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# An Analysis of Factors that Hinder TESOL Innovations in China

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In the past several decades, English language teaching in China has undergone many changes because of political reasons or economic needs. In the 50's, China copied indiscriminately the Soviet experience in many aspects. Naturally, Russian was the major foreign language. "But in the 60's, English gradually gained popularity, and soon China faced a large shortage of English teachers" (Yang 1987, p. 29). During the past decade (1978-1988), with the implementation of the "open door to the outside world" policy, China has been making rapid strides in English teaching and learning, not only at full-time schools, but also at TV and radio colleges, correspondence schools, and evening universities, as well as various training classes.

Under these circumstances, the question arises: Does China have adequate materials, effective methods, and/or enough qualified English teachers to "meet the needs of the millions of pupils and university students who are currently learning English in thousands of schools and less prestigious institutions scattered throughout the country"? (Scovel, T. 1983, p.85). Lamentably, the answer to this question is "No."

## Meeting the Need

Among the problems, the most pressing is the shortage of teachers. In order to solve this problem, "Chinese colleges and other institutions have invited large

numbers of English teachers from various foreign countries to join their staff" (Wu 1983, p. 111). "Hundreds and hundreds of former Russian teachers" have gone "through retraining programs to learn English" and become English teachers (Scovel, J. 1983, p. 107). In addition, various training classes have been held for English teachers. After six months or a year of training in English language skills (not in teaching methodology), these teachers are assigned to teach at middle schools. Some of the teachers are merely middle school graduates. They "are chosen to be teachers because they have a talent for language and have learned some teaching techniques from their teachers" (Hou 1987, p. 25). "Even those who cannot speak more than a handful of words and have no training find jobs" (Scovel, J. 1983, p. 107). It is true that quite a number of teachers are not qualified for their work. "It was even more the case six or seven years ago" (Yang 1987, p. 29).

In order to upgrade these teachers' English language skills, the government has made great efforts to encourage them to go to spare-time schools, to take courses offered by TV and radio colleges or correspondence schools, or to attend special training classes held for them. In this way, the pressing situation of the shortage of teachers has been alleviated to some extent, and the English language skills of the teachers have been much improved, but innovations in teaching methods are slow to catch on.

### Values and Traditions

In China, the study of methods for teaching English to speakers of other languages has never been highly valued, even in teacher training programs. In describing teacher training in China, Maley writes, "Most Chinese host institutions take this (teacher training) to mean language improvement for their teachers. No notion of methodological improvement enters into their calculations. [The assumption seems to be] if their teachers 'know' more English, they will teach better" (1983, p. 97). Under the guidance of this mistaken axiom, TESOL programs in China are virtually non-existent. Consequently, "the majority of English teachers in China are not systematic trainees in the methodology of second language teaching.... The development of research in linguistics and many effective techniques are completely new to most Chinese English teachers" (Hou 1987, p. 25).

Due to this lack of systematic training, most Chinese English teachers "teach in the way in which they have been taught" (Patrie and Daum 1980, p. 393). The methodology used in the past for second language teaching in China has always been a grammar-translation approach. "The result of the approach was that students learned how to analyse sentence structures but were handicapped in listening and speaking" (Yang 1987, p. 29). When they spoke, they talked like a book; when they read, they were actually doing word for word silent translation. Of course, their reading speed was extremely slow.

In recent years, influenced by the new concepts of language pedagogy and new achievements in linguistic and

communicative approaches, many teachers have tried hard to break away from the traditional grammar-translation approach, and to adopt the advanced strategies from abroad. After several years' efforts, a new methodology has been formed. It is most commonly described as "eclectic" or "composite". Teaching activities are drawn from "grammar translation", "direct" and "audiolingual" approaches. Obviously it is "a move from primary reliance on grammar-translation activities to increased use of techniques associated with audiolingual methodology," though "there still are proponents of grammar-translation activities and rigidly enforced teacher-as-dominant/student-as-submissive role relationships" (Cowan et al. 1979, p. 474). But the move is not radical. Grabe and Mahon comment on the issue, saying that the newly-formed methodology, "most commonly used in language classes in China today," is just a variety of the grammar translation approach "modified by the audio-lingual method" because its emphasis is still "on close analysis of syntax and discussion of word meanings" (1981, p. 207).

### Hindrances to Innovation

What are the main factors that hinder the innovation of TESOL in China? Attempting to answer the question, Grabe and Mahon cite such factors as the traditional nature of China's educational system, the fear of teachers that using new methods would not serve the examination preparation needs of their students, individual teachers' limited influence on educational policies in terms of methods selected for actual use in the classroom, and the preference which teachers consider their students to have for traditional methods (Osburne 1988). Other factors

that have been mentioned are the deep influence of Confucian thought and Russian teaching methods (Porter 1983, p. 80, Scovel, T. 1983, p. 85, Scovel, J. 1983, p. 108, Yan 1988, p. 8). I do not disagree with these reasons. However, in this article I would like to categorize and analyse them.

### China's Educational System

The traditional nature of China's educational system is the most decisive factor. In China, education must serve politics, while teachers, teaching methods and materials must suit the needs of the educational system. "As in all nations, scholastic tests are an important part of the educational system, but because of the strong traditional values placed on education and the longstanding importance of tests stemming from the Confucian tradition of civil service examinations, tests are viewed with almost reverential respect by students, teachers, and administrators" (Scovel, T. 1983, p. 88). It is these "neo-Confucian examinations" that determine the students' academic future and professional career in China today. They are so frequently abused that a student has to pass at least a hundred formal examinations involving scores of subjects from the day he enters primary school to the day he completes graduate school.

In recent years, English teaching and learning have been greatly intensified. English has become a required course not only for students at schools, but also for intellectuals in various circles. A senior middle school student cannot enroll in a college or university if he cannot make a good score on his English examination. An undergraduate may be turned down by a

graduate school simply because his English is not good enough. Similarly, an intellectual cannot be promoted into a higher position if he cannot pass his English examination. All these examinations, however, are written ones with the emphasis on sentence structure, comprehension, vocabulary, and translation.

In order for their students to pass these examinations successfully, teachers must adopt appropriate methods in their teaching. Due to "the wide gulf between the new materials, methods, and approaches that are entering Chinese classrooms from abroad and the contents of the national and local examinations administered to the students" (Scovel, T. 1983, p. 88), methods such as the Total Physical Response or the Silent Way cannot be considered appropriate in helping students pass these tests though they may help accelerate the acquisition of the English language. Fitting quite properly into the demands of these examinations is the traditional Grammar Translation approach with the emphasis on close analysis of syntax and discussion of word meanings.

Without a complete reform of the educational system, there will be little innovation in testing. Consequently, there won't be any radical changes in teaching methods and materials.

### China's Traditional Method

China's traditional teaching method is deep-rooted, and its influence constitutes another factor that hinders the adoption of methodological innovations in China. Stemming from the time of Confucius (551-479 B.C.), the traditional teaching

methodology has lasted for more than two thousand years.

In Imperial China, "texts were memorized mechanically with the belief that years later, as the child matured, appropriate quotes would return in flashes as needed and would then be comprehended" (Scovel, J. 1983, p. 106). Scholars had to spend at least ten years memorizing The Four Books (*The Great Learning, The Doctrine of Mean, The Analects of Confucius, and The Book of Mencius*) and The Five Classics (*The Book of Songs, The Book of History, The Book of Changes, The Book of Rites, and The Spring and Autumn Annals*) before they could take the official Imperial examination.

Today, "the Confucian emphasis on memorization is still important and, in fact, primary" in teaching (Porter 1983, p. 80). Commenting on the emphasis on memorization in China today, Janene Scovel put it this way:

Today the method of teaching Chinese children at the elementary level is comparable to that used to teach the Confucian classics, except that the content is socialistic (Unger 1977). Even at tertiary levels of education, students continue to memorize lessons. Barnhouse (1981:3) found in her teaching at Shanxi Agricultural University that "students not only memorize English readings, but biology and animal husbandry lectures as well. The professors also deliver their lectures from memory. (1983, p. 106)

Mechanical memorization and detailed analysis of scholarly works are the core of

the traditional teaching methodology. "Fitting quite comfortably into this tradition is the Grammar-Translation approach to language teaching with its emphasis on close analysis of syntax and discussion of word meanings" (Grabe and Mahon 1981, p. 207).

When it was first introduced into China in the mid-1800s and early 1900s, English was taught and learned by the grammar-translation method. In this manner, an additional methodological tradition was established.

Having entered the 1980s, China has made great progress in English teaching and learning. But the traditional approach is still predominant in English classes. The advantage of the method is that grammar can be taught divorced from the texts. Grammatical rules are singled out, illustrated with examples, and then they can be easily memorized and recited by the students mechanically. New words and expressions are explained in Chinese or English before the text is explicated. The text is dissected segment by segment. Sentence patterns are memorized, substitution drills are practiced, dialogues are recited, sentences are analysed grammatically and paraphrased in different ways, and finally translated into Chinese with accuracy, expressiveness and gracefulness (Scovel J. 1983, p. 105). Because vocabulary words and grammar rules are taught separately, students have the concept that English is grammar plus vocabulary. The result is that sometimes students can analyse a complex sentence so well that they know the grammatical function of every word, but they still do not understand the idea it carries though none of the words used in the sentence are new to them.

The weak points of China's traditional method of mechanical memorization are obvious. But "the discipline to memorize and learn by rote is believed to be an essential characteristic necessary for successful language learning in China" (Scovel J. 1983, p. 106). In fact with this very discipline China has been able to "produce stellar students, superb teachers, and magnificent translators" (Scovel, T. 1983, p. 84). Grabe and Mahon (1981) admit that Chinese teachers of English have been successful in turning out fluent speakers of the language (p. 207). These facts prove that China's traditional method has not been a total failure though it has never been a great success. Since most Chinese teachers still believe that the record of the traditional method should be assessed as 70 percent merits and 30 percent demerits, they won't discard it easily and completely.

### The Russian Influence

The Russian influence is the third factor, and it cannot be underestimated. Professor Yan Guocai points out that right after liberation, The People's Republic of China sided with the Soviet Union without reservation. In education, China adopted the whole system of teaching methodology created by Ivan Adreyevich Kairov, a well-known Soviet educationist. His theories on education exerted a tremendous influence on China's teaching methodology (1988, p. 8). Thus China's traditional method with the emphasis on memorization and attention to detailed analysis was "enhanced by the influence of Russian educators in the early 50's whose European tradition of explication *de texte* fit suitably into the Chinese milieu" (Scovel T. 1983, p. 85).

Porter points out that the Russian method could be accepted easily because it was not far removed from the Confucian, and the two methods complemented each other (1983, p. 80). This enhanced method is also called the cramming (forced-feeding) method or teacher-centered approach based on the belief that language teaching is regarded as a process of "knowledge-imparting" while language learning is seen as a process of "knowledge-receiving."

This approach is still widely used for language teaching, especially with non-English major students at colleges and universities and with students in middle schools. Teaching activities are centered on textbooks which are thought of as an embodiment of knowledge, wisdom and truth by many Chinese teachers and students. "Knowledge is 'in' the book and can be taken out and put inside the students' heads" (Maley 1983, p. 98). What teachers have to do is to take out knowledge from the textbooks and put it inside the students' heads.

To do this work well, the Preparing Lessons Collectively method, modeled on the Soviet system, is readily accepted since many "teachers do not have much confidence and do not feel proficient in English" (Scovel J. 1983, p. 108). In making preparations, the teachers who teach similar courses sit together to discuss teaching programs and materials, to solve difficult language problems, to analyse complex sentences and translate them into Chinese, to work out correct answers to every exercise their students will do. In this way, they will certainly have enough "knowledge" to impart in class and won't be frustrated by students' questions. In class, they keep reading,

analysing, paraphrasing, practising patterns, translating, doing exercises until the class is over. Treated as passive recipients, according to Hou Zhiming (1987), the students don't have to take any initiative. They just wait there to be filled with knowledge. To evaluate the method, he writes:

Because of teacher-as-dominant, student-as-submissive role relationships, students are accustomed to being silent. A fear of losing face, a desire to avoid confrontation, a reluctance to be singled out, a fear of making mistakes, a hesitancy about answering questions make students reluctant to participate in class activities. (p. 26)

The result is that after ten years' hard work at English they are still very handicapped in listening and speaking though they can read and translate with the help of a dictionary.

In spite of its drawbacks, both Chinese teachers and students seem reluctant to abandon this method. Some of the Chinese teachers are unwilling to depart from the established curriculum and materials because they lack confidence and proficiency in English (Scovel J. 1983, p. 108). Many Chinese students prefer this method because they are "accustomed to teacher-dominated classes and expect the teacher to deliver knowledge to them" (Wu 1983, p. 113).

From my observations, the influence of the Soviet system of education has actually enhanced China's traditional method, and this makes current innovation even harder. Janene Scovel (1983) also points out, "The longstanding Confucian emphasis on language structure and

memorization of textual material along with the more recent influence of the Soviet system of education established during the 1950s continue to affect the way the Chinese teach and learn English" (p. 109). She warns, "Cadres, administrators and teachers who are interested in changing the learning and teaching of EFL in the PRC need to consider the enduring legacy of these two influences very seriously before launching any meaningful pedagogical reforms" (p. 109).

### China's Traditional Culture

The fourth factor is the deep influence of China's traditional culture. China is an ancient country with a splendid traditional culture that produced a lot of miracles. The theoretical basis guiding the traditional culture is Confucianism.

Confucius was an outstanding Chinese philosopher in history. At an early age he devoted himself to study of ancient writings, and gained reputation for scholarship. Later he was made Prime Minister of the state of Lu. Resigning when the ruler gave himself up to pleasure, Confucius wandered for twelve or thirteen years from state to state teaching. His precepts, dealing with morals, the family system, social reforms, and statecraft, are so deeply ingrained in the Chinese mind that they still influence the daily life of the Chinese people.

In an article, Garrott (1987) includes a student's unedited composition which has the following comment on the influence of Confucianism:

In China for nearly 2000 years, people admired the doctrines of Confucius and Mencius. It laid down three cardinal

guides, which means ruler guides subject, father guides son, and husband guides wife, and five constant virtues, which refers to benevolence, rightness, propriety, wisdom, and fidelity. (p. 28)

The Chinese people have traditionally believed that by following these morals and ethics, society would be peaceful, and the economy would be prosperous. The composition goes on, "They didn't want to do anything which broke the rule. Perhaps that is one reason why Chinese feudal history lasted so long" (p. 28).

Chinese culture is deep-rooted, it has never been conquered in the past, and will never be conquered in the future. "The Chinese system works for the Chinese, and foreigners should not meddle with a civilization that produced silk, acupuncture, gunpowder, and the Great Wall" (Scovel T. 1983, p. 84).

Nurtured in the traditional culture, the Chinese people are resistant to any radical changes. Therefore any attempt at rapid transformation in teaching methods will evoke strong opposition. To Chinese people, the English language is foreign, but the method of teaching it should be Chinese.

### Rays of Hope

The above analysis indicates that the obstacles blocking TESOL innovation in China are still formidable. But for other reasons the prospects for at least some changes are bright.

First, reform is the main trend in China today. With the development of economic and political reform, at least some educational reform is inevitable.

Second, China already possesses the prerequisites for carrying out innovation in TESOL. In the past decade, large numbers of scholars and students have been sent abroad for advanced study, and most of them have completed their studies and returned to China. In addition, many foreign experts have been invited to China to train Chinese teachers and students. "They have brought new concepts of language pedagogy and introduced new linguistic and communicative approaches. Thus some English specialists in China have realized the problems in English teaching" (Hou 1987, p. 27). To discuss the best ways to improve the teaching of English, many national conferences have been held, and finally, in the fall of 1985, a new "College English Teaching Syllabus" was established by the Ministry of Education of the PRC. At the same time, "a large variety of EFL materials from Britain, the United States, and other English-speaking countries have been used...as the basic course materials...[and] guidelines given in the accompanying teacher's manuals are followed. This naturally brings about changes in methods and techniques" (Wu 1983, p. 112).

Third, there is evidence that the composition of teachers, teaching materials and methods are all changing. Many TESOL experts have noticed this too. In 1979, Cowan et al pointed out, "the Chinese are seeking new viewpoints on English language teaching" (p. 477). In 1984, "Oatey asserted that attitudes in China towards methodology may be changing" (Osburne 1988). and then in 1986, Osburne demonstrated in her successful teaching of a standard methodology course at Hunan University of China that "Oatey's assertion...is not overly optimistic."

### Conclusions

Changes will certainly occur, but at a slow pace. "One should not expect to sweep the existing educational system and its methods away overnight with the newest methodologies and ideas" (Meyer 1985, p. 20). Chinese are Chinese after all, and they will not discard completely their traditional system of education, based on rote learning, and copy indiscriminately the Western system of education, where meaning and understanding are everything (Patrie 1980, p. 393). Therefore, the only possible way for TESOL innovations to succeed in China lies in integrating the advanced communicative approaches of the West with China's existing educational system, traditional methods, and deep-rooted culture.

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