

## Secondary School English Learning and Teaching in China: Thirty Years of Change and Its Global Implication

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In recent years, ESL instructors and researchers in various English-speaking countries, such as Australia, England, New Zealand, and the United States, are having more contact with Chinese students on college campuses and become perplexed at the discrepancy between their high scores in standardized tests such as TOEFL and GRE and their actual low language ability, especially in speaking and writing. This paper utilizes secondary studies as well as interviews with English teachers in China to examine the history and development of English teaching methods and approaches in Chinese secondary schools in the past three decades. It also specifically discusses the teaching of English writing in Chinese secondary schools. The aim of this study is to help readers gain a better understanding of Chinese students' learning style and strategies, which may lead to more effective pedagogical assistance in these students' English learning abroad.

*Keywords:* culture of learning, EFL/ESL teaching method, L2 writing, secondary English education in China

**From** the time that China re-opened its doors to the West in 1978, and allowed cultural and economic exchange with the outside world, the country and its people have experienced phenomenal socioeconomic changes, which have in turn greatly influenced the teaching of English in Chinese schools. Drawing on articles and Chinese Ministry of Education documents, examining and comparing past English Subject Tests of the National College Entrance Exams (NCEE) in China, textbooks and classroom teaching procedures and strategies, and interviewing teachers in China, this paper identifies major changes in English teaching in Chinese secondary schools in the past three decades, which seem to follow, at an increasing pace, the modern paradigm shift of ESL pedagogy in Western countries, though in a more and more timely manner. Studying such a methodological shift in the paradigm not only could have an immediate impact on millions of students in China every year, it can also provide insights to teachers of Chinese students in ESL and other college classes abroad.

According to the *Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange*, nearly 200,000 Chinese students were enrolled in American colleges in 2011–12, making this group the largest cohort of international students in the United States (Institute of International Education, 2012). This paper aims to provide educators and researchers with some background information and consequently better understanding of the learning culture, strategies, and needs of the Chinese students so that they can help these students in their institutions learn English and adapt to the new environment more effectively.

### **1978 through 1980s: Hybrid of Traditional and Grammar Translation Method**

After the ten-year Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, the Ministry of Education reinstated the College Entrance Exam system in 1977 and started to recruit university students on a merit basis—as opposed to strictly selecting children from working-class and peasant families—for the first time in more than a decade. It was not until 1983, however, that English was fully accredited as one of the exam subjects. The only set of high school English textbooks in that period was compiled and published by People's

Education Press in 1978 (You, 2005). English was not taught in Chinese elementary schools until the first decade of the 21st century.

After more than two decades of isolation from the West, the Chinese textbook writers had no way of learning about the contemporary language learning theories and teaching principles and approaches abroad. They simply translated what the government wanted students to learn from Chinese into English, making sure that the contents were in line with the dominant political doctrines and that there were no grammar or vocabulary errors. The goal was to help students learn to use English as a tool to serve the Chinese modernization, i.e., to learn from foreign technology ways to help build a more modern and stronger country, not for communication purposes. Therefore, there was no authentic language whatsoever in this instruction, partly because none were available at the time. Zhang (2010) and Jie (2011) both pointed out that these textbooks mainly focused on vocabulary and grammar and emphasized accuracy of the language, not fluency. The texts and vocabulary were dry and difficult, and contained parts beyond a lot of middle school students' learning ability.

In 1982, People's Education Press introduced a revised version of the books, intended to incorporate some characteristics of audio-lingual and situational approaches (Jie, 2011). Though some situational dialogues and short essays were added, the emphasis of these textbooks was on grammar and pattern drills.

During that time, English teaching was not guided by any specific pedagogical principle and thus continued the thousand-year-long Chinese tradition of rote learning. This so-called "skill-based approach" (Fu, 2007, p. 30) was what both teachers and students were familiar and comfortable with (Cowan, Light, Mathews, & Tucker, 1979; Matalene, 1985; Rao, 1996; You, 2005). Classes were structured in a way similar to the Grammar Translation Method described in Brown (2007) and Richards and Rodgers (2001), although most teachers were probably not aware of this method. In addition, the classes were taught in the same way during that time—drills, drills, and more drills. The goal and the objective were one and the same: to memorize "discrete chunks of language rules and vocabulary items without context or even much co-text" (Hamp-Lyons, 1998, p. 332). Teachers spoke Chinese most of the time, especially when explaining grammatical usages. Students had no active use of the English language except for reading a few isolated passages or dialogues for practicing vocabulary; memorizing grammar rules and learning new words were of paramount importance. Needless to say, such decontextualized learning was boring and ineffective. The Ministry of Education came to realize this difficulty and set out to change it.

### **In the 1990s: Experiment with the Communicative Approach**

In 1990, the Ministry of Education issued a new set of guidelines for secondary school English teaching, stating: to provide students with basic training in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, . . . with a focus on reading; to build a foundation for the further learning and using of the English language (Chinese Ministry of Education, 1990). Furthermore, it instructed that English should be used in class as much as possible and that Chinese should be used when appropriate; it also stated that the teacher, in leading the class, should motivate students to participate in interaction and communication, as opposed to drills and memorization. It marked the first time that the Ministry of Education clearly stated that learning English was for the application of the language, not for the political reasons the older generations were used to. This new policy dramatically changed the attitude of the learning community, and transformed extrinsic pressure (learning for the country) into intrinsic motivation (learning for self).

Around that time as well, the communicative-language teaching approach was gaining in popularity (Brown, 2007). This new approach offered attractive elements to the Chinese English educators. They started to combine it with the traditional rote learning in various ways, introducing some parts of it into the classroom.

Many teachers found that utilizing the communicative approach livened the previously monotonous learning, adding authenticity and real-life simulation to the classroom. This seemed to help students

improve their overall language proficiency, especially their communication ability (Wu, 2009). Most students also welcomed this breath of fresh air in their otherwise stifling classroom.

The communicative approach, however, had its downside. Xu (2010) listed, among others, the following flaws in a reflective essay: (a) it broke the traditionally grammatical structure of English teaching that both teachers and students were used to and thus encountered resistance; (b) it did not really foster students' ability to communicate, because students had no use for English outside classrooms; (c) its result was difficult to assess; (d) many teachers in China were not adequately trained to apply this approach in their teaching; and (e) it hindered the learner's goal of getting the highest possible score in the National College Entrance Exam (NCEE), because communicative tasks took time away from grammar exercises and vocabulary memorization, the main focus of testing in China at the time.

This communicative approach-related experiment and debate lasted for almost ten years. It also brought about new sets of textbooks in different parts of China. By then, the Ministry of Education had ceased to require secondary schools to use the same teaching materials across the country. Cheng recorded that, in the 1990s, English textbook publishing fell into three categories: nationally published, regionally published, and imported (as cited in Jie, 2011). In 1993, People's Education Press invited the British publishing company Longman to plan and co-write Senior English for China, the new standard textbooks for high schools across the country. Jie (2011) noted that the biggest change in this set of textbooks was that, for the first time, they were not arranged according to grammatical structure. The textbooks recognized students' need for communication and included authentic language, role play, games, and other contemporary educational methods, and yet kept significant traditional pedagogical elements in dealing with pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary; they were intended to help students to learn to communicate in English in a natural or semi-natural setting. Such a combination of contemporary approaches made learning English more interesting for the students than the more traditional methods had (Jie, 2011; Liu, 2010).

### **In the 21st Century: The Task-Based Approach**

In 2000, the Chinese Ministry of Education issued a revised testing version of guidelines for teaching high school English and encouraged reforms in teaching approaches and methodologies (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2000). During that time, research and practice in task-based language teaching in the West were gaining momentum. Chinese English educators were clearly aware of this particular perspective within the communicative language teaching framework and appreciated its practicality, accessibility, and effectiveness in facilitating and motivating learning and communicating in English. They started to advocate for its incorporation in Chinese secondary school English classrooms.

In May 2001, the Ministry of Education issued "Requirements for High School English Classes (testing version)" and advocated for task-based language teaching. It also stated that in terms of emotional health and attitude, "teachers should guide students to cooperate with others and maintain harmonious and positive mental health" (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2001). It is interesting to note that this statement was taken quite literally by many schools, teachers, and school administrators and interpreted as stressing the classroom application of task-based teaching, which indeed would foster cooperation among learners in accomplishing mutual tasks. This led to the burgeoning of task-based teaching in secondary schools in China in the subsequent decade and beyond.

J. Lu, a high school teacher in southern China who has 30 years of teaching experience, recalled that she and her colleagues started to get instruction and training in task-based teaching in 2000/2001 (J. Lu, personal communication, November 20, 2011). She found task-based teaching quite useful in activating student creativity and motivating them to interact and practice the four language modalities, but she also said that it did not always work, especially when the task at hand involved difficult content (e.g., science- or culture-related topics) or grammar/vocabulary issues.

As English educators in China were rapidly incorporating Western language learning and teaching principles and methods in their classes, the publishing of appropriate textbooks lagged somewhat behind. It was not until 2003 that the first set of task-based textbooks, New Senior English for China (New SEFC), was published and put into use. New SEFC books were designed around specific topics such as computers, wildlife protection, traveling abroad, and life in the future, and were organized into the four language modalities accordingly (Liu, 2006, New Senior English for China section, para. 10). These new textbooks took student life and interest into consideration and supplied many culturally and linguistically authentic situations. Students were to use the English language to acquire, manage, and process information; to communicate with others; and to solve a real problem or accomplish a designated project. Developed by a team of Chinese linguists and educators in cooperation with Chris Jacques, who had been sent by Longman Publishing in 1993 to form a publishing alliance, these six new textbooks were designed for use throughout the three years of senior high school, two volumes per academic year. They covered all 24 themes required by the Ministry of Education in 2001, including natural science, environmental protection, customs and festivals in other countries, sports and hobbies, language learning, famous professionals, traveling, humor, invention, and marketing. All topics, lessons, projects, and exercises in these textbooks were selected and designed according to age-appropriate student developmental characteristics.

J. Liu, a high school teacher in central China who has taught for 19 years, volunteered a task-based sample lesson. When Liu was to teach the unit about festivals and celebrations, she asked her students to brainstorm how to actually organize a celebration. Students were motivated and quite creative, obviously enjoying such a task. After in-class discussion, which covered speaking, listening, reading, vocabulary, and grammar, Liu asked her students to write an essay about it. She said she was able to collect some original writings, such as responses to her assignment on writing about festival celebrations, and appreciated these changes, which pointed her teaching in a freer, more creative and more communicative direction (J. Liu, personal communication, November 26, 2011).

The advantages of task-based teaching were obvious. Brown (2007) pointed out that, in task-based teaching, successful completion of tasks was more practiced and valued than was the correct use of language forms. This certainly facilitated fluency in English as well as student interest and confidence, which the focus-on-form approach failed to do. That explained its increased application of task-based teaching in many secondary school English classrooms across China and the popularity of the New SEFC books, which was sustained for almost ten years.

### **Today: A Medley of Methods**

In the past thirty years, Chinese secondary English teaching experienced quite a few major changes, seemingly more and more in tune with the international trend in language acquisition theories and teaching principles and methodologies. These changes are reflected in every aspect of English learning: teaching methods, procedures and strategies, learner competencies and motivation, textbooks, and, last but not least, exams.

Exams have always been an integral and important component of learning assessment in China. The ultimate test of them all is the NCEE. Exam forms and topics in English have undergone a gradual and yet significant change in the past decades, mirroring the shift in associated pedagogy; the writing part of the English NCEE is an example.

From 1978 to 1987, writing was not even tested in the English NCEE. This fit perfectly with the learning goal and approach at the time: students were to practice some basic English speaking and listening and focus on reading and grammar; teachers emphasized traditional rote learning and applied a form of the grammar translation method in class. Writing was not taught at all; students were merely required to translate fragmented sentences from Chinese into English, free from error and misspellings.

In 1991, the writing test of the English NCEE required students to rewrite a short essay (80–120 words) from a third-person angle to a first-person perspective; there was a list of things that had to be included in the essay. This kind of test could hardly encourage any authentic production of students' own writing. Although it stated clearly that students should not translate the Chinese list of required elements, given the very specific requirements and strict grading criteria, they could at best do some parallel writing. Such tests were typical at the end of the 1980s, right before the communicative approach was introduced.

In comparison, the 2010 topic of the NCEE English writing test was more open. Students were to take on the role of the president of the School Student Senate and write a letter of invitation to an English-speaking teacher as if from the Senate president. It was clearly task-oriented and close to student life, obviously coinciding with the currently prevalent task-based approach in current Chinese English teaching.

Certain elements of the traditional rote learning/grammar translation method continue to have their long-held place in secondary school English classrooms in China, whereas newer and more learner-based approaches from the West have been playing an increasingly significant role in language teaching, including communicative and task-based approaches. Such a mix is characteristic of the modern-day Chinese philosophy of borrowing and making use of whatever is necessary and/or beneficial for the intended goal, and seems to work quite well for students and teachers alike.

According to Lu—the veteran high school English teacher in southern China—the newest trend will be learner-centered cooperative learning. Lu and her colleagues were sent to attend a pedagogy training seminar in Shandong, in northern China, in November 2011. Lu explained that a new teaching approach was introduced and might be implemented next year: called 2-7-1, it referred to 20% self-learning, 70% peer discussion, and 10% teacher instruction (J. Lu, personal communication, November 20, 2011). Detailed new testing requirements for the 2012 English NCEE have been issued by the Ministry of Education; whether there will be new learner-centered textbooks remains to be seen. No matter how the Ministry of Education changes its guidelines and requirements, though, schools and teachers in different regions tend to implement them differently, in ways most suitable for their particular students and resources—which inevitably leads to discrepancy in learning outcomes. There has been and will continue to be a mix of English teaching approaches, new and old, Western and traditional, in secondary school classrooms in China.

## Discussion

Throughout Second Language Acquisition history, language theories and learning and teaching approaches have been developed to be debated, practiced, challenged, and surpassed/modified/improved. The same process applies to the teaching of secondary school English in China as well. Teachers and students benefit from what works well, but they also learn from what does not work and adjust accordingly.

In implementing the teaching approaches discussed thus far, however, there are a few problems to be dealt with by both teachers and students: (a) the initial lack of and later inadequate teaching of English writing that results in difficulties/challenges Chinese students face; (b) the issue of authenticity in textbooks and teaching materials; and (c) the cultural aspects of language teaching in China.

### Lack of English Writing Teaching

The first problem is the lack of English writing teaching in many Chinese secondary English curricula. In the first decade after English began to be taught as a subject in secondary school again, most teachers neither considered it important to teach writing, nor did they have the training to do so. Liu recalled that she started to teach middle school English right after she graduated from an occupational high school where future teachers were trained (J. Liu, personal communication, November 26, 2011). As time went by, teacher training has gradually become more and more professional and reached increasingly higher standards, as most secondary schools started to recruit teachers from four-year normal colleges. There is

another reason, however, for the lackluster attitude toward English writing teaching: the pressure of the NCEE. Almost all the time and effort is devoted to learning the 3,300 required words, 360 phrases, and grammatical items specified by the Ministry of Education. Writing makes up anywhere between 15 and 25 points out of a total of 150 and is relatively insignificant, whereas memorization of grammar and vocabulary continues to occupy most learning time and effort.

The second problem is also writing-related: if it is taught in secondary English classes, it is inadvertently taught in the tradition of current-traditional pedagogy (You, 2005). You pointed out that traditionally many English teachers:

learned to write on their own through reading and writing, because English writing was hardly taught when they were students in the 1970s and 1980s. They were not confident about their writing experience and had found current-traditional pedagogy the most effective in maintaining their pride in the traditional teacher-dominant classroom culture in China. . . . With a relatively low level of proficiency, students also feel comfortable practicing writing following rigid steps (p. 648).

This kind of teaching treats writing as a product and ignores the importance and dynamics of helping learners develop their writer identities and writing skills in the process. Students might be able to memorize some model templates and write a short essay for the exam with little or no grammatical or vocabulary errors, but then they are not writers, merely copiers.

### **Authenticity and Culture-Related Issues**

The next question is much more complex and intriguing: how much authenticity is necessary or adequate in learning English—or, how much imported culture in a classroom is too much? Connor (2002) pointed out that “different cultures have different rhetorical tendencies” (p. 494). If students want to learn the authentic language, they should, as a matter of course, also learn the linguistic and rhetorical tendencies as well as cultures related to the target language.

Belcher (2006), however, pointed out that “[o]ne person’s authenticity may not be another’s” (p. 137). Widdowson argued that authenticity “resides not in texts but in the interaction between texts and intended contexts. According to this reasoning, texts taken out of context are inauthentic as soon as they enter the classroom” (as cited in p. 137). Belcher further explained that texts, “as classroom materials, can be viewed as exhibiting varying degrees of authenticity: from clearly authentic materials found in the target discourse community, to semi-authentic materials produced by the ESP practitioner, to obviously inauthentic textbooks mass-produced by publishers” (p. 138). This poses a dilemma in selecting authentic language materials for Chinese students. The Ministry of Education opted for a compromise and used both original English texts and some materials adapted or specifically written for Chinese students by linguists and educators.

Concerning the cultural aspect in Chinese secondary English textbooks, Liu (2010) compared them with English textbooks from Japan and argued that the Chinese ones focused much more on the cultures of English-speaking countries, whereas the Japanese put more emphasis on their own culture in compiling the teaching materials. Liu (2002) warned that one severe consequence of too much focus on English-speaking countries would be the lack of language to adequately relate to one’s own culture in English.

Chinese teachers and language educators have noticed some of the problems and already started to address them. In the New Senior English for China series and textbooks published thereafter, a small writing session is carefully designed and included in every unit. Teachers are encouraged to help students learn and practice the writing process. Given that most teachers themselves did not learn writing as a process, this may take a long time to accomplish; nonetheless, it is indeed good news that they are on their way. In short, the authenticity and culture-related issues are still being observed, evaluated, and debated. No unified conclusion or application is yet available.



## Conclusion: The Implications

In the past three decades, secondary school English teaching in China has experienced a rich array of changes and will continue learning and adjusting in search of better ways to serve student needs in the future. Since the Open Door Policy was implemented in 1978, the Chinese government not only carried out major economic and minor political reforms, it also launched educational reforms in various aspects of the teaching and learning system. As communication with the West resumed and then rapidly increased and information flowed more freely across borders, Chinese linguists and language educators have been exposed to and consequently adopted some influential teaching principles and approaches and adapted them to the secondary school English learning environment in China. These include the grammar translation method, the communicative approach, task-based learning, and, most recently, learner-based cooperative learning.

Despite the Chinese Ministry of Education's official stand in adopting the communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based language teaching (TBLT) approaches in secondary English curricula, their local implementation and results vary greatly across the country. In a case study of a secondary school teacher, Liao (2004) observed that this teacher "held favourable attitudes towards CLT, had a clear and correct understanding of CLT, and the professional ability to overcome situational constraints (e.g., large class size)" (p. 271). The teacher "used the mandatory function-based textbook, and focused on such functions as asking for time, asking for help, and expressing thanks" (p. 271). In other words, the teacher was able to engage her students in task-based language learning activities.

Liao was a strong advocate for CLT and TBLT in China. Deng & Carless (2009), however, pointed out that it was not easy to implement these approaches because of many contextual factors, such as teachers' central and authoritative roles in traditional Chinese classrooms, students' reluctance to participate in class tasks, and teachers' lack of understanding of CLT and TBLT and poor English skills. They cited a 2003 survey involving 500 secondary English teachers from Sichuan province as showing that "15.2% of the teachers had never heard of TBLT, 50.6% had only heard of the name of the approach but had no ideas about it, 30.8% had read some TBLT information or articles and only 4.4% had actually tried to implement it in their classrooms" (p. 115).

The complex situation in the individual implementation of CLT and TBLT in Chinese secondary schools and their varied degrees of success, combined with the fact that CLT/TBLT approaches sometimes coexist with other language teaching methods, such as grammar translation and rote learning, make it impossible to provide any definite advice to language professionals and other instructors on how to deal with incoming college students from China. For ESL instructors and researchers in English-speaking countries and universities where more and more Chinese students flock to study, however, it is still relevant and even necessary to learn about the historic and current situation of English teaching methods and approaches in China so that they can at least understand how and why Chinese students learn and use English in the way they do. Furthermore, ESL professionals are advised to be aware that "homogeneities are rather misleading" (Shi, 2006, p. 139) because the new generations of Chinese students are anything but unanimously obedient to authority, as was the case for previous generations, and they are more adept at critical thinking. On the other hand, they are also "clear about their learning purposes which were predominantly self-interested, e.g., self-improvement" (p. 137). Furthermore, Shi's data showed that "these young learners actually hoped classroom teaching would be more interesting and interactive. They wanted their teachers to be light-hearted and use different activities to help them with language learning" (p. 137). If ESL and the methods used by other college teachers can raise their awareness of the distinctive learning style, characteristics, and strategies of this large cohort of new international students, including the source of their English knowledge as well as their learning needs, they will be better prepared to help these students acquire the language skills needed for academic success in the all-English environment.

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