

Teaching English as a Foreign Language in China

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The Teaching of English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) in China has, for political reasons, experienced significant fluctuations over the past thirty-seven years. However, it was only after the downfall of the Gang of Four that TEFL regained its prominent role in China's education. As Ashworth (1985) notes,

Educational policies are affected by economic and social policies, as these regulate the amount of money and resources that will be available to institutions as well as establishing the atmosphere that surrounds and permeates them.

This is exactly the case with education in China. This paper contains a brief review of the political, economic, and educational situations in China today. The goal of the review is to explain why TEFL has revived in recent years and to forecast its development over the next decade or two.

Since China launched all-round reforms and started a policy of opening up to the rest of the world, remarkable progress has been achieved on all fronts. Rural economic reforms have brought farmers' initiative into full play. As a result, agriculture, animal husbandry and fisheries have achieved successive record harvests. Now, further reforms have been initiated to quadruple agricultural output value from 252.3 billion *yuan* in 1980 to more than 1,000 billion *yuan* by the years 2000.

In addition to agriculture, great efforts have been made to boost industry. Since 1986, China has embarked on her seventh five-year plan, which is to be completed by 1990. According to the State Planning Commission, the government will invest 1,300 billion *yuan*, the equivalent of 535 billion US dollars for fixed assets, 70 percent more than in the previous five years.

With economic reform in full swing, the need for professionally trained people in all fields is becoming more acute. In response, universities and colleges, having recovered from the setbacks that occurred during the ten years of the Cultural Revolution, are expanding their enrollment year by year. In addition to the restoration of colleges and universities which were closed down during the Cultural Revolution, many new institutions have been established. The total number of institutions in 1985 reached 1,016, compared with 633 in late 1979, three years after the overthrow of the Gang of Four. These institutions offer courses in a total of over 11,760

subjects. The number of students has gone up strikingly from 1,020,000 in 1979 to 1,880,000 in 1986.

As a part of the open-door policy, from 1980 to 1985 China sent a total of 17,966 students abroad to study and do research work. In the meantime, more than 20,000 foreign experts and teachers were invited to teach in more than four hundred institutions across China. These experts and teachers are to be credited for contributing to China's development in higher education, language education in particular. It is anticipated that more will be invited to teach in China's institutions during the period of the seventh five-year plan.

Economic reforms also necessitated political reforms which, viewed as important as the four modernizations (modernization of industry, agriculture, science and technology and national defence), have been going on for some time.

Along with political and economic reforms, and the open-door policy, English fever has swept the country. It is estimated that fifty million people in China today are engaged in English study. Among them, forty million are students at various schools. At universities and colleges, English is a compulsory course. If students fail an English course they are required to take it again. If they fail a second time, they may lose their degrees unless they pass a subsequent examination. After graduation, English is required for promotion in various academic institutions and many other work areas. English has actually become a major priority in China's education.

Since students of science and engineering comprise the majority of the total population of students learning English at the tertiary level in China today, I will describe briefly the English program for science students, including its goals, problems and prospects.

Science Students and English

According to the most recently designed curriculum, the general goal of English education at universities of science and engineering is to provide students with greater ability in reading comprehension, to enable them to acquire the information needed in their specified fields, and to lay a sound foundation for further study of English. English education consists of two major stages; the elementary stage and the stage of reading technical literature in specified fields.

The elementary stage, which corresponds to 240-280 study hours, lasts from the first to the fourth semester, with four hours of classroom instruction a week. This stage is subdivided into six stages called "College English Stage 1 — 6." When entering a university, students are required to take a standardized examination and are then assigned to different stages

according to their scores. Students in each stage are reassigned at the end of every semester according to their test scores. The excellent students can move to a higher stage in the following semester if they wish. At the elementary stage, students are provided with a sound foundation in English in order to satisfy the requirements set for advanced study. The goal of the reading stage, which corresponds to 100-120 study hours, with two hours of classroom instruction a week, is to direct students' reading of books, magazines, and articles written in English associated with their specified fields, and hence, to improve their ability to read technical literature and gain access to the information they need.

Teaching Methodologies in China

English is taught mainly through two kinds of strategies; intensive reading and extensive reading. Intensive reading, which is considered as the most effective approach for Chinese students learning foreign languages, covers most of the study hours. The method used is generally labelled grammar-translation, despite the fact that sometimes it is blended with some other methods, such as audio-lingual and audio-visual methods. The common practice can be illustrated as follows:

1. students read new words and expressions listed in the gloss following the text along with either a teacher or a tape-recording before the teacher starts to explain the lexical items;
2. the text is presented to exemplify grammatical items, accompanied by the translation from English to Chinese;
3. pattern drills on linguistic items are assigned;
4. grammar is presented and consolidated through illustrative sentences and specially designed exercises;
5. finally, students turn to extensive reading materials equivalent to the text in terms of the content to further familiarize themselves with the grammatical concepts and the vocabulary they have encountered in the text.

The class is mainly teacher-centered. The teacher and students analyse the text in a linear fashion, sentence by sentence, with the teacher asking questions now and then on some points, which he thinks might hinder students' understanding, to make sure that students are clear about everything in the text. It often happens that a teacher spends a whole hour of classroom instruction explaining one grammatical concept or exemplifying on the blackboard the usage of some lexical items. This method has a great impact on the formation of students' reading habits. In fact, it encourages students to focus their attention on minute points instead of the meaning of the text as a whole. It appears that sometimes, even if

students have understood the text they are reading, they still feel insecure until they have made clear the exact meaning of every word, every sentence, and its Chinese equivalent. Language learning has more often than not turned out to be a matter of learning the meaning of words and grammatical concepts.

With the ever increasing international, scientific, and cultural exchange between China and other countries of the world, with the upgrading of the quality of English education in secondary schools, and with the growing popularity of English in society as a whole since the late 70's, the effectiveness of the grammar-translation method has constantly been challenged. In recent years, many experimental courses have been run at various universities in an effort to find methods feasible for the non-English-major students. Although the grammar-translation method is still dominant in English instruction, communicative methods have been employed in some classrooms. Much more time has been allocated for students to practise in the class for the purpose of developing their language skills. However, despite many efforts made in the reform of classroom instruction, English education still cannot keep abreast of the increasing demands on the part of students. Teachers always find themselves being blamed for unsatisfactory results of English instruction. This has consequently led to a growing demand on the part of teachers for a theoretical clarification regarding teaching aims and methodologies.

Teacher Training in China

In order to train more competent personnel in English to meet the needs of economic construction, teacher training is at present a matter of primary importance. Judged in the light of teaching perspectives for TEFL, there is not a sufficient number of qualified teachers teaching at universities of science and engineering. Admittedly the past few years have witnessed rapid development in the reform of English education and research in China. This can be evidenced by the founding of the China Association of Foreign Language Teaching and Research in 1981, the publication of over one hundred different journals and locally produced newspapers for English teaching and research, as well as the running of various graduate courses and assistant lecturers' training courses aimed at upgrading English teachers' linguistic knowledge and their methodology as well. However, as compared with the total number of teachers of English, particularly the teachers training at universities of science and engineering, to date, only a few have had the opportunity to receive teacher training. As a matter of fact, non-major English education has long been considered secondary in importance, as opposed to English-major education; therefore, little attention has been drawn to the training

of teachers teaching at universities of science and engineering. My university is a case in point. The Foreign Language Department I am working for consists of nearly 100 teachers, about 40 of whom teach English, including 6 associated professors, 18 lecturers, and 16 assistant lecturers. Among them only 8 graduated from universities specializing in teacher education and 10 have received formal teacher training. Owing in part to the lack of basic training, some teachers are ignorant of the basics of linguistics and teaching methodology. As a result, they habitually resort to the grammar-translation method in their teaching.

The lack of sufficient reference books on language education constitutes another problem confronting TEFL teachers. Since the downfall of the Gang of Four, many original books, novels, and magazines have become accessible to language teachers. However, reference books on linguistics and teaching methodology available to teachers at universities of science and engineering are still quite scarce. The lack of sufficient reference books has contributed to the fact that pedagogical research in TEFL to science students is not widespread in China today.

The Future of TEFL in China

The goal of the four modernizations in China is to build China into a strong country with advanced industry, agriculture, science and technology, and national defence by the end of this century. Obviously education plays a key role in realizing the four modernizations. English is viewed as an important tool for gaining access to western science and technology in order to facilitate the four modernizations, and as a medium to promote international academic and cultural exchanges, as well as a bridge for developing friendship between Chinese people and the people of other countries. As long as the present policies of reform and opening to the rest of the world continue, English will beyond any doubt maintain an important role in China's education. In the realm of English education, much more emphasis will be shifted to research on teaching methodology. Nevertheless, before Chinese teachers are prepared to accept current teaching perspectives for TEFL, no dramatic changes can be expected to appear in terms of teaching methodology and approaches to language education. In the long run, the eclectic approach will become the mainstream in English education, particularly at universities of science and engineering, as a reconciliation between the grammar-translation method and the functional method. Complementing the existing methods, some advanced teaching facilities will be popularized, such as language labs, videos, films and computers, which have been used for years but not always properly.

In short, in order to better suit the needs of the four modernizations,

reform in English education in China has already been placed on the agenda. I hope in China's process of opening to the rest of the world, more and more teachers of English can gain access to research in current developments in linguistics and teaching methodology so that they can make a joint effort to make positive changes to TEFL within the context of China's needs.

REFERENCES

Ashworth, M. (1985). *Beyond Methodology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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He-ping Cheng, a lecturer of English, graduated from Shanghai Normal University in 1976. Since then he has taught English to science students at East China Institute of Chemical Technology. He has witnessed great changes which have taken place in language education in the past ten years or so and obtained many experiences at teaching English as a foreign language to science students.