English Language Teaching in China: An Update on the State of the Art

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English language teachers who have been to China in the past may be in for a surprise if/when they return. As I observed on a recent research trip to China (during which I visited a variety of English classes at numerous educational institutions in various cities), many things—both inside and outside of the schools—have changed. This report highlights the most impressive and important changes I noticed relative to university-level teaching of English in the world's most populous nation.

Past Reports: Difficult Conditions, Traditional Methods, Dominant Teachers, Passive Learners, and a System Resistant to Change

Over the last thirty years, a variety of reports have been published about the state of English language teaching in China. Scovel (1979), an early post-Cultural Revolution teacher of English in China, wrote about the difficult classroom conditions that he endured while teaching in northern China in the late 1970s. These conditions included "the blaring loudspeakers across the street, the dry, dusty air penetrating our classroom, [and] the persistent cold" (p. 259). That same year, a team of TESOL specialists from the United States visited five cities and 21 educational institutions in China and reported both "an impressive commitment to the teaching of English" (Cowan, Light, Mathews, & Tucker, 1979, p. 465) and various problematic conditions for doing so. They noted a "primary reliance on grammar-translation activities" (with some movement toward audiolingual oral repetition exercises and substitution drills) and "rigidly enforced teacher-as-dominant/student-as-submissive role relationships" (p. 474).

Fifteen years later, McKay (1994), one of the first Peace Corps volunteers to enter China, reported continuing, difficult conditions for English language teaching. He explained the challenging "conflict between a grammar-centered curriculum [and a 'grammar-centered exam' system] and an increasing desire and need for communicatively proficient students" (p. 3). At about the same time, a pair of experienced China teachers, Campbell and Yong (1993), decried the fact that "students spend a large portion of their time listening to explanations of the structure of language and engaging in dull and decontextualized pattern drills" (p. 4) leading to the disappointing result that "even the most diligent students with the most responsible

teachers often cannot communicate effectively with the target language population after ten years of studying English" (p. 4). Weng (1996) agreed that despite the expansion of English language teaching in higher education in China, "the average Chinese college graduate has a limited command of English" (p. 9). Weng blamed the problem on the "traditional methodology—the so-called sentence-text approach" (p. 9) in which "the primary mode of teaching and learning is one in which the teacher talks and the students listen . . . the teacher dominates the class and the students are passive learners" (p. 9). Weng also lamented that "teachers have to teach according to an established college English syllabus for non-English majors [that 'focuses on reading, listening, grammar, and vocabulary' and that is] approved by the State Education Commission" (p. 9) and "students primarily study English to pass multiple-choice examinations aimed at testing their ability to deal with questions that reflect this fixed syllabus (p. 9)" Wang (1999) gave essentially the same assessment of the Chinese curriculum and the influence of the centralized and powerful College English Test and noted that Chinese EFL students "are said to have contracted the deaf-and-mute disease, an unavoidable result of the syllabus" (p. 48).

Commenting on language teacher education in China, Cowan, Light, Mathews, and Tucker (1979) explained that "systematic training in methodology of second language teaching was virtually non-existent" (p. 473) in the colleges and universities they visited. In a similar vein, a few years later, Maley (1983) lamented the fact that "teacher training" in China meant "language improvement" and "no notion of methodological improvement" was even considered. In addition, he noted problems with the memory-based learning approach taken by most Chinese students, the "very few courses with clearly defined objectives," the employment of foreign teachers with little knowledge of how to teach English, and the Chinese bureaucracy (pp. 103-107).

Because of its large size and long history, China has proven difficult to change—particularly from the outside (Spence, 1980). Discussing factors that hindered innovation and improvement in English language teaching in China, Liu (1988) cited "the traditional nature of China's educational system." This system included "China's traditional teaching method" (which emphasized mechanical memorization and detailed analysis of texts), "the Russian influence" (based on a teaching methodology that emphasized explanation of texts and fit nicely with the Chinese traditional approach), and "China's traditional culture" which was based in Confucianism and resisted "any radical changes" (pp. 72-76). In the same discouraging vein, Campbell and Yong (1993) concluded that "the prognosis for successful, large-scale implementation of communicative language strategies in English language classes in China [was] bleak but not terminal" (p. 5).

My Experiences

Having taught and conducted research in China on four different occasions in the last 22 years (in 1985, 1993, 1998, and 2006), I have witnessed many of these conditions and difficulties. In contrast to the rather bleak prognoses offered by many earlier analysts of ELT in China, however, I have also noticed considerable change as I have visited the country, taking mental "snapshots" at 5-8 year intervals. On my most recent research trip (in May of 2006), I traveled to six cities (Beijing, Tianjin, Qingdao, Shanghai, Nanjing, and Guangzhou) and observed a total of twenty-one English classes on eleven different university campuses. The universities ranked among China's best, and so did the students and facilities. Most of the classes focused on oral English, and all were taught by expatriate Americans.

Recent Observations on China's Progress

On my recent trip, I noted that the Chinese have made dramatic progress in many respects since my first visit to China over 20 years ago. Other China analysts have also commented on the improvements, which are evident in many areas, including the national economy, the modernization of the infrastructure generally and educational facilities in particular, the variety and quality of English language teaching materials available, the influential English language examinations, the teaching/learning activities employed in English classrooms, and the use of English outside of school.

Economy, Infrastructure, Transportation, and Communications

China has changed radically in the last two decades in terms of its economy and infrastructure, as well as its transportation and communication systems. In 1985, most people in China still belonged to communal work units, and there was virtually no free enterprise. Over the years, China's austere economic situation has improved dramatically—progressing from once-a-week "free markets" to sidewalk shops and then to fancy department stores and full-throttle capitalism. As I traveled through China in 2006, I could not help but notice how China's economy is booming. In fact, it is now "the world's fastest-growing large economy" (Zakaria, 2005, p. 29). Its gross domestic product is growing at a blazing rate—more than 8% annually for the last few years. A decade ago, China experts called its economy "an emerging powerhouse" (Spence & Chin, 1996, frontispiece), and today international reporters proclaim the arrival of that "economic powerhouse" (Elliott, 2005, p. 32). Over the past 15 years, China's exports to the United States have grown by 1,600 percent (Zakaria, 2005, p. 28), and in the last decade, foreign investment, retail sales, and car ownership in China have also mushroomed. New commercial enterprises can be observed everywhere. In sum, China

is now enjoying greater economic prosperity than at any time in the past 150 years (Elliott, 2005).

As a result of this prosperity, the country is modernizing rapidly. New buildings can be seen wherever one looks, and construction cranes dominate the skylines of every city—especially designated Olympic venues such as Beijing and Qingdao. In 1985, Beijing's wide streets were occupied mostly by bicycles, aging trucks, farm tractors, lumbering buses, and a few requisitioned work unit cars. Today, the streets in many Chinese cities are rivers of honking taxis sprinkled with impressive numbers of shiny, expensive BMWs, Toyotas, Volkswagens, and Buicks—private car ownership in China has nearly tripled in the last ten years (Elliott, 2005). Twenty years ago, the Chinese government's Xinhua news agency controlled the information that was available to the Chinese public. Today, everyone in every Chinese city seems to have a cell phone—the number of cell phone owners in China is calculated to be over 300 million (Elliott, 2005)—and many millions have access to the Internet and the World Wide Web.

Modernization in Educational Facilities

In connection with China's economic growth and modernization, much money has been put into education—especially English instruction. Campuses and classrooms used to be old, dusty, and grimy (with spittoons in early days and "no spitting" signs, which were often ignored, later on). The hard wooden seats and desks were fixed in rows and fastened down to the creaky wooden or hard concrete floors. Early expatriate English teachers lamented that these physical facilities (not to mention cultural and other factors) made it impossible for them to do group work in class, and they could only dream of using modern instructional media. Teweles (1998), who went to China in 1993-94, noted that "aside from a blackboard and chalk and the usual slogan emblazoned on the wall exhorting the students to do their best, there were no instructional aids or enhancements in the classroom. The one electrical outlet within reach of the teaching podium had not worked in several years. The classroom was by no means climate controlled, and the door often had to be kept closed to keep out hallway noise (and in early fall and late spring, the smell from the latrine next door)" (pp. 325-326). Cowan, Light, Mathews, and Tucker (1979) noted similar conditions regarding instructional technology. They saw only a couple of rather primitive language laboratories being used and visited some classes that used "radios and tape recorders" (p. 469) to bring native-speaker English into the classroom, but "the blackboard and magazine pictures [were] . . . the most sophisticated media" (p. 469) that average teachers used.

In contrast, in 2006, on many of the university campuses that I visited, I saw gleaming, modern buildings with polished floors, video projectors mounted on ceilings,

and computer consoles standing at the front of many classrooms. In 11 of the 21 classes I observed, instructors used PowerPoint® presentations and digital photographs to get their teaching points across. While these classroom facilities may not have been typical of those at all universities in China, they are by no means unique. Zhang (2005) notes that one college recently "issued all its English teacher [sic] with a computer, a printer, and granted free Internet access. In the past, English teachers were armed only with a textbook, a piece of chalk and a blackboard. Now all English teachers at the college are expected to prepare lessons on their computers creating PowerPoint presentations to use in class" (p. 5)

Quality and Variety of English Teaching Materials

English-teaching textbooks in China used to be few in number and poor in quality. Cowan, Light, Mathews, and Tucker (1979) reported "occasionally" discovering copies of "in-country-produced EFL textbooks" (p. 468). They added that "books in English available to the general public appeared to be limited. [Their] visits to bookstores in four cities turned up no original works in English and only a few English translations of books written by Chinese authors, primarily the poetry and thoughts of Mao Tse Tung" (p. 468). An expatriate teacher in Hunan Province several years later, in 1985, lamented that "Western goods…were very scarce. There was one foreign language bookstore that actually stocked no foreign language books except for a few musty simplified versions of *Jane Eyre*" (Jones, 1998, p. 404). Besides the decade-old *English for Today* (National Council of Teachers of English, 1975), which he was assigned to use in his classes, "the English department stocked no other texts and showed no willingness to order more resources" (p. 404). Cowan, Light, Mathews, and Tucker (1979) pointed out that the Chinese textbooks they examined seemed designed to serve political, not practical, purposes. They also noted that these books were pedagogically flawed because of their "rigid control of grammatical structures," (p. 470) resulting in "passages which often sound[ed] unnatural and artificial" (p. 471) and the fact that they "rarely if ever, present[ed] opportunities for students to engage in meaningful communication" (p. 471). In subsequent years, more English textbooks were published in China, but they were often characterized by outdated English, antiquated teaching procedures, and primitive, error-riddled typesetting. Zhang (2005) recalled that these textbooks "were loaded with political jargon" (p. 5) and granted learners "a very limited glimpse into the lives of native speakers" (p. 5).

Today, both the quality and the selection of materials for English language teaching are greatly improved. In classrooms and in bookstores throughout China, a multitude of modern textbooks (as well as audio, video, and computer software) can be found. My own observations agree with a recent report ("Language Takes on Chinese Flavour,"

2004) that "if you walk into a large bookstore in any major mainland city, you'll be amazed by the number and variety of titles that teach English to Chinese speakers" (p. 14). These include popular textbooks from abroad that are used worldwide, such as, *New American Streamline* (Viney, Hartley, Falla, & Frankel, 1994), *Passages* (Richards & Sandy, 1998), and *New Interchange* (Richards, Hull, & Proctor, 2001). They come from major, international ELT publishers (Oxford, Cambridge, Longman, Heinle, etc.), either in their original, expensive versions or in special, more affordable Chinese editions. In addition, locally produced English-teaching textbooks authored by teams of Chinese experts and published in China (by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, Peking University Press, The Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, Higher Education Press, World Publishing Corporation, etc.) seem to be rising in quality in every respect—paper, printing, editing, and pedagogy—and are widely used. The more popular Chinese press publications include *College English* (Li, Wang, Xia, & Yu, 2001) (used at about 300 universities throughout China), *College Core English* (Yang, Zhang, & Zheng, 1992) (used at more than 300 universities), *Present-Day American English* (Chi & Poppen, 1990), and *21st Century College English* (Yu, 2001). Myriad other books (as well as instructional CDs) by less known authors and published by minor Chinese presses—some of them good; others not so good—are also available.

Updated English-language Examinations

One thing that has not changed in China over the years is Chinese students' strong test-orientation, although most of the tests have new, updated versions. Like most English teachers in China, White (1998) experienced "high student concern with passing course exams and band exams in English" (p. 13). Today, major, nationwide, standardized English tests continue to be very important in China. Students and teachers alike focus heavily on preparation for these big exams. The venerable and powerful College English Test (CET) is still widely used. In fact, over eleven million examinees a year take the CET, making it "the world's largest test in terms of the number of examinees" (Zhang, 2005, p. 5). "The CET primarily targets college students whose majors are not English" (p. 5). (English majors now take a special Test for English Majors, the TEM.) The CET "has two levels, Band 4 and Band 6. . . . [and] because of its wide recognition, almost all colleges in China require bachelor's degree students to pass the CET Band 4," (p. 5) usually at the end of their fourth semester (second year) at the university. Also, many employers, including foreign companies, prefer job applicants who have a certificate saying they have passed the CET ("CET Band 4 Test to be Revamped," 2005).

Traditionally, the CET had five parts: listening comprehension (20 minutes), reading comprehension (35 minutes), vocabulary and structure (20 minutes), short

answer questions (which used to be a multiple-choice cloze passage) (15 minutes), and writing (30 minutes). Recently, however, the CET has been revamped (Zhang, 2005). The changes include the reorganization and reordering of the test's sections, the provision of more listening and oral sections (the speaking portion used to be administered only to students who scored high on the written exam), and the addition of new skimming, scanning, and translation sections. All these changes should produce beneficial "washback" effects on how English is taught in China, increasing the emphasis on developing students' practical language skills and oral English abilities. In addition, the new CET will have a new grading system. Before the reform, the maximum number of points an examinee could earn was 100. Now, scores will be curved so the highest is 710 and the lowest is 290 (a broader scale that not only is similar to that used on the paper-based TOEFL but also allows for greater differentiation among examinees). Finally, the revisions include the elimination of the test's "public service function." It used to be that anyone in China who needed certification of English skills could sign up, pay the fee, and take the test. Now, only university students will be able to take the CET (*College English Test, 2006*). This reduction in the number and range of examinees should allow for better quality control in the administration of the CET in the future.

As noted above, English majors take the Test for English Majors (TEM). This test tends to be more demanding, requiring English skills at a higher level (Zhang, 2006). Also, since fewer students take the TEM than take the CET, scoring the TEM is not such a time and labor intensive operation so there can be more flexibility in item formats. The TEM consists of six sections: dictation (15 minutes); listening comprehension (conversations, passages, and news broadcasts; 15 minutes); cloze (15 minutes); grammar and vocabulary (15 minutes); reading comprehension (five long passages with four comprehension questions each, 25 minutes); writing (composition, 35 minutes; note writing, 10 minutes) (Chen, 2004).

International English examinations like the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication), and IELTS (International English Language Testing System) also have a presence in China, as do specialized courses to prepare students for them. Nevertheless, the relatively high cost of these foreign tests precludes many English learners from taking them unless they absolutely need them for admission to universities in English-speaking countries. The CET still reigns supreme in China in terms of the number of examinees who take it and the influence it wields on the teaching of English.

Improvement in Chinese Students' English Speaking Skills

As I interacted with many Chinese students, my most promising observation (corroborated by the comments made by many of the teachers I visited and by reports that the national pass rate on the CET has increased from 10% in the past to over 70% in this decade) had to do with how, on average, students' English abilities—especially in speaking and listening—seem to have improved greatly. More than ever before, many Chinese university students speak English confidently, correctly, and even naturally. Of course, there are still many who are shy and reluctant to speak up in a foreign tongue, and there is still a disparity between English majors and non-majors (students majoring in other subjects and taking a relatively few required English courses). Nevertheless, my recent experience was that it was not uncommon to find entering university freshman whose English speaking skills were better than those of older, Ph.D. students, who started taking English classes years ago.

Another noteworthy development was an increased emphasis on pronunciation teaching. Of the 21 classes I observed, 10 included some sort of direct pronunciation instruction or practice activities focusing primarily on pronunciation improvement. These activities ranged from simple repetition drills, minimal pair exercises, and tongue twisters to the presentation of useful phonological rules (e.g., how the pronunciation of the *-ed* ending in English varies depending on whether the preceding syllable ends in a voiced, voiceless, or [*t/d*] sound). Pronunciation teaching points included not only English vowels and consonants but also suprasegmentals, such as the verb-noun stress pattern in *finánce-finance*. Students participated in all these pronunciation-improvement activities eagerly. Obviously, the new generation of Chinese university students has a strong interest not just in reading and writing English but also in speaking it accurately.

Interactive Communication in English Classrooms

Most surprising of all, on my recent research trip I frequently observed a large amount of student-to-student, small-group interaction during English class activities. In fact, in 14 of the 21 classes that I visited, I saw Chinese students doing small-group or pair work in which they interacted with each other in English. The activities included student-delivered news reports followed by partner discussions and debates, interviews with classmates about their resumes, partner-discussion games, and other games requiring natural and communicative use of English. In addition, I saw students enthusiastically participating in small groups as they engaged in informal debates on assigned topics or extended simulations—all entirely in English. I also witnessed many students carrying out rehearsed and improvised mini-dramas and role plays. All these activities constituted a dramatic contrast to the traditional English-class pattern that so many earlier China observers have criticized. For example, after visiting scores of English classes at 21 institutions of higher education in China, Cowan, Light, Mathews,

and Tucker (1979) reported, "One element which was consistently missing was any opportunity for students to practice communicative use of English. Students were rarely given the opportunity to use language to state their own opinions, express their own feelings, or communicate new information to their classmates" (p. 474). Instead, "there was a heavy reliance on rote memorization and the reproduction of carefully prepared lessons" (p. 474). Only ten years ago, Weng (1996) commented on this same pattern, in which there was "little chance in the classroom to ask questions or share ideas in conversation" (p. 9).

From these observations, it appears that many Chinese students and universities may actually be ready to meet the challenge issued in 2001 by the Chinese Ministry of Education "to use more English textbooks to keep up with the latest development of some subjects" and "to offer bilingual lectures in 5 to 10 per cent of their courses" in order to "better adapt the students to an increasingly globalized environment" ("English Textbooks Should be Used," 2001; "Chinese Universities to use Textbooks Written in English," 2001). Moving in this direction, several of the classes I observed utilized some form of sustained content-based instruction in English.

Use of English Outside of School

Outside the classroom, things have also changed, resulting in many more opportunities for Chinese students to experience authentic English. Twenty years ago, a Western foreigner was a rarity on the streets of most Chinese cities, even Beijing. Contact with the Western world was limited (and carefully controlled). Less than a decade ago, a returning expatriate teacher (White, 1998) reported that "English learners in China have few opportunities to speak and hear the language. . . . The main source of spoken English is usually commercial language tapes" (p. 13). Today, however, expatriates and tourists are a common sight in most major cities. So are Western products and goods. DVDs of the latest Western movies are sold on many downtown street corners. It is not unusual for advertisements and the name signs for stores to employ English words. The mass media also bring English before the Chinese population with increasing frequency. Not many years ago, virtually all television broadcasts were in Chinese (except for a few minutes of English news at the end of the evening's Chinese news broadcast and a few programs designed for overt, explicit English teaching). Today, it is not difficult to find English-language CNN or BBC news and cultural programs, HBO movies, and American cartoon programs on the television in most major Chinese cities. Even government-sponsored CCTV (China Central Television) has its own English-language channel that broadcasts news and feature programs 24 hours a day (*CCTV International,* n.d.). Furthermore, despite some government controls on the World Wide Web, it is not difficult for the Chinese to experience natural English via the Internet. The days when English learners would flock

to "English Corners" in expatriate teachers' apartments or in public parks just so they could be exposed to English spoken by natives seem to be on their way out. When China hosts the Olympics in 2008, and foreigners inundate the country, English will also flood the media and the streets—especially in the Olympic venue cities. The Chinese have been preparing for this linguistic eventuality for many years now ("Practising English for Olympic Bid," 2001), and the Olympics' effect on English-language teaching and use in China has already been significant.

Conclusion

As I observed in 2006 in China and as other China ELT analysts have noted, "great changes have taken place in the English classroom" (Zhang 2005, p. 5). These observations provide cause for hope that English language instruction in China is improving despite the difficulties experienced and foreseen by English-teaching experts in past decades.

It should be emphasized, of course, that what I observed is probably not typical or representative of all English classes throughout China. Many of the universities I went to were among the best in the nation. In fact, 8 of the 11 campuses I visited (Tsinghua University, Peking University, Nanjing University, Nankai University, Shanghai Jiaotong University, Tongji University, South China University of Technology, and Nanjing University of Science and Technology) ranked in the top forty Chinese universities in the "general and science schools" category ("Asia's Best Universities," 2000). Furthermore, all the classes I observed were taught by expatriate American "foreign experts" and foreign teachers. For these reasons, what I observed may not accurately represent what happens in English classes taught by native Chinese instructors or at less prestigious universities. Also, the observations I have reported on were all personal and subject to individual bias. What this means is that, compared to the actual state of affairs in outlying areas, my conclusions may be overly optimistic. Moreover, my data sources and data-gathering methods were comparable to those employed by reputable scholars who have investigated English language teaching in China in the past.[1] Equally important, as the additional sources I have cited above demonstrate, my observations seem to be corroborated by other experts. Finally, even if my findings reflect only what is currently happening at top-level universities in China, it is likely that in the future other Chinese universities will follow the lead of these highly ranked ones.

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[1]Cowan, Light, Mathews, & Tucker, for instance, visited "21 educational institutions in 5 cities" (p. 465), Beijing, Nanjing, Suzhou, Shanghai, and Guangzhou over a period of 19 days in May (1979). In May, 2006, I visited 21 English classes at eleven different universities in six Chinese cities—Beijing, Tianjin, Quingdao, Shanghai, Nanjing, and Guangzhou.

In sum, despite the possible drawbacks to my data gathering methods, these observations are very encouraging. The traditional English-teaching methods used in China seem to be changing and modernizing along with the rest of the country, and the forces that were supposed to hinder innovation appear to have been overcome. As China moves forward in the 21st century, it will be exciting to see what further changes the coming decades will bring to English language teaching in this great nation.

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