

## Texts in Context: Textbook Choice in an Evolving ELT Environment

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**This** review discusses two textbook series: *New College English* (Wu, Li, & Fan, 2014), originally published by Shanghai Foreign Language Education around 2002 and designed specifically for the Chinese market, and an academic reading and writing series consisting of reprints from Cambridge University Press. The decision to replace the former series with the latter provides insight into the institutional considerations and competing ideologies in current Chinese EFL. This review addresses textbook consumption and distribution practices in order to develop a "rhetoric of production" (You, 2005, p. 633) that provides a broader understanding of materials and practices within the global ELT environment.

Over a decade ago, Chinese ELT reforms mandated both critical thinking and communicative competencies, in a move that created conflict with the traditional national examinations' emphasis on receptive skills (You, 2004b). Additional reforms have recently been driven by a performance-oriented approach that prioritizes student output through speaking and writing (Wen, 2015). Because higher proficiency students have long been required to take content-based English courses beyond basic college English (You, 2004a), the rising English proficiency of incoming freshmen has facilitated these reforms. At my university, the overhaul of the college English curriculum includes plans to eliminate the English textbooks designed for the Chinese classroom and replace those books with ESL textbooks originally developed for use within English-medium institutional contexts.

### ***New College English Series***

For more than a decade, Chinese college English courses have relied almost exclusively on textbooks like *New College English* (Wu et al., 2012), a series of books first published by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press around 2002. The books in this series use eight thematic units that begin with a short listening followed by two readings (with audio) consisting of non-authentic or abridged and edited essays or articles from periodicals, book excerpts, or short stories.

The series is noticeably influenced by the lexical approach (Lewis, 1993), arguably the most widely adopted approach to ELT in China (Xu, Mao, & Liu, 2012). The textbook exercises target words, polywords, sentence frames, and institutionalized chunks of language (with L1 equivalents) while deemphasizing grammar and extended language production. The focus on vocabulary results in margins completely filled with brief glosses in English and Chinese, marked to indicate whether the item appears on the vocabulary list for the national exams, the standard final for the textbook, or only in that text. Although each unit concludes with brief extension activities involving writing and speaking, the textbook exercises consist primarily of vocabulary drills that ask learners to rewrite sentences using an alternate (and presumably equivalent) expression, translate sentences from Chinese to English or English to Chinese, complete a banked cloze, or (in traditional Chinese fashion) memorize passages of vocabulary-rich text.

Given the lexical emphasis of the books, the margin glosses are presumably designed to promote vocabulary growth, although the effects on language acquisition seem doubtful. Although some research

has concluded that glossing improves isolated vocabulary learning, it has not been found to improve comprehension (Cheng & Good, 2009; Jung, 2016). Besides distracting from top-down processing, these glosses reduce the involvement load in lexical processing (Hulstijn & Laufer, 2001) and limit the availability of syntactic and morphological information needed to derive accurate word meaning from context (Celce-Murcia & Olstain, 2000; Nagy, 1997). This view of language as itemized semantic equivalence, referred to as naïve by Swan (1997), is reinforced by the translation exercises for practicing these items within constructions clearly paralleling Chinese, rather than English, rhetorical patterns. In practice, these books have tended to produce students who can score well on standardized vocabulary-focused exams but who do not have the language skills necessary to successfully communicate in English, much less succeed in English-medium classrooms.

### ***Academic English Reading and Writing Course Series***

As graduates from top Chinese universities increasingly choose to pursue advanced degrees abroad, the inadequacies of this older college English curriculum has prompted curricular reform. My department is currently phasing out the *New College English* series and replacing it with older textbooks that not only account for the higher proficiency level of incoming students, but also adopt a markedly different approach to language learning. One of the newly implemented titles is *Daxue Xueshu Yingyu Duxie Jiaocheng* [Academic English Reading and Writing Course], which consists of Cambridge University Press editions first licensed for reprint by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press in 2005 and reprinted under this new name in 2013. This set includes two pre-academic reading and writing textbooks. The lower level is *Academic Encounters: Life in Society* by Kristine Brown and Susan Hood, while the higher level is *New Directions: An Integrated Approach to Reading, Writing, and Critical Thinking* by Peter S. Gardner. Although *Academic Encounters* mimics a sociology textbook and *New Directions* mimics a thematic WAC-styled reader, the use of the books as a series is supported by many shared features, including the use of authentic texts, some overlapping themes (family, gender, and education), and similar formatting and organization. Both have prereading activities designed to activate schema and a variety of similar post-reading activities that include critical discussion, strategy development, vocabulary building through collocations and morphology, and a variety of formal and informal writing assignments.

Although these *Academic English* books are reprints of outdated editions from the 1990s, their implementation here within the general college English courses marks a notable shift in Chinese ELT. While the older college English courses relied on uniform exams, receptive skills, and closed-ended questions in order to maintain objective standards and reduce reliance on perhaps unskilled teachers, these “newer” books require highly competent teachers capable of evaluating student output for both content and language. Teachers must also be capable of mediating the cultural differences and alternative viewpoints within the text. While the *New College English* books utilize texts that conform to an overt Chinese ideology, these alternate textbooks—designed for use within the target language environment—assume a primarily North American educational and cultural context. This ideological shift means that teachers and students must contend with culture, language, and norms of academic performance simultaneously.

One motivation for the adoption of *Academic English* texts is their inclusion of nationally mandated critical thinking skills. While these broader educational goals are not specifically language proficiency goals, the existing emphasis on such skills in pre-academic ESL texts allows classes to address this perceived need without adding courses to the university curriculum. In addition, these new college English courses also emphasize the development of general academic skills, such as note taking, that are often alien for students accustomed to an educational system that continues to rely primarily on regurgitation of memorized data. Critical thinking may very well be cultural thinking (Atkinson, 1997), but English language materials are increasingly valued because of, not in spite of, this cultural thinking.

Such adoption of “new” textbooks even older than those they replace is not unusual in Chinese higher education. Many academic majors already use English-language textbooks, and even have dual-language exams, either because their field relies on English (e.g., computer science) or because comparable materials do not yet exist in Chinese. The exorbitant cost of foreign textbooks, however, leaves only the older editions affordable. Publishers license these older editions for distribution exclusively within the Chinese market, providing quality textbooks at prices compatible with the local market and consumption practices. The increased focus on comprehension and vocabulary strategies (rather than on memorization of standard word lists) in the “newer” English textbooks allows college English courses to support other disciplines rather than serve merely as an inconvenient foreign language requirement.

In some ways, these older, inexpensive Chinese imprints conform better to local consumption practices than other newer publications targeting similar language skills. The reprint of *New Directions* has a list price of RMB 37 (\$5.35), vastly cheaper than alternative textbooks designed for EAP courses like *Cambridge Academic English* (McCarthy, 2012), which, at around RMB 300, far exceeds the acceptable price range. More important, the Chinese still contend that reading a book repeatedly until it is memorized is the best way to learn. This attitude, coupled with the relatively low cost of books, makes book resale uncommon. Students often fill their textbooks with both textual notation and classroom notes that can provide needed context as they reread. The glossy paper, decontextualized pieces of text, narrow margins and spacing, and multiplicity of fonts found in books like the *Cambridge Academic English* series interfere with these textbook practices.

While *Academic Encounters* shows its age through outdated information, it targets academic skills and language that remain current. *New Directions* likewise adopts obsolete notions of genre and rhetorical mode, but it provides many readings that manage to maintain relevance in contemporary China. More significantly, the fact that these republished books continue to find a place within the field of EFL demonstrates what is important and unimportant, what is changing, and what remains unchanged across the vast ELT landscape.

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