taught at institutions in the U.S. Applied statistics is a particularly weak link for social science researchers. I suggest that more overseas scholars introduce to China current research

philosophies and techniques either in the form of short-term lectures, regular courses for students, or summer institutes for professional training.

(The author obtained her Doctor of Education degree from the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) in June 2003. She was a teaching fellow for four courses on educational research methods at HGSE. She is currently an Education Specialist at Massachusetts Department of Education. )