Teaching English in China: Conflicts and Expectations

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Abstract

This review article addresses the issue of teaching English as a foreign language in China. By reviewing recent literature, the article analyzes the characteristics of Chinese learners and Western teachers. Chinese learners regard themselves as empty vessel ready for teachers to fill in with knowledge while Western teachers prefer to act as facilitators helping students to acquire English in communicative approach. Because of different educational philosophies, cultures and societal expectations between the Western teachers and Chinese learners, native English speaking (NES) teachers sometimes encounter tensions and even conflicts when teaching in China. The article suggests that NES teachers should adapt themselves to instructive methods applicable to Chinese context.

Key words: *Native English teachers, English teaching, Chinese context*

NES Teaching: irreplaceable but unsatisfactory

Ever since China opened its door to the outside world in 1980, learning English in China began to be accelerated as a pace similar to its modernization drive (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996). Learning English has been a nationwide fashion for three decades (Lam, 2002). Today the estimated number of English learners in China, young and old, amounts to as much as more than 300 million[1].

With China's quickened move towards economic globalization, English teaching in China has undergone a fundamental change, especially at university level. The focus has turned from vocabulary and grammar to listening and speaking. As a result, the need for more qualified English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers is growing, especially a rising demand for NES teachers, who are supposed to 'demonstrate fluent, idiomatically appropriate language' (Phillipson, 1992, p. 14). Under this background, the number of teachers from Western countries who are invited to teach English in China is on a constant rise.

However, the rush of NES teachers also brings tensions and conflicts between them and Chinese students. Quite a few studies in literature focus on these issues. Researchers found NES teachers and students misunderstood each other and NES teachers felt frustrated while teaching in China (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996; McIlwraith, 1996). For example, when they encouraged Chinese students to raise questions, NES teachers met with little response. Chinese students usually believed that questions indicated that the teacher didn't explain clearly and any questions to challenge the teacher would make him or her lose face in front of the whole class (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996). In Li (1999)'s study, one of the NES teachers constantly recognized tension in the classroom where he taught English in an interactive format to English majors in a Chinese university, who remained silent and were reluctant to get involved in discussions and group work. Barlow and Lowe (1985) s' article revealed a very contradictory finding regarding the effect of traditional Chinese learning method:

> They [foreign experts] cannot accept the obvious fact that Chinese students learn better if they can learn in their own way: start with rote memorization, grammar rules, sentence construction and then worry about conversation and shades of meaning, not the other way around...Chinese students learn to read, write, speak, and then comprehend aurally in exactly the reverse order stressed by Western pedagogy. The emphasis on grammar means students tend to neglect comprehension, but can easily construct very good sentences. It seems inexcusably formalistic to

most foreign language teachers. But in our experience, these students speak English more fluently after four years of study than their counterparts in the U.S. speak Chinese (p. 155)

Medgyes (1992) also found that being a NES teacher was by no means an advantage. He asked more than 60 English language teaching (ELT) specialists to select from the following three questions and two thirds of them chose B and the remaining chose C:

'Suppose you were the principal of a commercial ELT school in Britain. Who would you employ?'

A. I would employ only native speakers, even if they were not qualified EFL teachers.

B. I would prefer to employ native-speaking EFL teachers, but if hard pressed I would choose a qualified non-native rather than a native without EFL qualifications.

C. The native/non-native issue would not be a selection criterion (provided the non-native-speaking EFL teacher was a highly proficient speaker of English (p. 343).

From these studies it can be concluded that be qualified for teaching English, language competence is far from enough (Medgyes, 1992). To get fully prepared to teach English in China, NES teachers must get familiar with and adjusted to different teaching patterns and cultural modes typical in Chinese contexts (Murphy-O'Dwyer, 1996).

Chinese students as diligent knowledge pursuers

China is quite unique in human history in that it boasts the longest continuously running history of any other countries and civilizations. Because of its rich heritage, one of the major functions of education is transmission of received wisdom (Simpson, 2008). Han Yu[2], one of important ancient Chinese philosophers, defined three roles of being a teacher in *On the Teacher*: to propagate the doctrine for, to impart professional knowledge to, and to resolve doubts of students.

Nurtured with such an educational philosophy, Chinese students have developed an attitude to teachers, teaching and learning different from the Western countries. Szalay et al (1994) surveyed three groups of university students in mainland China, Taiwan and USA (N=100 in each site). The predominant Chinese image for teachers is a good friend who is first of all well-learned and knows how to instruct, delivers lectures, and clarify problems. Chinese students hold teachers in high respect and esteem. The saying like 'to be my teacher for one day is to be my parent for my lifetime' highlights Chinese students' respect for teachers. Because of teachers' superior role as a transmitter of knowledge, they are naturally expected to know more and therefore become more powerful. As a result students keep a power distance between them and their teachers (Nguyen et al, 2006). What they say in class is taken as authoritative statements. This mismatch of depth of knowledge between teachers and students places students in an inferior and passive position or what researchers called asymmetry in the classroom (Holliday, 1994) where the teacher dominates the class and students are more likely to listen to the teacher and take notes rather than actively contribute to class activities, let alone challenging teachers with questions.

Because they are placed in an inferior position, Chinese students regard themselves as empty receptacle that can be filled up by teachers' instruction and they also prefer detailed and precise teaching (Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995). Teachers are supposed to impart professional knowledge. When it comes to English proficiency, Chinese students are more likely to take tangible knowledge such as vocabulary and grammatical rules as achievement rather than intangible skills such as listening and speaking, which also take a much longer time to practice before they see a satisfactory result. Researchers studying Chinese students' learning behavior also found that memorizing English words seemed to be their major task (Yue, 1991; Li and Li, 1991). In a survey conducted to over 7000 university students in a 2002[3], most students (78%) applauded teachers who could explain new words and elaborate difficult sentences. Even for Chinese living in the United States, the traditional attitude to knowledge remains almost unchanged. Huntsinger et al (2000) studied Chinese American children and they found that Chinese children were more likely to outperform their Caucasian American counterparts in receptive English vocabulary acquisition when they reached the fourth grade. Peacock (1999) also drew the same conclusion based on his survey to the college students in Hong Kong. His findings revealed that 64% of those surveyed believed that 'learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammatical rules' (Peacock, 1999, p. 257).

Another reason for Chinese unique learning behavior derives from parental pressure. Chen and Steven (1995) owed the mathematics achievement of students from East-Asian-American families including Chinese-Americans to their parents who set high standards, 'believing that the road to success is through effort, having positive attitudes about achievement, studying diligently' (p. 1216). Their survey on the Chinese-American students found the same result: most of the students chose 'studying hard' among the four options, a good teacher, innate intelligence, home environment, and studying hard. Diligence as a virtue is usually cultivated by practice and effort rather than interacting with others. Because of these different expectations and beliefs, Chinese learners are more accustomed to passive, mechanical, routine and independent study rather than active, creative and spontaneous cooperation with peers.

One more difference found in Chinese students is their face-saving strategy, an effort to maintain good self-image in the presence of others. To avoid losing face, Chinese students are reluctant to speak English in the public and also hesitate in participating in class activities (Simpson, 2008). For fear of losing face, Chinese students usually falter when they answer teacher's questions and give presentations (Liu and Wang, 2009). According to Tan (2007)'s observation of nine English classes in a Chinese university, Chinese teachers preferred to raise lower cognitive questions based on the information from the textbook and these questions expect to elicit straightforward answers, usually in chorus because answering in chorus gives the students a sense of safety. Because of their different performance in class, Chinese students usually impress NES teachers as if they are less confident (Liu & Wang, 2009). Their *under-confidence* is also reinforced in the Chinese culture. According to Huntsinger et al (2000), Chinese American parents usually rated their children lower than their teachers did. One of the traditional Chinese virtues is to show modesty by finding fault with children when they are praised openly (Stevenson et al, 1990). The consequence of constant under-praise is likely to lead to self-denunciation which eventually reduces their confidence or at least affects the way of showing their confidence.

NES teachers as stubborn instructors

Under such English teaching environments, if teachers hold biased judgment based on their own cultural backgrounds and stereotypes, NES teachers who teach in China will inevitably encounter conflicts in their teaching and in their relationship with their Chinese students. If 'each culture places priorities and values in different places' (Pennington, 1985, p. 31), the cultural bias seems to be unavoidable. The different cultural value is one of important reasons that blocks the introduction of Western teaching approaches into Chinese schools. One of the conflicts in English teaching is found in the competition between Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and the Traditional Chinese Method (TCM) (Simpson, 2008). It is often argued whether CLT is an effective approach in Chinese classrooms (ibid) because it is mainly an approach used in the context of English as a second language (ESL) and is built upon the ideals of 'autonomy and egalitarianism, self-reliance and individualism' (Li, 1994, p. 84) and it stresses appropriate and fluent use of English by involving learners to accomplish tasks in initiative and interactive ways (Maley, 1984).Such a teaching philosophy runs counter to Chinese cultural and educational norms that places teacher as the authority and students as passive followers. Another question we need to keep in mind is what specific purposes Chinese students have for learning English. For the majority of Chinese students, one of the primary reasons of learning English is preparing for various high stake exams and these exams serve as 'gatekeepers to success more than assessors of success' (Simpson, 2008, p. 385). Because of the important reason, Chinese students and teachers still stick to TCM, which places more emphasis on teaching English lexical and syntactic knowledge in teacher-centered classroom (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996). The fierce competition in these exams also finds its way into curriculum and eventually affects students' motivation. Besides, English exams in China are usually based on knowledge rather than skills because 'knowledge bits are more easily tested than skills are' (ibid, 388). Anderson (1993) reminded Western NES teachers that:

> While the communicative approach may be the best way of training those from other language backgrounds here in the United States and the most efficient kind of training for those who need to be a part of our culture, it may not meet the needs of others in distant lands, who are learning English for a different purpose and who have no hope of ever visiting our country and no desire to adopt our culture (p. 471).

By studying the beliefs of three groups of American undergraduates learning German, French and Spanish, Horwitz (1988) found that if learners differed considerably from teachers' expectations,

learners' satisfaction with the course, confidence in learning and sense of achievement might be affected. She pointed out that students' belief would play a decisive role in their performance in foreign language instruction with communicative approach. She explained:

> Many teachers using communicative approaches have encountered students who complain if their every mistake is not corrected, or if the teacher requires them to say something they have not practiced. At the same time, students who value the communication of meaning over grammatical accuracy may bristle when their utterances are corrected constantly. (p. 290)

Thus, Horwits suggested that teachers were responsible for students' clear understanding of the reasons and purposes of classroom activities to guarantee their active participation. Based on the questionnaire replies by 288 American university students about their belief of learning French as a foreign language, Kern (1995) found out that previous learning affected students' perception of how to learn a foreign language. If this finding is universally applicable, NES teachers first need to have a clear understanding about their Chinese university students' preconceived notion of learning English, which is notoriously teacher-centered at secondary schools because of the pressure to prepare for national college entrance examination. Peacock (1999) focused on the belief of first-year university students in Hong Kong. She surveyed 202 students and cautioned that mismatch of beliefs between students and teachers might lead to students' frustration. For example, one of the items showed that 52% of the students believed that it is important to speak a foreign language with an excellent accent and yet only 13% percent of teachers surveyed believed so. Peacock argued that if teachers ignored their students' accent, they might feel at a loss. Another item in Peacock's finding also makes sense to NES teachers. The 71% of students she surveyed believed that aptitude was important to learn a foreign language but only 14% of them claimed that they had such aptitude. Peacock explained that students might attribute their failure to their poor aptitude and felt disheartened. If NES teachers set goal either too high or too different from students' expectations, their motivation may be negatively affected. Krashen (2002) explained that low motivation, low self-esteem, and anxiety may 'raise' the affective filter and may form a 'mental block' that prevents comprehensible input from being used for acquisition. According to his theory, if language learners are not ready for and not comfortable with a new teaching approach, teaching will not be effective because low motivation and high anxiety prevent learners from learning effectively.

However, many NES teachers are quite overoptimistic about their trick of teaching. They believe that they have the 'panacea to China's ELT problems' (Maley, 1990, p. 103) and that teaching strategies effective in ESL teaching in their home countries is also applicable to Chinese situations (Liu and Wang, 2009). Contrary to their high expectation, many NES teachers felt disappointed after their teaching experience in China. Maley (1990) found that 'large numbers of foreign language teachers returned from China with dampened enthusiasm, feelings of disappointment and in some cases bitterness and rancor' (p. 103). Li (1994) referred to the disappointment as cross-cultural frustrations in Chinese EFL classrooms and he gave two reasons for it: 'failing to understand each other's culture and unrealistically expecting complete accommodation from the other party' (p. 24). Some researchers labeled such teachers as victims of 'cultural myopia' (Tang and Absalom,1998, p. 118). These teachers may blame Chinese students for low motivation because their reluctance to participate in class activities and they may also 'force-feed' the Chinese students with what they believe the right stuff to teach. For example, in Liu and Wang (2009)'s study, they observed two American teachers teaching oral English to Chinese university students. They set typical American examples that were quite unfamiliar with Chinese students. For example, when talking about traveling, one of teachers asked the students to discuss the benefits of RV (recreational vehicles). Students' response was not so enthusiastic. There wasn't much interaction in English between the students and many students murmured in Chinese in their discussion. Although in the interview both teachers showed a clear understanding about the Chinese students such as their poor vocabulary and little knowledge of the United States, they didn't attempt to adapt their teaching representations to them. This is usually the case when Western NES teachers subconsciously or unconsciously assume their civilization to be superior to that in the host country just as Canagarajah (1999) contended that learning is not a 'value-free, pragmatic and egalitarian enterprise, education has lost its innocence' (p. 17).

NES teachers as effective facilitators

Effective NES teachers should teach across cultures by recognizing their historical and cultural distinction and should teach in communicative approach by considering students' needs and cognition

that can really create communication. Giffone (1999) warned Western teachers not to be 'pedagogical imperialists' (p. 40), who are blind to the variety of pedagogy. If 'one size cannot fit all' (Nguyen, Terlouw and Pilota, 2006, p. 4) and if Western models don't completely fit into Chinese students' learning habit, NES teachers should make some 'eclectic compromise with Chinese approaches' (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996, p. 75). It is certain that the teaching effect will be quite different if NES teachers have clearer understanding of their EFL students and adapt their teaching to them accordingly. On the other hand, students who have more realistic and informed beliefs are more likely to "behave productively in class, work harder outside class, and (crucially) persist longer with language study" (Mantle-Bromley, 1995, p. 373).

In light of the differences mentioned above, I suggest that NES teachers rethink and modify their concepts and teaching methods that they believe effective to ESL learners in English speaking countries. To meet Chinese students' needs, Munro-Smith (2003) implemented a model of culturally appropriate pedagogy, including "collective, high power distance, high uncertainty avoidance" (Nguyen, Terlouw and Pilota, 2006, p. 13). The culturally appropriate pedagogy consists of four essential components, i.e. epistemological, process, contextual and personalistic (Thomas, 1997). According to this model, NES teachers need to develop a proper English knowledge and they also know how to effectively apply the knowledge. When they apply, they need to keep the teaching context in mind and adjust their pedagogy to the cultural tradition in a certain culture. Personalistic component means that teachers develop their unique pedagogy driven by different motivations (Thomas 1997). The four components echo Shulman's (1987) theory of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK). Shulman (1987) defined PCK as 'the subject matter knowledge for teaching' (p. 9) and he pointed out that it is PCK that distinguishes a teacher of a subject from an expert of a subject in that a teacher is capable of transforming content knowledge into 'forms that are pedagogically powerful' (p. 15) and of making it comprehensible to learners. Shulman (1987) gave five processes that facilitate transformation: preparation, representation of ideas, instructional selection, adaptation of these representations to learners in general and tailoring the adaptation to specific learners.

In the same vein, NES teachers should also develop their own EFL pedagogical content knowledge in Chinese context. Liu and Wang (2009)'s study found how such PCK makes a difference. In their observation, an experienced NES teacher, John, who had been taught in China several times, was quite adaptive to Chinese students. John always tried to associate his teaching with Chinese situation. He showed his picture taken on the Great Wall and he introduced himself by mentioning his Chinese name. When he believed a word was difficult, he would stop to explain it and asked the students to read after him. Before the students' presentation, he asked each of them to talk to him first in private so that he could correct any mistakes, which, in his words, could avoid losing face when they presented in the class and also could avoid the students' talking in Chinese when they discussed a topic. Harvey (1985)'s study concluded that NES teachers should not force-feed their Chinese students. He found that the Chinese students had a great willingness to participate in different activities, especially if the rationale was explained clearly to them. He balanced grammatical explanation with communicative approach and he explained that NES teachers without much knowledge of language had 'done more harm than good in China' (p. 185). White (1989) also managed to blend Chinese learning style into her communicative teaching approach. She first negotiated with her students to inquire about their needs. Meanwhile, she also strived to make each step clear in what she called 'structured approach' so that the students gradually developed more confidence and willingness to participate in classroom activities. Another NES teacher, Forseth (1991), intended to overcome students' fear by a step-by-step approach and by rewarding and challenging his students. He explained his approach clearly and developed a progressive but challenging lesson plan. Before the students performed, he showed examples and his students participated in a relieving and controlled atmosphere.

Researchers also offered suggestions to those who would teach in China. First, teachers should set aside regular office hours or devote some time after class so that those who are too shy or reticent to talk in class could seek extra chance for practice (Tang and Absalom, 1998). Second, in giving feedback, encouragement would produce better effect criticism (Mark, 2003). Third, always write important messages on the board (Simpson, 2008) and repeat or paraphrase new words or phrases. Fourth, don't feel frustrated if your questions elicit no response. Instead, ask students the questions directly (Wong, 2000) or by their name (Liu and Wang, 2009). Finally, since language is inseparable from culture, teachers will inevitably integrate Western culture into their class but the right way to do is to express Western ideology and culture in a 'non-confrontational way' (Simpson, 2008, p. 390).

Conclusion

Effective English teaching depends on teaching contexts. Good teachers are those who not only possess subject matter knowledge and pedagogical knowledge but also know how to adapt their teaching according to different students and situations (Shulman, 1987). They understand 'what makes the learning of specific topics easy or difficult: the conceptions and preconceptions that students of different ages and backgrounds bring with them to the learning of those most frequently taught topics and lessons' (Shulman, 1986, p. 9). Shelton (2007) says we (English teachers) should not only give a voice to students but we all benefit from those voices. 'To take away a student's voice is to lose his or her unique gift we could have received' (p. 70). NES teachers will be better prepared and English teaching will be mutually beneficial if NES teachers are equipped with gadgets that can soften and relieve the conflicts between them and their Chinese students and if also they can be more multicultural.

Notes

- This statistic number was announced by the vice-minister of education of China in the Second International Forum on China English Education in 2005.

- Han, Yu (768～824 AD), Chinese philosopher in Tang Dynasty

- Data is based on a survey conducted in 2002 at one of the key universities located in central China to 7000 undergraduates to obtain the students' evaluation of English teaching.

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