

Overview of Academic Writing in China

A Response to Wesley O'Morrow's Materials Review, "Texts in Context: Textbook Choice in an Evolving ELT Environment" (Vol. 4, No. 1, January 2017)

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Wesley O'Morrow provides an appropriate review of China's college English teaching materials by analyzing two English as a foreign language (EFL) textbook series: *New College English* and *Academic English Reading and Writing*. *New College English*, as O'Morrow indicates, was designed in 2002 for the Chinese EFL classroom. However, the series is dominated by non-authentic materials (materials that are specially designed for language learning) and abridged readings, and excessive attention is paid to the teaching of vocabulary in isolation, as evidenced by the margin glosses in both English and Chinese. Exercises in these textbooks include vocabulary drills, paraphrases, cloze activities, translations from either Chinese to English or from English to Chinese, and passages for memorizing. As O'Morrow writes, ". . . each unit [of the textbooks] concludes with brief extension activities involving writing and speaking" (O'Morrow, 2017, p. 26), which to O'Morrow shows that communication skills in writing and speaking are not given enough attention. O'Morrow thus concludes that the *New College English* textbook series places a particular emphasis on improving vocabulary in preparation for standardized tests rather than helping foster original, effective oral and written communication.

O'Morrow then asserts, however, that "[a]s graduates from top universities increasingly choose to pursue advanced degrees abroad" (p. 27), the outdated college English curriculum has begun to change. More specifically, basic college English is being replaced by content-based English courses, also known as English for academic purposes (EAP), a branch of English for specific purposes (ESP) in which speaking and writing are emphasized. O'Morrow explains that his department, in adopting "a markedly different approach to language learning" (p. 27), is currently replacing the old *New College English* texts with the *Academic English Reading and Writing* series in order to meet the needs of "the rising English proficiency of incoming freshmen" (p. 26). O'Morrow further notes that these *Academic English* texts, initially intended for "the North American educational and cultural context" (p. 27), are reprints of old Cambridge University Press editions from the 1990s, first appearing in the Chinese ELT market in 2005. Instead of largely relying on rote memorization and mechanical drills, O'Morrow states that this series uses many authentic readings and integrates both content and language with a focus on developing general academic skills and improving critical thinking. While these newly adopted textbooks are outdated, according to O'Morrow, they still contain a wealth of useful and relevant information in terms of language and academic skills.

In reviewing the book series, O'Morrow has brought up some excellent points on teacher knowledge and student achievement. Choosing the right textbooks for students' needs strongly supports the move from teaching general EFL into EAP in China's current curriculum reform (Cai, 2015). While I agree that the

adoption of this *Academic English* textbook series is a great choice, I argue that good teaching materials are not enough to resolve the longstanding issues in teaching English to Chinese EFL students. To support this position, I explain the importance of teacher competence and then discuss student learning skills. Finally, I examine the problem of teacher/student resistance to change in English language education.

Essential to Student Learning: Highly Competent Teachers

As O'Morrow asserts, these content-based *Academic English* texts require "highly competent teachers," who "must be capable of mediating the cultural differences and alternative viewpoints within the text" (O'Morrow, 2017, p. 27). I am in complete agreement with O'Morrow here. A key component of teacher competency, as I understand it, is the teacher's ability to think critically. This skill allows a teacher to create an encouraging environment for critical discussions of the content in order to stimulate students' independent, critical thinking rather than just focus on language and vocabulary. When teachers evaluated as "highly competent" in critical thinking are in the EFL classroom, the positive impact can be dramatic. In such a classroom, students can learn to appreciate and accommodate cultural differences and handle different perspectives that might otherwise escalate to cultural conflict.

There are not, however, many EFL teachers in China that can be deemed as "highly competent" in effectively utilizing the *Academic English* textbooks. One issue that has been the focus of much heated debate about teaching EAP courses concerns teacher knowledge and teacher competence (Han & Yin, 2016; Ning, 2017; Sun, 2017; Wang, 2015). While the requirement for highly competent teachers is absolutely necessary, we must be aware that in present-day China, teaching EAP brings great challenges to all Chinese EFL teachers (Luo & Garner, 2017). Lack of teacher competence may be one of the strongest barriers to obtaining the full benefits of the *Academic English* textbooks in the EFL classroom.

According to the literature on teacher competence and teachers' attitudes toward curriculum reform in China, most Chinese university EFL teachers seem to be academically unprepared to teach EAP/ESP courses. Findings from the literature review indicate that many Chinese tertiary EFL teachers' professional knowledge and skills base, such as content knowledge of the subject matter, knowledge of different cultural and educational practices and worldviews, and research skills, are clearly insufficient (Luo & Garner, 2017; Ning, 2017; Wang, 2015; Xia, 2014). Here are a few examples:

- In their most recent work, Luo and Garner (2017) share similar views when they assert that "some of the teachers approach ESP as though it involved no more than a change of textbooks. Such people are ill equipped to play the demanding role of [ESP teachers]" (p. 84).
- Commenting on instructors' difficulties in using EAP teaching materials, Ning (2017) maintains that "[i]n China, EAP is not only a new course to students but also a new trial to most of the teachers. Teachers who have been accustomed to teaching general English (the major role of which is to enhance the learner's competence of using English language for daily communicative purposes by using more advanced materials than those in high schools) find it rather difficult to adapt themselves to the use of academic materials. Many of them have not been educated with such a systematic introduction of academic skills themselves" (p. 218).
- Sun (2017) puts it more directly when he claims that EFL teachers are so inadequately prepared for EAP that they are incapable of teaching students to reference and cite sources properly, which is regarded as a central course objective in EAP. Sun argues that as a result, students do not receive adequate training in academic writing.

- Wang (2015) surveyed five universities in western China and conducted semi-structured interviews with six instructors currently teaching ESP courses. Wang's study reveals that because they feel underprepared to teach content-based academic English, approximately 85% of the teachers over 40 and 65% of the younger teachers prefer to teach English for general purposes (EGP) rather than ESP. As Wang observes, "many ESP teachers are unwilling to spend a lot of time and energy changing their teaching practices" to meet the requirements of China's curriculum reform because "they hold that they have been teaching EGP for years and are already familiar with [EGP] teaching material, teaching methods, and courseware" (p. 140).
- According to Xia's (2014) report, many Chinese college graduates who study abroad are incapable of writing a research paper, at least in part because many Chinese university EFL teachers have little experience conducting or writing about research. The question is: because EAP courses teach students the conventions of research (Columbian College of Arts & Sciences, George Washington University, 2017), if teachers hardly do any research work themselves, how can they become highly qualified EAP teachers?

In addition, according to the educational culture in China, "challenging authority is a distinct taboo in Chinese classrooms" (Chen, 2016, p. 359). Chinese instructors typically do not encourage students to take a questioning approach (Bei, 2015), and they "require complete silence while they lecture" (Alon & McIntyre, 2005, p. 158).

One researcher describes most teachers as still "spoon feeders" (Zhang, 2013, p. 93) of knowledge who teach to the test only. The teacher-centered traditional approach to language learning continues to be the predominant teaching style in today's EFL classroom (Li & Li, 2009; Wang, 2015; Yang & Yuen, 2014; Zhao, 2012).

This line of research suggests that ongoing teacher training and faculty development programs should be expressly designed according to teachers' professional responsibilities. China needs to build up programs to address cultural differences in teaching philosophies so that teachers would be capable of helping students develop their critical-thinking skills as well as the flexibility to perform adequately in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. To use the *Academic English* textbook series effectively, proper teacher training programs should ideally come first.

Integrating Critical Skills into Student Learning

O'Morrow is surely right when he argues that general academic skills are "often alien" for Chinese students, who rely largely on "regurgitation of memorized data" (O'Morrow, 2017, p. 27). Chinese students may lack the critical skills in active inquiry, critical discussion, problem solving, making arguments, complex reasoning, capacity for analysis and synthesis, and strategy development. As noted by Xiaodong Lin, a professor at Columbia University's Teachers' College (described in Anderson, 2016), Chinese ESL students at Western universities often struggle with analytical writing, summarizing, critical discussion, deep reasoning, and communication with peers and professors. Huang and Brown (2009) echo Lin's findings by reporting that research with ESL students studying at North American universities indicates that Chinese graduate students experience considerable challenges as a result of deficiencies in general academic skills.

In the view of Chinese scholars (Du, Wang, & Du, 2016; Zeng, 2013; Zhu, 2016), Chinese students regard themselves as empty vessels ready for teachers to fill with knowledge. This observation suggests that Chinese students rely heavily on teachers at the expense of general academic skills and creativity, and therefore lack autonomous self-disciplined learning capacity (Du et al., 2016). O'Morrow points out that the emphasis on these broader educational goals in *Academic English* texts "allows classes to address this

perceived need" (O'Morrow, 2017, p. 27), drawing attention to the acquisition of these vital skills for Chinese students.

Teacher/Student Resistance to Educational Change

Although O'Morrow makes several strong points in his article, he does not fully tackle the issue that both teachers and students in China may be potentially resistant to change in pedagogical approaches. While O'Morrow mentions that "teachers and students must contend with culture, language, and norms of academic performance simultaneously" (O'Morrow, 2017, p. 27), he does not develop the idea. Expanding it will help readers understand how Chinese EFL students are being taught, why Chinese EFL teachers are teaching the way they do, and what obstacles prevent Chinese EFL students from achieving English proficiency.

Over the past decades in China, English has been learned in an environment of very limited input, involving very little meaningful exchange of conversation in class (Kohn, 1992). Studies show that many Chinese students, through four years of college, are not learning to think critically (Anderson, 2016; Hernandez, 2016; Rimer, 2011). In the Western context, critical thinking, which is closely linked to critical analysis, plays a central role in academic writing. When Chinese ESL students are missing these essential skills, which they need to be successful at Western universities, their academic writing could be fundamentally weak in many ways—from poor grammar and sentence structure to lack of analytical skills and improper use of evidence to confusing organization and faulty reasoning.

In what follows, I present a brief overview of China's academic English writing instruction as it exists today, hoping that this account provides readers with direct insights into how cultural practices might hinder the effective use of the *Academic English Reading and Writing* texts. I begin with the teaching of grammar and its over-emphasis on accuracy, followed by an assessment of such teaching on English writing instruction, and finally, I consider China's College English Program, using the findings of a study I conducted (Ye, 2013).

Over-Emphasis on Grammatical Accuracy

In China's English instruction, grammar accuracy has been heavily stressed, but Chinese EFL students still have problems with English grammar. Accustomed to the linguistic features of Chinese syntax, Chinese EFL students may structure English sentences differently. When they write, their writing is influenced by their L1 grammatical structure (Bumgarner, 2016). Because they are working with a grammar that is topic-oriented, Chinese students often find it challenging and confusing to write correct English sentences to convey their basic ideas. The topic is the most important part of the sentence in Chinese, so it does not matter to a Chinese writer if there is no apparent subject (Liu & Li, 2009). Influenced by the negative transfer of the Chinese syntax, Chinese EFL students may ignore the grammatical relationship of the subject and the predicate. For this reason, Chinese educators are focused on helping students work at the sentence level, which is primarily, though not solely, built on accuracy (Wu & He, 2010). In other words, while grammatical accuracy is not the only challenge Chinese EFL students face in trying to produce coherent English writing, teachers continue to focus primarily on refining accuracy, following the Chinese way of focusing on form rather than content—which is rooted in classical Chinese philosophy, rhetorical traditions, and predominant pedagogical practice.

In addition to grammatical accuracy, another issue found in Chinese EFL students' writing is ambiguity in conveying their ideas. With the goal of promoting harmony, as a rhetorical strategy the Chinese may not come straight to the point or may avoid divergent opinions during the reasoning process. With respect to English writing instruction, while concern for grammar is necessary for developing writers, most Chinese would not hold that content should carry more weight than form; at least this is the case with

developing Chinese EFL writers. Indisputably, "a Chinese EFL student would be considered a good English writer if a strong command of language is apparent" (Ye, 2013, p. 86).

Finally, the former Soviet Intensive Reading model of foreign language teaching has exerted a far-reaching influence on China's English instruction over a long period of time (Wang & He, 2006). Because that longstanding, Soviet-constructed model deals with language instruction mostly at the lexical-syntactical level, teachers who were educated and grew up in this Soviet/Chinese EFL context tend to believe that vocabulary, sentence structure, and grammatically correct English are more important than content for Chinese EFL students' English writing. In fact, over the past 30 years, as demonstrated by research on ESL/EFL writing, Chinese EFL teachers have maintained a common view that grammatically correct form is of the utmost importance in teaching writing in China (Bao & Sun, 2010; Liu & Deng, 2005; Silva, 1997).

Impact on English Writing Instruction

In most cases, English writing instruction in Chinese classrooms has been overwhelmingly dominated by teacher-centered explanations and an emphasis on rote learning. Practices in the Chinese education system seem to resist the notion of student-centered learning. Students usually sit quietly in class, listening attentively and taking notes, with teachers lecturing at the front (He, 2000). As O'Morrow notes, today "the Chinese still contend that reading a book repeatedly until it is memorized is the best way to learn" (O'Morrow, 2017, p. 28). This is quite true. Deeply rooted in China's social and cultural conventions, memorization of texts consists of a large part of writing instruction because there is a strong belief in China that the path to good writing lies in internalizing others' styles (Carson, 1992), which is believed to be an excellent way to demonstrate one's knowledge of the language.

For college English teaching, the final exam at the end of each semester usually includes correct usage, cloze or error correction, and vocabulary from the textbook, which have been taught during the semester (Gao, F., 2010), instead of assessing a student's ability to organize his or her material smoothly and logically, to support ideas with relevant information, or to demonstrate basic critical thinking. Consequently, little attention is paid to coherence in writing.

As writing instruction in China is practically inseparable from the test-oriented College English Program, a brief look at this program is vital to a better understanding of how writing skills are generally overlooked.

College English Program

In China, English writing instruction at the college level is directly related to what is called "College English," which is a nationwide, college-level English language program covering such areas as grammar, vocabulary, reading, listening, writing, and translation. When students complete their courses in the program sequence, they eventually need to take an exit exam commonly known as the College English Test (CET), a large-scale nationwide standardized examination designed by the National College English Testing Committee. The test scores have generally been accepted throughout China as the standard evaluation of students' English proficiency level (Gu & Liu, 2005). Because passing the CET is believed to lead to social and financial success, the test itself has become the final goal (You, 2004). It therefore makes sense that the writing task of this program is oriented toward test-taking rather than meaning exploration or development of creative thought. For this reason, in preparation for the CET, EFL teachers in this examination system are predominately concerned about the teaching of grammatically correct form rather than English language skills (Gao, J., 2007; Guo & Wang, 2004; Wu & He, 2010; You, 2004).

As the above discussion attests, English writing instruction at the college level in China appears to be shaped by grammar-focused and test-driven education. For the new texts to be successful in classroom

practices, Chinese EAP educators must develop a new skill set that meets the changing and growing needs of today's Chinese students and prepares them for the real world.

Final Thoughts

Throughout the past decades, Chinese EFL teachers in China's exam-oriented education system have been teaching through vocabulary, memorization, and grammar, revealing that rote learning still appears to be Chinese students' principal way to learn. The reason for this situation is highly complex, and stems from the cultural roots of such practices. Currently, college English teaching in China is making a shift from general college English to English for academic purposes. As Chinese EFL teachers are not at present adequately prepared for today's new challenges, I suggest incorporating well-designed teacher training and faculty development programs based on teachers' profile of competencies. With commitment to efficient implementation of teachers' ongoing professional development, textbooks like the *Academic English Reading and Writing* series, reflecting an emphasis on developing students' critical-thinking and academic skills, would be more likely to exert a considerable positive impact on China's teaching and learning over time.

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