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Problems of English Language Teaching in Chinese Schools

В данной статье рассматриваются ключевые компоненты проблем, возникающих в преподавании английского языка в китайских учебных заведениях. Проблема комплексно анализируется как с точки зрения учебных заведений, так и с точки зрения методологических приемов обучения. Также статья предлагает ряд комплексных решений, направленных на улучшение ситуации.

Keywords: English language, trends, pedagogy, teaching methodology, China

Introduction

It is obvious that as of now, English language is considered to be one of the most important subjects on the curriculum of any Chinese school. It stands there alongside mathematics and Chinese, the native language of the most populated country in the world.

What makes this particular foreign language so important? The reasons for this are obvious and fairly simple.

First of all, English is the official business communication language. No matter where the business partners come from, once their business crosses the borders and requires a certain degree of internationalization, English language comes into play. More than 90% of international invoices, delivery arrangements, cargo manifests and contracts are in English language.

Since China has become a powerful force in global business, it needs its growing businesses to be able to communicate with the world in English. The future Chinese Bill Gates's and Steve Jobs's are studying in primary, middle and high schools now and, as we speak, are acquiring the basic English language knowledge that will help China bring its entrepreneurship onto a new worldwide level.

The second reason for it is computing industry. As Bill Kovach mentions, at present moment, Alibaba, Baidu and other Chinese Internet platforms claim over 45% of the global Internet traffic [2, p. 56]. China is in dire need of HTTP, PHP

and Java developers. It also needs world-class C++ programmers and IT administrators to support and expand the influence of Chinese Internet enterprises.

A lot of young people find themselves engulfed in data streams and are willing to become involved with the IT industry in the future. There is no doubt that this field brings fast career development, stable wages and exciting job opportunities.

Yet if we look closer at the IT sphere, we will see that everything, starting from programming languages down to website support documentation is written, coded, sent and processed in English. This makes English language one of the top skill priorities for anyone who wishes to realize themselves in IT field.

The third reason is the possibility of international travel. It's not only the Internet that makes our world a global village. There are also cheap airlines and simplified visa requirements. We have Chinese families with relatives living all around the world. The job market, housing market and entertainment market have reached far out beyond the borders of a single country and are offering exciting opportunities for young professionals. A Chinese national working in Spain, who buys a house in Portugal, and spends his or her yearly leave in Australia with the family, is no longer a curiosity.

If you ask those globetrotters about the language they use in their travels and international communication, they'll undoubtedly name no other language than English, since it is widely spoken not only in the countries that have adapted it as a national language, but also in the countries which have had historic ties with the English-speaking countries and pretty much everywhere, where a certain industry or a set of industries is dependent on it.

Taking all of the above mentioned into account, we can clearly see why teaching and studying English language is one of the priorities for Chinese school educational system. Unfortunately, that being a priority does not necessarily solve all the problems that English language teachers, English language students and other people involved in the process face today.

Problems and solutions

1. The need and fear of change

It has been a long time now that the reform of the education system in China has been proposed and discussed. There have been numerous conferences, symposiums and forums in which distinguished professors presented their opinions on what Chinese education is and which way it should go.

Probably, there was a certain benefit from those talks, yet it was not the benefit that we can immediately see in the field of English language study in Chinese school. Talking about change and changing things are absolutely different, and, while it may be a fun pastime entertaining a thought of innovating things, actual change may be as dangerous as losing a job or getting a bad reputation.

Experience shows that a typical Chinese school usually has very vague and rigid views on how the things should be taught. English language, being pretty much the only subject taught in a non-native language, is usually treated with reverence and fear. Reverence comes from the simple fact that some people "can"

English and some can't, and fear comes from the fact that those who "can't English" always assume that everything that is being said in a foreign language is somehow detrimental to their country or well-being.

This rigid state of educational mind is not just an acute observation. It is one of the factors that influence education in general and English teaching in particular. Usually in the school system there are a few authority figures above the teacher, and in many cases those with the decision power don't have any knowledge of what English language is or how it should be taught. Yet the numerous hordes of supervisors, education managers and teaching assistants are doing their best to force a school English teacher into a rigid system of reports, prohibitions and unattainable teaching goals.

The worst thing here is the double standard attitude, according to which the very same people who are afraid of English language being used in their educational institutions are also the ones who seem to be supporting the change in the educational system. So on the one hand they are all for the change and are ready to welcome it, but on the other hand they force young creative English language teachers to obey the standards they want to change.

Apparently, this kind of an attitude will not take English language education anywhere in the near future, and the only way to get out of this catch-22 situation is to implement the educational change in a centralized manner and make sure that it is introduced and used in the schools throughout the country.

For starters, it would be nice to see 50-student classes divided into smaller (10–15 people) groups for English classes. This is a classic approach to language education arrangement, which has been outlined in many modern classroom management works including "Communication in Small Groups – Principles and Practices" by Steven A. Beebe. According to Beebe, this simple step immediately gives each student approximately six times more practice time per class, and allows the teacher to personalize class content and pace [3, p. 78]. It would also eliminate the need for Teacher Assistants (TAs), since maintaining discipline is much easier in a class of 10 than in a class of 50.

Then it would be very useful to either introduce a specific grammar class taught to the Chinese students in their native language (Chinese) or allow foreign English language teachers use the native language of their students (Chinese) if they are able to. This would go in line with the methodological statement that the grammar of a foreign language should be explained in the native language of the student.

Then, it would be great if there was a certain continuity between English classes taught by the local and the foreign teachers, since at the moment the situation is: local teachers spend 40 minutes of class time disciplining their students and using Chinese language extensively, which results in the students not acquiring any English language skill. Then foreign English teachers play games and "have fun" with the class, wasting class time on non-targeted practice, which doesn't provide adequate language acquisition.

2. Teaching the teachers to teach

As a language teacher, I have two diplomas that certify my teaching skill and guarantee me the ability to teach students a language. One of my diplomas is from Anhui Normal University, and the other one is from Nanjing Normal University. At the moment I am doing my Ph.D. with Nanjing Normal University.

According to these diplomas, I am a professional teacher, yet I don't feel this way. Let us have a look at the reasons why this happens and what underlies the proper training for a teacher.

First of all, teaching is a skill. It belongs to the same skill set as language mastery or driving. Thusly it is vital that pedagogical education is practice-focused rather than purely theoretical. In my course, most of the class time was given to the subjects that are somehow linked with the general process of knowledge acquisition, but the amount of hands-on practice was minimal.

I studied the history of education, but nobody taught me how to behave when your student suddenly suffocates in class. I was taught the names of famous educational figures, yet I was never told what to do with a class of 50 people. My teachers paid great attention to us learning extracts from the books we needed to study, but they never taught me how to discipline a class of 4-year-olds.

The list can go on and on. As a result now I feel that even though I am a certified professional, I lack real world skills that will allow me to do the job I was trained for.

The most frightening thing is that I am not the only case. In all the schools in all the subjects there are the teachers, who slept through their university program, aiming at getting 61% on the tests.

An easy solution here would be to have mandatory one-year practice for all university students who train to be language teachers, be it English language pedagogy or otherwise. This could be arranged in the fourth year of Bachelor program and should be supervised and monitored by the experienced teachers with real-life teaching practice, but not by the people who invested their time into the methodological theory.

Besides that, students who have a language teaching major should be presented with more practical role-play, simulations and case studies throughout their course. This would allow them to be better prepared for a multitude of classroom situations, since it is obvious that there has never been and will never be an ideal non-personal classroom-student environment that most of the classic methodological theories are revolving around.

3. Recruitment standards and employment options for English language teachers in China

It would make a good statistical study to ask the parents of school students about how many professional teachers (certified, with pedagogical university diplomas) they think their children have and then to compare this number with the actual number of certified teachers with pedagogical university diplomas that those school have in fact. I believe that this study would uncover a massive lie that

has been built from ground up by schools, recruitment agencies, various intermediaries and poor HR management.

It would have brought to light the fact that to be employed as an English teacher in China you require no specific training at all. A native speaker's passport would suffice in 90 percent of cases. Moreover, a white face and a positive demeanor usually land you a job within a week of job search.

I am not going to name the names of people and educational institutions I mention in this article, lest I put myself in certain jeopardy, so the reader will have to take my word for it.

If we have a closer look at the English language teachers who work in Chinese schools, we will see that quite a few of them have no higher education at all. Employing a 19-year-old one should understand that the teacher's age itself presupposes the teacher's lack of any professional education of any sort, yet that goes.

Many of those foreign students who come to China are being approached in the street, like I regularly am, with an offer that usually goes as "You have white skin. Do you want to teach English?" At the same time, your major, certification and qualifications are never asked for. They aren't demanded later when those students are being offered a job.

So, what teaching skills do those people with white skin possess? In 90 percent of cases they have no idea how to teach the language they are able to speak. Them being students and enjoying the night life they would often show up drunk or hung over for their morning classes and waste class time by playing songs to kids or doing non language focused activities like throwing a paper ball around. In individual cases this is a horrible thing, but when this horrible thing is done on a massive scale, in pretty much every school, it becomes a trend, and the kids' parents and school personnel believe that this is the actual approach that foreign teachers have to their class [5, p. 34]. Well, this is wrong. Real foreign teachers actually teach the class and don't have the attitude that those fake teachers exhibit.

Another recruitment problem is the superiority of native speakers' passports over teaching certification. One of my acquaintances who graduated from Russian State Pedagogical University had a hard time finding an English teaching job in China since he had a Russian passport. This leads to a situation where a Pakistani taxi driver with a British passport is much more welcome to teach English in China than a professional certified English language teacher from Russia. As a result, we have native speakers in primary, middle and high schools all over the country who are unable to teach their language. On the one hand, English may be not that native to them, since many of those with native speaker's passports grew up in ethnical neighborhoods with minimal exposure to English. On the other hand, they lack the experience of actually acquiring English native, and, thusly, have no idea of what difficulties the learners may face and how to work with those difficulties. It often happens that when you ask a native speaker about a certain reading rule or grammatical phenomenon, they would answer along the lines of "Because we just say so," which is an insufficient explanation for an English language classroom. Non-native English language speakers, who have been certified to teach English

language, have all the experience of acquiring this language in a simulated environment from zero level, and are usually able to address students' problems on all levels of language acquisition hierarchy. Non-native English language speakers can use their experience to their advantage when teaching and are themselves a mighty example to the students of the fact that such acquisition and professional language mastery are possible.

We can find various hiring agencies and intermediaries who provide Chinese schools with English language teachers all over WeChat (the most popular Chinese messaging application). They have their own groups and looking for them is a matter of a simple search. Most of those agencies are a one-two people affair driven by a desire of quick profit on intermediary fees. They have neither ability nor skill for distinguishing proper teachers from scam and are happy to peddle anyone to Chinese schools as soon as there is profit in it. Quitting teachers, teachers who miss classes and teachers who get sick in front of primary school kids because of partying too hard the night before aren't a problem, since China is full of young foreign faces looking for a quick buck. Teachers get replaced, rotated over and fired left right and center, which tells badly on the continuity of English class, curriculum coherence and students' progress.

Schools, who have the final word in saying which English teachers they hire and which they don't, usually have no professional HR specialists, who would do a proper job interview with a job candidate. English teachers are thrown into a classroom without orientation training, proper teaching materials or audiovisual support. The assisting personal (TAs) are usually people with an English major of sorts, but we have yet to see a TA who would have been trained as an English teacher.

When a teacher is being replaced, students' parents are usually told that "the new teacher is better than the previous one" without any explanation why it is so. Parents, who see a foreign face, don't usually ask any further questions, believing that a school did its job and hired a proper teacher who would teach their kids English language worthy of the money they had paid for it.

At a glance this system looks as follows: profit-focused people with no experience in education push underage non-professionals with poor language skills and zero teaching abilities to Chinese schools, where they pretend to be teaching English, all while local school personnel who has no teacher assessment criteria pretends that everything is going great and the children acquire English language.

As a result Chinese students learn nothing and are usually unable to use English language by the end of their school period. Professional non-native English teachers find it nearly impossible to find a decent job because of all the competition from native speakers with no teaching background. Professional native English language speakers feel that they are underpaid and underappreciated in this market situation. Agencies and intermediaries make a huge profit. Schools write their reports pretending that they provide adequate English language education.

This problem would be easily solved if only English teachers with teaching diplomas and certified English teaching experience were hired, no matter what country their passports were from and no matter what the color of their skin was. Hopefully a new system of foreign workers' assessment will bring us one step closer to that.

4. English teaching feedback mechanisms

Since the problem described above is so vast and obvious, there should have been people concerned with English language education in China who would have exposed it somehow. Yet there have been none so far. Why does this happen?

The reason for that is the feedback mechanisms implemented by the majority of schools when it comes to English language classes. First of all, there is no criteria or proficiency test given to the classes and on the material taught by a foreign English language teacher.

Of course, it is very difficult to test English language mastery if most of the activities that the foreign English language teacher did were not language focused. Besides, schools have this misconception that just being in a class with a foreign English language teacher automatically gives students language mastery. On top of that, no schools have yet come to the understanding of the fact that a native speaker's English class may be not beneficial to students anyhow.

So, how is feedback organized? It usually goes through the TAs (Teacher Assistants) who observe foreign teachers' classes and write reports to their supervisors. Since the majority of those TAs are not professional teachers, but are just somehow affiliated with English language, their assessment goes along the lines of "I liked the class," "Students played," "There was a song," "The teacher was white enough." Classic activities such as role-plays and presentations outlined in a cornerstone of language teaching, "700 Classroom Activities", written by David Seymour & Maria Popova [1, p. 237] are never mentioned in feedback forms. Methodological devices, material work, class planning, content tuning, activity set-up and class focus are never taken into account. Furthermore, most of the TAs do not even know that those English class assessment criteria exist.

The same TAs are then required to provide certain feedback to the foreign teachers teaching English language at their respective schools. Most of time their feedback and suggestions are: "Don't speak Chinese" and "Play more."

Somehow there is an ultimate idea that a foreign teacher who teaches English language in a Chinese school shouldn't speak Chinese. It probably comes from an idea of immersive language study, proposed by H. Anderson and N. Rhodes in their article on the immersion method in language learning [4, p. 17]. What the Chinese proponents of this teaching method do not understand is the fact that for this method of language teaching to work, the classes should be 10 students maximum and their language environment immersion time should be 5 times a week, 4 hours per day minimum. Since no regular school can allocate that much time for English language study, implementing this method is useless.

In case of a big classroom and little time allocated for language study and explanatory teaching method should be used to teach Chinese kids English language. It is no doubt that English grammar should be explained in the language native to the language learners. Thusly, an English language teacher who is able to explain English grammar in Chinese and draw parallels between lingual structures of both languages should be a cherished asset for any school.

Another kind of TA feedback that goes along with misunderstanding or rather no knowledge of applied language teaching methodology is "Don't teach stu-

dents to spell words. Don't teach students individual words. Have students parrot songs and articles. It's enough for language study." This comes from the way that Chinese language is taught and later used by the Chinese children. If we look at a Chinese class at a typical Chinese school, we will see that students are asked to memorize big chunks of classic texts and are encouraged to quote those texts and use parts of them later in speeches or compositions. Isolative language structure, set writing system and absence of inflections or concord all lead to the fact that modern spoken Chinese is just a collection of learned up structures. The language teaching notion here is that if a student learns enough phrasal vocabulary, he or she will be able to combine it in any ways he or she sees fit to render their communicative intention.

Unfortunately, English language doesn't work this way. In order to have fluency and language mastery, one should be able to understand not just a single word form, but its paradigmatic changes and contextual implications. A prerequisite for teaching this on higher levels is students' understanding of every word (or an ability to guess its meaning out of immediate context) as well as understanding of the rules according to which those words had been strung in this or that way. Simply put, mindlessly parroting English words and piling them up together in sentence-like structures results in the majority of mistakes Chinese English learners make.

Yet foreign English language teachers who insist on explanatory methodology of teaching are not listened to in Chinese schools and are claimed as "too demanding," "too strict" or "too boring" by the TAs. Without any comparative test assessment given to foreign English teachers it is impossible to convince the school personnel otherwise, which leads to the teachers who could have made the difference being replaced by "funny" teachers, who have their students either play paper ball or run around in class.

It is not necessary that an English class taught according to an explanatory method is perceived as boring by the students. Usually, such class has a certain structure including studied material review, new material introduction, practice of the new material in the familiar context, an activity and a multimedia slot followed by a homework assignment. Practice shows that Chinese students quickly adapt to such English class structure, are willing to participate in class, keep discipline and be involved. Yet the students are never tested for their knowledge or asked their opinion on the class.

Since it's the TAs who provide two-way feedback (foreign English teacher – TA – school supervisor), students and their English language knowledge is excluded from the equation.

Add to that the overwhelming TAs' desire to hurry up foreign English teachers to comply with the program based on a textbook page-by-week division, and you get feedback that doesn't reflect the state of things in an English classroom a tiny bit.

As a result, there are reports written by non-involved people based on their personal attitude to foreign English language teachers and their classes. Those re-

ports then are read by the people who are not English language teachers, are often not teachers at all, and are usually unable to speak a word of English, and, according to their rulings, hiring, firing, promotion and curriculum decisions are made.

Since it all looks like a complicated problem in itself, it requires an integrated solution that can be implemented and traced on all levels of English language education in schools. A system of assessment criteria for a foreign English language teacher class should be designed. This system should be designed by professional English language teachers, both local and foreign, and should be explained to every foreign English language teacher who starts to work at a Chinese school.

The assessment of foreign English language teachers should be done by certified professional English language teachers, and the students' feedback should definitely be a part of that assessment. This assessment system should be developed for each school grade and should be unified for all the primary, middle and high schools in the country with the exception of language-focused schools (like Nanjing Foreign Language School for example).

Foreign English language teacher promotion, hiring and firing decisions should be taken in accordance with the results of this assessment.

Conclusion

Since career, studying and family limit the time children can spend on language acquisition, it is very important that the time they spend in foreign English language teacher's class is not wasted, but is adequately used. Unfortunately, the situation today is far from that. In order for a change to happen, a lot of things should be done and seen through.

First of all, schools and educational institutions should let go of their fear of change and embrace the progressive and established methods of English language training. English language teachers who study in China should be taught to teach rather than taught to study. They should be provided with a plethora of opportunities to gain experience before they are able to contribute to their workplaces.

The standards and hiring requirements for foreign English language teachers should be changed throughout the country, and more professional English language teachers should be invited to work in Chinese schools.

To help this, a new assessment system should be created for the foreign English language teachers who want to work in Chinese schools. This system should be designed, tested and fine-tuned before it is implemented.

All the foreign English language teachers working in Chinese schools at the moment should be assessed according to the new system and deemed job worthy or not. It will help get rid of the teachers who are nothing but fake and who capitalize on their passports rather than contribute to the English language acquisition of Chinese youth.

At the same time, the perception of a foreign English language teacher should be gradually changed in public eye from that of an overseas curiosity to a professional contributing to the education of the future of China.

With a proper attitude, a set recruitment system for professional foreign English language teachers and a proper feedback and assessment system, Chinese students will have a great chance to experience proper English language teaching.

If we take countries, in which this or a similar system has been implemented and has been in operation for a decade or more, we will see that the nationwide results are stunning. Finland, Russia, Germany and Portugal have been successful in teaching 75-83% of their population English language. The time and effort spent on it was much less than that in China, yet the results (IELTS, TOEFL, English GRE) have been steadily better than those of Chinese students.

Once the complex paradigmatic approach to English language teaching is implemented in every Chinese school, the results will be evident within the first five years after its implementation. This will undoubtedly put China on a new level in global business, global IT and global economy, all while providing young Chinese population with a new cultural dimension that will make them the rightful citizens of the global village of the future.

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