SITE VISIT: Xiang Jiang High School

November 6-9, 2011

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OBSERVATIONS:

1. CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS: EFL CLASSES:

I observed two classes taught by each of the EBUS EFL Instructors: Susan Kelly, Chris Meoli, and Jimmy Ma. All were very satisfactory. The instructors all exhibited a solid background in EFL subject matter, a clear understanding of the language learning process, awareness of each student’s progress and needs, mastery of highly effective teaching methods, and concern for individual students. Objectives were clear, and explanations and instructions were presented in a logical well-organized fashion. All students participated enthusiastically in communicative, interactive classroom activities. Student surveys were conducted in one class for each instructor. Formal observation reports will be submitted.

1. CLASSROOM OBSERVATION: BIOLOGY C100

I observed one session of the Coastline hybrid Biology C100 class at XJ. This was a very effective class taught by Jesus Reyes. During the instructor’s lecture and demonstrations, presented synchronously via Skype, students followed PowerPoint slides on their laptops and the facilitator, Jimmy Ma, assisted them in communicating with the instructor in real time. This was definitely a college-level lecture introducing more than thirty scientific terms (e.g., radial and bilateral symmetry, invertebrates, phylum Arthropoda, etc.), at a normal pace for a college audience. I interviewed two students after the class, and they reported that they had no problems following the lectures, and they enjoyed the class.

MEETINGS:

1. EFL INSTRUCTORS:

In two meetings with the EFL Instructors, the following topics and issues were discussed:

* EFL textbooks and curriculum for the spring 2012 semester: Our goal, agreed upon in advance by Joe and the instructors, was to introduce more academic reading, writing, listening, and note-taking into the EFL curriculum. The instructors had identified six academic integrated-skill EFL text series they wanted to review, so I took these textbooks with me to XJ and left them for the instructors to review during the week after my visit.
* Communication challenges: The instructors reported that they often were not informed by Elaine or Avie about schedule changes, curriculum changes, new students, paperwork and document requirements, and other matters in a timely fashion, making it difficult to prepare for and conduct their classes in a professional manner. They requested clear and timely communication about all matters that involve them.
* Technology: The instructors requested that all electronic equipment for the classrooms and labs be kept in good working order. Classroom AV equipment needs to be fully functional before classes begin. On many occasions, this has not been the case.
* The ACT Test and the computer lab: The ACT test, the primary instrument used for placement of students in correct levels, for alignment with the Coastline ESL program in California, and for scientific pre and post testing to determine the effectiveness of EFL instruction, does not work properly in any of the computer labs at XJ because all of the labs have bilingual (English/Mandarin) software. With the existing software, Chinese characters appear randomly throughout the test, making it impossible to use as intended. In addition, the bilingual software interferes with other EFL instructional and testing programs, allowing students to access Mandarin translations of words and sentences at will. Naturally, this is pedagogically counterproductive. The instructors requested that one lab be equipped with all-English software in addition to software that prevents the installation of any software programs in Chinese.
* The LACAT exam: The instructors offered some input on possible improvements in the LACAT exam which is still being developed, and for which the authors are still soliciting input. Jimmy commented that the test works well for his S1-3 students.
* Fall semester textbooks: Fall classes had been going on for several weeks, but some of the fall textbooks arrived during my visit. Trying to conduct high-quality professional classes in the meantime had been difficult, and the instructors expressed frustration about this. Also, although the high school purchases class sets of EFL texts that can be used for several semesters, the instructors expressed an interest in allowing students who want to purchase textbooks on their own to do so. This would allow these students to write in the texts (instead of having to copy exercises on notebook paper) and take them back to the dorms for homework.
* The instructors agree that there is a need for an on-site facilitator (preferably one who speaks Mandarin and Cantonese) hired by EBUS to deal with facilities issues (condos, classroom and lab electronic equipment, the condition of classrooms), document and paperwork issues, ordering of textbooks, transportation, and other issues not related to the curriculum. (This person would have no influence over instruction or the instructional curriculum.)
* Placement of students for the fall 2011 semester: The instructors reported that the new S1-3 (low level), S1-2 (Intermediate level) and S1-1 (high level) students were, for the most part, accurately placed, using the high school entrance exam results. All acknowledged that the S2 students represent a very wide range of abilities (comparable to the low beginning to intermediate levels of the Coastline ESL program in California). Most of the S3 students are reasonably proficient in English. Although their most recent ACT scores range from the CCC 2A to 3B level, most are solidly in the 3B range. Students in Level 3B in the Coastline program in California are allowed to take ESL and college general education courses concurrently.
1. STUDENT FOCUS GROUP:

About a dozen representatives of the S1-1 class met with Susan and me to discuss a variety of topics:

* College classes for the spring semester: All students expressed a strong interest in taking a math class. They were enthusiastic about this possibility.
* The college Art class: They had all dropped the art class offered for the fall 2011 semester. They reported that they had had difficulty following the lectures and that they had decided not to purchase the textbook.
* All but one reported that their parents had enrolled them in weekend TOEFL preparation classes offered by various agencies. Most classes were from 8:00 a.m. to 11:00 or noon on Saturdays. Their goal was to achieve a score of 80 so that they would qualify for AP classes. We explained that it was highly unlikely that they would achieve this score and that it was better to wait to take this expensive test after they had become more proficient in English.
* The focus group expressed an interest in pursuing extracurricular activities and mentioned sports, a science fair, a comic club, an art festival, parties, picnics, field trips, and volunteer activities as examples. They were enthusiastic about these possibilities.
1. MEETING WITH ELAINE AND FELICIA (Tuesday, November 8):

In a private meeting with Elaine and Felicia, the following issues were discussed:

* The EFL instructors and instructional program: Elaine reported that she is satisfied with the quality of EFL instruction that the EBUS program provides. “The problem,” she said, “is the students.” We agreed that steps needed to be taken to admit to the EBUS program only students with high enough English language proficiency to succeed. XJ plans to use an admissions policy for the spring semester that includes English language testing (with strictly-enforced cut scores, so that students who do not achieve the minimum-level score are not admitted).
* Communication: Elaine requested that instructors inform her first when there are issues and requests (regarding the physical facility, electronic equipment, curriculum, and other issues). I, in turn relayed the instructors’ concerns about not being informed in a timely fashion about schedule changes, curriculum changes, new students, paperwork and document requirements, and other matters. As an example, I pointed out that a new student had appeared unexpectedly in Susan’s class during my visit, and that Susan had not been told in advance that this student had been added to her class. Elaine was surprised to hear that there was a new student. We both agreed to try to improve communication between XJ and the instructors.
* English Mentors/Facilitators: The EBUS students generally speak Chinese when they are not in the classroom. Felicia suggested that we bring graduate students or other native English speakers to XJ for the purpose of encouraging students to use English outside of the classroom (in the cafeteria, the dorms, on the athletic field, between classes) to create more of an English immersion atmosphere at XJ. Both Elaine and I agreed that this would be a good idea. The more our EBUS students use the English language, the more quickly they will develop the kind of fluency they will need for later college success.
* No Social Promotion: We discussed differences between the EBUS EFL program, which allows students to progress from one level to the next on the basis of progress in their English language proficiency, and a typical high school, where students move automatically from the sophomore to the junior to the senior year and out (allowing some to move through the system through “social promotion,” whether they have mastered the necessary skills or not). Felicia and I both emphasized the need to allow students to progress from level to level in the EBUS program if and only if their language proficiency warranted it. As Felicia put it, students need to “earn their way” up through the levels. This is the only way to develop a reputation for quality instruction and a reputation for producing students who will ultimately succeed in American college courses.
* Determining which students are ready to go to the U.S.: We agreed that ACT test scores, writing sample scores, grades, motivation, and maturity all had to be considered in determining when the S2 students would be ready to go to the U.S. The EFL teachers and Coastline counselors need to make this determination.
* The ACT test and the computer lab: We discussed the need to convert one of the computer labs to an “English-only lab” equipped with monolingual English software (like the basic software in the labs at the Le-Jao Center) that does not allow Chinese-language software to be installed. I explained that the ACT test cannot be administered properly in their bilingual English/Mandarin labs and that other necessary EFL educational software programs also require computers with English-only software. Elaine agreed that this is needed.
* The ACT test: We agreed that post-testing with the ACT is to be done no sooner than the end of the spring semester. Ideally, ACT tests should be spaced one year apart.
* TOEFL tests: We agreed that students should not take the TOEFL test until the end of the spring semester. Elaine said that, at that time, only those who “insisted on” taking it in order to try to achieve a score of 80 for admission to the AP program would take it. I expressed the opinion that it is not at all likely that any of the current students will achieve a score of 80 and that having students take the test prematurely is a waste of the parents’ money.
* The Chinese English Instructors and their EFL classes: We discussed the following issues: (a) The Chinese teachers, Linda, Billy, and Jenny, whom Elaine has allowed to teach EFL classes to EBUS students, do not have the Minimum Qualifications to teach EFL for Coastline. (b) We had originally agreed to allow them to function only as “Teaching Associates” or trainees, sitting in on our EFL classes and teaching a limited number of lessons under the direction of our Coastline EFL instructors, but they have, instead, been allowed to teach classes on their own. (c) We do not approve of some of their teaching methods. They have students memorize sentences and claim them as their own (plagiarism), and also make them memorize long lists of vocabulary items instead of teaching vocabulary development strategies (explaining, for example, Latin roots, prefixes, and suffixes to help students learn how to figure out the meanings of unfamiliar words). (d) We do not approve of the textbook they are using: New Concept English (Longman). It is fully translated into Mandarin, with English on every other page and Chinese characters on the opposite page. This is clearly counterproductive for students who need to master the English language. Furthermore, the English pages contain numerous errors.
* We agreed to the following: Susan will train the Chinese English teachers. She will observe their classes regularly and conduct regular teacher training sessions for them. XJ will no longer use the New Concept English textbooks. The Coastline EFL teachers will select the textbooks they will use. (Some existing class sets of texts, such as Vocabulary Power, might be used). The Chinese English teachers are not to teach writing.
* The EBUS TOEFL course: The EBUS TOEFL classes were designed to teach our students academic reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills that they will need in order to succeed in college classes through exercises that are similar to those on the TOEFL exam. The TOEFL exam is designed to measure mastery of these skills to help colleges predict prospective students’ future academic success. Our TOEFL classes are designed to develop these skills in a legitimate and ethical manner.
* The TOEFL training Agency: XJ has employed a Chinese TOEFL training agency to give EBUS students TOEFL test training during the regular school week in place of the EBUS TOEFL classes. We do not approve of this training. This agency employs non-native English speakers, and these teachers use unethical methods to raise students’ TOEFL test scores. Their worst practice is teaching students to plagiarize. They teach students to copy and memorize long passages and paragraphs in English for the purpose of presenting those memorized passages as their own writing when they take the TOEFL test. So, while our EBUS EFL instructors consistently reinforce the message that plagiarism is unethical, that it is punishable academic dishonesty, the TOEFL agency instructors actually teach and encourage students to plagiarize. This is a serious issue.
1. MEETING WITH MR. CHEN, FELICIA, ELAINE, AND AVIE:

All of the important issues enumerated in item 3, above, were repeated and fully translated in this meeting. Further discussion included the following points:

* Felicia and I emphasized the importance of giving the EBUS students an American educational experience. We have promised the parents (a) instructors who are native speakers of English, (b) American teaching methods, requiring students to employ critical thinking, active questioning, and collaborative strategies (c) American rules and standards, including a strict Academic Honesty policy (with no tolerance for plagiarism) so that the students will be successful and feel comfortable in an American college or university when the go to the U.S.
* We discussed the importance of complete support from XJ for our Academic Honesty policy. Mr. Chen agreed that thorough orientation on the unethical nature of plagiarism and the dangers of plagiarizing would be an important part of our students’ education at XJ. Both Felicia and I emphasized that students caught plagiarizing in an American college or university could face (a) a failing grade on the plagiarized assignment, (b) a failing grade for the entire course as a result of just one instance, or (c) expulsion from the school as a result of one instance of plagiarism.
* We did not resolve the issue of the TOEFL agency classes that teach students to plagiarize.
* Mr. Chen and Elaine agreed to convert one computer lab at XJ to an English-only lab with monolingual software (the same basic Microsoft Office and other software used at the Le-Jao Center) as well as protection from the installation of software students might want to bring into the lab (such as software that instantly translates any highlighted word to Mandarin). EBUS will need to follow up by identifying this monolingual English software (and necessary firewalls, etc.) , paying special attention to the specifications for administration of the ACT exam.
* Mr. Chen and Elaine agreed that the Chinese English teachers, Linda, Billy, and Jenny, would be supervised, observed, and trained by Susan, and that EBUS would choose alternative EFL textbooks (possibly existing class sets) to replace the text they are currently using, New Concept English.
* We agreed that our reputation rests, not on simply getting students into American colleges and universities, but on the final result: academic success. If our EBUS students are consistently successful, they will eventually be viewed as desirable by American schools and they will be actively recruited. This is how we will build our reputation.