Understanding L2 Speaking Problems: Implications for ESL Curriculum Development in a Teacher Training Institution in Hong Kong

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Abstract: This paper reports the result of a study that aimed to identify the problems with oral English skills of ESL (English as a second language) students at a tertiary teacher training institution in Hong Kong. The study, by way of semi-structured interview, addresses the gap in our understanding of the difficulties ESL students encountered in their oral English development in the context of a Bachelor of Education (English Language) programme. Insufficient opportunities to speak English in lectures and tutorials, lack of a focus on language improvement in the curriculum, and the input-poor environment for spoken communication in English outside class apparently contributed to a range of problems that closely related to the sociocultural, institutional and interpersonal contexts in which individual ESL students found themselves. The results of the study lead us to question the effectiveness of the knowledge- and pedagogy-based ESL teacher training curriculum. They also point to a need to incorporate a sufficiently intensive language improvement component in the current teacher preparation program.

Background to the Investigation

The institution at which the study was conducted is a provider of tertiary-level teacher training formally established in 1994. In 2004, the government granted the institute self-accrediting status in respect of its own teacher education programs at degree-level and above. In 2010, the institution launched its research postgraduate programmes and undergraduate programmes in three disciplines: "Humanities" (mainly Language), "Social Sciences", and "Creative Arts & Culture", which was seen as a step closer for the institute to gaining its university title by becoming a

fully-fledged university of education with a range of disciplines and strong research capacity. Currently, the entry point of the students studying at the institute is not as high as at some other tertiary institutions in Hong Kong. This suggests that in the case of language-major students, if the entry point is lower, it would not be surprising that the exit point may be lower as well, as "the proficiency one starts with at university is the most constant indicator of how far one is likely to 'travel'" (Elder & O'Loughlin, 2003, p.226)

One of the academic programmes, i.e., the Bachelor of Education (English Language) programme provided by the institution, is recognized by the government as one of a few degree programmes whose graduates are exempted from sitting the Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers of English (LPATE) as they are deemed to have achieved the equivalent of Level 3 of LPATE. LPATE which is designed and organised by the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority aims to provide an objective reference against which the language proficiency of primary/secondary English teachers in Hong Kong can be gauged. The minimum requirement set by the government for primary/secondary English language teachers in Hong Kong is Level 3 in each component of LPATE. Currently, most local secondary schools tend to be unwilling to hire English language teachers unless they have obtained LPATE Level 3, regardless of which degree programme they graduated from (Report of the External Review Panel,. 2010). Given the local secondary schools' preferences in employment, and to ensure the employability of graduates from the Bachelor of Education (English Language) programme when they seek employment as English language teachers, the institute has therefore set LPATE Level 3 as an exit requirement, i.e., students on the programme are not allowed to graduate unless they have fulfilled the LPATE requirement (Report of the External Review Panel, 2010). To alert students' attention to the importance of LPAT, the English Department within the institute that runs the BEd (English Language) programme requires that BEd students have to reach LPATE Level 3 by the end of Year 3 in all five areas of reading, writing, listening, speaking, and classroom language assessment) in order to progress to Year 4. Those who fail to reach the required level are put on 'conditional progression' or 'non-progression'. 'Conditional progression' means that students who fail only either speaking or writing but gain an average score of 2.5 or above in the area will be allowed to conditionally progress to Year 4, i.e., these students can take all Year 4 courses but will only be allowed to graduate if they reach LPATE 3 by the end of Year 4. 'Non-progression' means that students who fail to reach the conditional progression requirements will be on non-progression status. These students have to re-sit LPATE the next year, and if they reach the LPATE requirements or the conditional progression requirements, they

can progress to Year 4. This means that non-progression students have to study their Year 4 in two years.

This study builds on an earlier survey study of the English language skills of the BEd students in the English Department at the institution which was motivated by the fact that for two consecutive academic years (2008-2009 and 2009-2010), an alarmingly large number of BEd students in the program were unable to reach Level 3 of LPATE, the minimum requirement set by the government for English language teachers in Hong Kong. For example, of the 113 students in the 2009-2010 Year 3 cohort progressing to Year 4 in 2010-2011, nearly one third were on either conditional progression or non-progression. Given the fact that majority of these students failed the LPATE speaking component, this study aimed to identify their problems with oral English skills during the Bachelor of Education (English Language) programme so that some form of intervention could be included in pre-service teacher preparation.

In the following sections, I first present an overview of some important theoretical perspectives on second-language speaking and a number of empirical studies of language problems that ESL students face at tertiary level. I then describe the methodology: the participants, data collection instrument and data analysis procedures. Next I present and discuss the results of the interviews. I conclude with suggestions for some form of intervention to be included in the ESL teacher training curriculum.

Overview of the Literature

In this section, I first briefly describe some important theoretical perspectives on second language (L2) oral production in the fields of L2 acquisition and pedagogy.

Levelt's (1989) speech production model is probably the most influential theory in relation to research into second language (L2) processing. The Levelt's model identifies three processing components (conceptualizer, formulator, and articulator), each of which functions differently in the process of speech production. The conceptualizer is responsible for conceptualizing the message, i.e., generating and monitoring messages; the formulator for formulating the language presentation, i.e., giving grammatical and phonological shape to messages; and the articulator for articulating the language, i.e., retrieving chunks of internal speech and executing the message.

In Bachman's influential discussion of communicative language ability (CLA) (Bachman, 1990; Bachman & Palmer, 1996), elements considered important to a learner's performance on a given language use situation are said to be cognitive

knowledge of the second language, knowledge of how to overcome communication difficulties, knowledge of how to organize and plan a task, topical knowledge and learners' affective reactions. Consequently, communicative language ability can be described as consisting of both knowledge, or competence, and the capacity for implementing, or executing that competence in appropriate, contextualized communicative language use (Bachman, 1990). Bachman and Palmer (1996) make a further distinction between language competence and strategic competence. Language competence consists of organizational competence (e.g., grammatical and textual competence) and pragmatic competence (e.g., illocutionary competence and sociolinguistic competence) (see Littlemore & Low, 2006). Strategic competence is a general ability that enables an individual to use available resources by regulating online cognitive processes in accomplishing a communicative goal (Phakiti, 2008). It can thus be seen that there is a clear distinction between knowledge and processing action in Bachman's model of communicative language ability.

Recent developments in the fields of discourse analysis, conversational analysis, and corpus analysis suggest that discourse can be compartmentalized into a number of speaking situations and genres, and that successful L2 speakers should be able to operate in these situations and genres (Roger, 2006). Drawing on Jones (1996) and Burns (1998), Richards (2006) categorizes speech activities as talk as interaction, talk as transaction, and talk as performance. *Talk as interaction* is defined by Richards as referring to what is normally meant by 'conversation', which describes interaction that serves a primarily social function. *Talk as transaction* is defined by Richards as referring to situations in which the focus is on what is said or done. *Talk as performance* is defined by Richards as referring to public talk, i.e., talk that transmits information before an audience, which follows a recognizable format and is close to written language rather than conversational language

A number of empirical studies have examined university ESL students' concerns and difficulties they face while participating in oral classroom activities. These studies focused on international ESL students studying in English speaking countries (For example, Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Ferris, 1998; Morita, 2002; Cheng, Myles, & Curtis 2004; Kim, 2006). For example, Ferris (1998) investigated the views of tertiary ESL students at three different American tertiary institutions about their difficulties in English listening and speaking skills, and found that the students were most concerned with oral presentations and whole class discussions, but they perceived little difficulty with small-group discussions.

Cheng, Myles, & Curtis (2004) examined the consistency between the language skills required for engagement with the demands of course work at the graduate level, and the skills that non-native English speaker students found difficult

to master. Their findings suggested that many non-native English speaker students still needed continual targeted language support even after they were admitted into the graduate programs.

Kim (2006) examined views of East Asian international graduate students concerning required academic listening and speaking skill levels in their university courses and their own difficulties in meeting these expectations. Confirming Ferris' findings, Kim's survey revealed that students were most concerned about leading class discussions and participating in whole-class debates.

Unlike the above studies which adopted a quantitative approach, Morita (2002) carried out a qualitative study that investigated how students were expected to speak in two graduate courses in a TESL program at a Canadian university and how they acquired the oral academic discourses required to perform successful oral academic presentations. Morita's findings suggested that both nonnative and native speakers gradually became apprenticed into oral academic discourses through ongoing negotiations with instructors and peers.

Several researchers in Hong Kong have investigated language problems faced by university students in Hong Kong. Hyland (1997) surveyed first-year students from eight disciplines at five Hong Kong tertiary institutions. Hyland's findings showed that students demonstrated an awareness of the value of English language classes as they realized that proficiency in English was an important determinant of academic success in an English-medium environment. Offering a general picture of undergraduates' language problems, Hyland concluded that the students' language problems centred on the productive skills of writing and speaking and the acquisition of specialist vocabulary.

Evans and Green (2007) investigated the language problems experienced by first-year Cantonese-speaking students at Hong Kong's largest English-medium university. Their findings revealed that a significant percentage of the subjects experienced difficulties when studying content subjects through the medium of English. Somewhat echoing Hyland's (1997) findings, Evans and Green suggested that their subjects' problems centred on academic speaking (particularly grammar, fluency and pronunciation), and academic writing (particularly style, grammar and cohesion). To further illustrate the language-related challenges that first-year undergraduates faced when adjusting to the demands of English-medium higher education in Hong Kong, Evans and Morrison (2011) further focused on three students from different societal, educational and disciplinary backgrounds so as to illustrate and personalize their first-year language experience at a science and engineering university. Relying on the use of qualitative research method, i.e., semi-structured interview, their investigation revealed that the students experienced

four particular problems during the crucial first year at university: understanding technical vocabulary, comprehending lectures, achieving an appropriate academic style and meeting institutional and disciplinary requirements.

Most of the studies reviewed above examined ESL students who were studying in North American English speaking countries. Although Hyland (1997), Evans and Green (2007), and Evans and Morrison (2011) examined Hong Kong university ESL students, their studies focused on first-year non-English major students. Given the lack of research into English language problems tertiary English-major students may face in an ESL context, it was considered that the field would benefit from a study that examined the problems experienced by tertiary English-major students during an English language education program at the tertiary level in Hong Kong.

The central research question that frames this study is thus: *What English speaking problems did one group of ESL learners experience during an English language education program at a tertiary teacher training institution in Hong Kong?*

Method

In order to investigate the perceived English speaking problems of the ESL English major students, the study reported here used semi-structured interview, which aimed for "concrete and complex illustrations" (Wolcott, 1994, p. 364) and thus provided the students with opportunities to talk about their experiences in their own words.

Participants

Participants were 20 students (of whom 16 were females) in the final year of a 4-year Bachelor of Education (BEd) (English language) programme in a teacher training institution at tertiary level in Hong Kong. Eleven reported speaking Putonghua as their mother tongue and having completed their primary and secondary education on the Chinese mainland, and nine reported speaking Cantonese as their mother tongue and undertaking their primary and secondary education in Hong Kong. All the participants were required to undertake an eight-week teaching practice in Semester 2 of their third year and Semester 2 of their fourth year respectively during the programme. They also took the Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers of English (LPATE) organized by the Hong Kong Examination and Assessment Authority in Semester 2 of their third year in the programme. Those who failed to

reach the required LPATE level had to sit LPATE again in the fourth year.

Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all the participants. Each interview, conducted in English or Chinese depending on the interviewee's preference, ranged in length from approximately 40 to 60 minutes. Each interviewee was asked to describe their English speaking experience as English language learners during the BEd programme. Each interview centred on the difficulties with speaking in English that the participant had experienced as an undergraduate during the BEd programme. Although following a pre-determined structure, the author was able to ask probing questions to gain a fuller understanding of the issues under discussion (Gillham, 2005). All the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. If an interview was conducted in Chinese, it was later further translated into English in its entirety.

In keeping with a tradition in qualitative research, the transcripts of the interviews were read, re-read and annotated with comments and specific descriptive phrases, a process that Merriam (2009, p. 179) calls ''open coding''. These comments and specific descriptive phrases were subsequently clustered into broader ideational categories- what Strauss and Corbin (1998) call 'thematic units' and 'core categories' respectively that captured recurring patterns in the data.

Results

Inadequate Vocabulary

Liu and Jackson (2008) claim that lack of vocabulary was regarded as a main obstacle for spoken communication by Chinese English learners. In the present study, inadequate vocabulary was also reported as a prevalent concern among the students:

I think there is a gap between my vocabulary range when I write and speak. I mean when I am writing, I have enough time to figure out the most appropriate words and phrases. But when it comes to speaking, some words and phrases may never come to my mind, so my expression may not deliver my intended meaning precisely. (Jane)

"In some social situations that involve use of highly colloquial language, you'll find that you face a shortage of vocabulary and you can't express accurately what you want to say." (Elizabeth)

Almost all the student thus agreed with the view that this vocabulary problem was the major reason why they sometimes could not express themselves clearly and

appropriately. They also believed that this contributed directly to a lack of fluency in their speech. During the interviews, they all emphasized a need to further expand their vocabulary.

Grammar as a Stumbling Block

Like vocabulary, almost all the participants mentioned grammar as a stumbling block to their spoken English:

"Sometimes, some simple grammar points like a verb's third-person singular form, you already have the concept of subject-verb agreement in your head. But when you speak fast, you fail to observe this rule and end up using 'do' when the subject is 'he'" (Grace)

"I'm particularly bothered by the past tense that leads to a variety of inflectional forms of verbs. When I speak, I tend to switch unconsciously from past tense to present tense" (Eva).

Some students reported that to ensure grammatical accuracy, they would think about the particular grammar item being involved before producing the utterance. Under such circumstance, their learned grammatical knowledge serves as an 'editor' or 'monitor' (Krashen, 1988). But this strategy did not always work, as in: "In terms of speaking, you will not think too much about what you are going to say. Actually you will have no time to think, and you have to improvise. I thus feel I have a big problem with my grammar" (Cathie). Cathie's remark apparently echoes Krashen's (1988) argument that when second language speakers rely on "feel" for correctness without prior planning, they will make grammatical errors.

Imperfectly Learned Pronunciation and Intonation

Some students mentioned in the interviews that they had to speak carefully in order to focus on pronouncing certain words (especially those less common words) and sound clusters accurately. "When I speak fast, there will likely be inaccuracies in some sounds", one of them commented. Others said that they got problems with some particular vowels or consonants: "I'm not quite clear about the sounds of 'a' and 'ae'; I thus often pronounce 'staff' as /steif/." (Linda). There was also mention of articulation errors (for example, dropped final consonant clusters), although these errors would not lead to unintelligibility. Some students in this study also appeared to have trouble with words that had both American and British pronunciations. As one

student stated:

> I'm not consistent in use of either American or British pronunciation. For some words, I used American pronunciation; for some other words, I used British pronunciation. After a four-month immersion in the UK, I got even more confused with American and British pronunciations. (Jessica)

Most of the students admitted that they had not developed a command of the native-like intonation. They thus regarded intonation as one aspect of their English that needed improvement:

> I guess my intonation is one weakness for me and most Chinese speakers. I didn't have too much exposure to the native-like English environment at previous stages of my English learning. (Jane)

Inadequate Opportunities to Speak English in Class

The courses in the BEd (English Language) programme involve mass lectures and tutorials. All lectures are characterized by a didactic, transmissional style of teaching; not surprisingly, little interaction such as small-group work and in-class questions is expected. This didactic, transmissional teaching style, together with an implicit focus of assimilation of disciplinary knowledge, apparently led to some critical comments about the program's effectiveness in terms of developing students' oral communication skills:

> "I did not find the courses particularly useful in helping me improving my English language proficiency. I read English novels, and watched English movies. It is these extracurricular media and activities that I relied on to improve my English. So such media, not the courses, benefited my English language development." (Christy)

Although tutorials employed a somewhat more interactive approach than lectures, it appears that some practical constraints affected the provision or distribution of opportunities for students to speak in class, as observed by some students:

> "I don't think there are enough chances for us to speak in class. If any, just the presentations. I don't think this is enough. So maybe more discussion time can be given for us in class." (Esther)
>
> "Sometimes a tutorial has 30-40 students. With so many students in one tutorial group, I find it difficult to get a chance to speak" (Jenny).
>
> These comments remind us of a similar situation that prevails across

secondary schools in Hong Kong where power, authority and control tend to be in the hands of teachers who generally favor a didactic, transmissional style of teaching, while the students' main classroom role seems to involve listening to the teacher and they have limited opportunities to negotiate meaning with peers (Evans, 1997).

Lack of a Focus on Language Improvement in the Curriculum

In the current BEd (English Language) programme, 60 per cent of the courses on the programme focus on the English language, while 40 per cent focus on pedagogy. An overwhelming majority of English language–related courses deal primarily with areas such as English literature, theories of language and language learning, and grammatical and phonological systems of the English language, with an emphasis on increasing the knowledge and awareness about the systems of the language rather than the ability to use this knowledge in real communication. Consequently, language improvement often fails to be afforded with the central place in the program. As a result of this, such a knowledge- and pedagogy-based ESL teacher training curriculum apparently fails to respond to the students' overwhelming desire to improve their communicative command of English so that they can use it fluently and confidently in their future classrooms. As one student remarked in her interview:

> It seems that our institute believes that we have got great English proficiency before entering our institute and the important thing is to improve our teaching methods in our undergraduate study. But after four years of study, you can see that most of us will become English teachers in Band 3 schools, not in Band 1 schools. I agree that Band 1 school would prefer HKU [The University of Hong Kong] or CUHK [The Chinese University of Hong Kong] graduates. But the other important reason is that as graduates from our institute, our English proficiency is not that competitive as graduates from other schools. We are afraid of teaching good students. When we compete in the interviews, we would feel disadvantaged when speaking English with them (Wendy).

It can thus been seen that the students were aware what matters most in job interviews and what counts most in being an English teacher in a quality secondary school in Hong Kong.

Input-Poor Environment Outside Class

Although English is a socioeconomically dominant language in Hong Kong society in the sense that proficiency in English has been regarded by Hong Kong Chinese as the principal determinant of upward and outward mobility, and that the majority of business corporations in Hong Kong preferred employees with a good command of English to employees with a good command of Chinese, about 95% of its population is ethnic Chinese with 91% using Cantonese as their L 1 (Census and Statistics Department, 2007; Cit. in Mak, 2011). Hong Kong is thus a predominantly Cantonese speaking society. Consequently, English in Hong Kong is often described as having an 'input-poor environment' because most communication outside the English classroom is in Cantonese, and English is little used in social intercourse (Kouraogo, 1993; Flowerdew, Li, & Miller, 1998). This is best reflected in comments like "tutorials and lectures are conducted in English. Outside of these settings, students speak Chinese", "We don't have many opportunities to speak in our daily life. I know we should speak English to each other. But it's a bit strange. We are all Chinese.". Since Cantonese is the preferred medium of communication on campus and in the local community, all the mainland students in this study perceived a need to learn Cantonese: "It is a must for us to learn and speak Cantonese if we want to adapt into this society. We learn Cantonese from everywhere, when shopping, when watching TV, when we are in the MTR, etc." (Alice)

In addition, due to presence of a large population of mainland Chinese students on campus, it is natural that they communicated with each other in their shared language, Putonghua, outside class. "If you suddenly switch to English, there would be a strange feeling", one student from mainland China commented. Also worthy to note is the fact that mainland Chinese students attending lectures and tutorials together with the local Cantonese speaking students presents excellent opportunities for the former to learn Cantonese from their local counterparts, and for the local students to learn Putonghua from their mainland classmates. Such being the case, it is thus not surprising that English played a negligible social role in the daily lives of all the students in this study.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study was designed in part to contribute to the relatively small body of knowledge so far available on the English speaking problems of ESL students attending teacher training programs at tertiary level. The various linguistic problems (for example, grammatical, lexical and phonological problems) documented in this

study lead the present author to concur with Fulcher's (2003) argument that second language speaking is complex. This is largely because the sources of challenges for second language learners when engaged in a speaking task include not only demands of processing the task itself but also the demands of processing an imperfectly known language. Language education researchers and practitioners thus agree that performing in an underdeveloped interlanguage tends to impose a large burden on the second language learner's attention and cause the learner to make choices: to prioritize one aspect of performance, such as being grammatically accurate, over another, such as being fluent (Tavocoli & Foster, 2008). Moreover, gaps in lexical knowledge can seriously compromise spoken fluency (Hilton, 2007). Hilton further points out that it is very hard for an individual to engage in the higher-level, strategic aspects of meaning communication if his/her working memory is saturated by non-automated, lower-level L2 processes. A corollary of this argument is that anyone who wishes to speak a second language must learn the grammar and vocabulary of the language, and master its sounds (Fulcher, 2003). Consequently, second language learners tend to be more vulnerable to criticism and negative evaluation than in other subjects because the chances of making mistakes in using the language are much greater (Tsui, 2001). The implication is thus that speaking practice can help expose gaps in learners' vocabulary and grammar and pronunciation and eventually improve their oral fluency.

In the context of ESL teacher education, Murdoch (1994) makes the case that language proficiency will always represent the bedrock of ESL teachers' professional confidence. Most recently, Richards (2010) rates language proficiency as the most important skill among the ten core dimensions of expertise in language teaching. Richards further outlines ten specific language competencies that a language teacher needs in order to teach effectively: 1) competence to provide good language models; 2) competence to maintain use of the target language in the classroom; 3) competence to maintain fluent use of the target language; 4) competence to give explanations and instructions in the target language; 5) competence to provide examples of words and grammatical structures and give accurate explanations (e.g. of vocabulary); 6) competence to use appropriate classroom language; 7) competence to select target-language resources (e.g. newspapers, magazines, internet websites); 8) competence to monitor his or her own speech and writing for accuracy; 9) competence to give correct feedback on learner language; 10) competence to provide input at an appropriate level of difficulty. Clearly, each of these language competences is closely related to a teacher's ability to speak the target language fluently and confidently in classroom.

It can be assumed that the students' perceived speaking problems and

difficulties will have an impact on their teaching when they actually start to teach. Cullen (1994) reminds us that inadequate command of spoken English undermines pre-service teachers' confidence in the future classroom, affects his or her self-esteem and sense of professional status, and makes it difficult for him or her to follow even fairly straightforward teaching procedures such as asking questions on a text. Other researchers (Littlewood, 2007; Li, 1996, Carless, 2006) observe that some secondary school English teachers in Asia often lack confidence in conducting communication activities in English because the teachers themselves feel that their own proficiency is not sufficient to engage in communication or deal with students' unforeseen needs. Cullen (1994) thus rightly points out that problematic command of spoken English among the teaching force is not just a concern for teachers or pre-service teachers but should also be a concern for those involved in planning pre-service teacher training programmes.

There is thus a general consensus that language proficiency is the foundation of non-native ESL teacher trainees' ability to fulfill their future professional role (Murdoch, 1994). However, as Richards (2010) observes, insufficient attention has been given to the issue of language proficiency in many teacher-preparation programmes. Richards (2010) also argues that language proficiency not only makes contribution to teaching skills, it also leads to enhanced confidence in teachers' teaching ability and an adequate sense of professional legitimacy. As reflected in the students' comments in this study, the fact that Hong Kong is a monolingual and monocultural environment means that most students rarely use or encounter English outside educational contexts. In such circumstances, the provision of adequate language training would be crucial to students' development of their speaking skills. In light of a prevailing perception among the students in this study about a lack of focus on language training, language development has apparently not been given a central place in the current BEd program. Efforts should thus be made to ensure it will be afforded proper status in the programme.

Given the teacher-dominated teaching style prevalent in some lectures reported above, innovative instructional methods are also needed to encourage a shift from a product-oriented, transmissional approach to one that is more process-oriented and learner-centered, as the latter can enable us to create the conditions under which learners may acquire the speaking skills they need in and outside the classroom. (Fulcher, 2003). For example, lecturers can arrange for students to engage in small discussion in a buzz group at appropriate moments (Liu & Littlewood, 1997). The advantage of this kind of group work is that it allows the use of English in a low-risk environment and makes students become less dependent on the teacher and more dependent on the group for their learning, and thus builds their self confidence in

using English for meaningful communication. This type of learner-centred learning activity clearly meets the students' desire for an active speech role in lectures and tutorials expressed in the interviews. Meanwhile, at the institutional level, it is recommended that efforts be made to ensure that adequate exposure to English takes place on campus. Students should also be encouraged to organise extra-curricular activities using English such as dramas or shows performed in English so that students can be helped to become aware that a better communicative command of English will not only allow them to communicate with a wider range of people but also provide them with greater opportunities for work and study and pleasure and enjoyment in their personal lives (Education Bureau, 2011).

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