

# Teaching Young Children English as a Foreign Language in China

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## Introduction

The learning of English as a foreign language in China has been gaining popularity and importance as China opens its doors economically and culturally to the outside world at large. Remarkable changes and achievements have been made across the country in order to improve students' English proficiency levels. However, Chinese students' English proficiency is rather limited due to various factors such as educational resources, individual personality, and teaching effectiveness. Teaching English as a second language in China still leaves much to be desired (Zhou, 2003). The first section of this paper tends to provide general situation of English in China under the current situation. English has enjoyed great popularity during the last two decades since open-up policy was adopted in China. The second section is to discuss the characteristics of English learners in China. Due to the traditional cultural influence which is deeply rooted in Chinese people's mind, Chinese students are more passive, reflective and obedient to teachers compared with the students from western countries. The third section deals with the distinctions between Chinese language and English language, which will be helpful for English teachers in China. Once English teachers have a good command of these differences between English and Chinese, they will find it easy to deal with the English class effectively. The fourth section is regarding examination culture and English curriculum in China. Tough examinations in China are to cause great pressure in effective English teaching. The paper concludes with providing useful and effective strategies for English language teachers in China. It is of great significance to take various factors into consideration when it comes to English teaching in China.

## English in China today

English has enjoyed world-wide popularity in the recent several decades. There has been a clear recognition of English as an important resource that the nation can harness in its drive to modernization (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). In the last 25 years, English has been gaining importance and popularity at an accelerated rate in the People's Republic of China (PRC) (Hu, 2002). English is perceived as a key to promoting international exchange, acquiring scientific knowledge and technological expertise, fostering economic process, and participating in international competition (Ross, 1992). Because of the superior prestige, English has accrued in relation to the nation's modernization program and English language teaching has received a great deal of attention (Hu, 2002). Within the general context of the country's increasingly active involvement in the process of economic globalization and international cooperation, it comes to no surprise that English has assumed a position of unprecedented importance in Chinese education. When addressing a 1996 conference in Beijing on English instruction in China, Mr Li Lan Qing, vice premier of the State Council, asserted that the urgent improvement of English proficiency of Chinese people in general was not merely an educational issue, but an issue associated with the modernization of the country (Brieger & Comfort, 1996). In colleges and universities in China, English is a compulsory course which all students are required to follow for two years. The National College English Test, which began in 1987 to assess the implementation of the College English Syllabus and to promote English language learning, is one of the most important tests nationwide with candidates now reaching 6 million annually (Committee, 2000).

With the initiative of modernization programme in the late 1970s and subsequent transformations in political, economic, social domains have brought rapid economic development and an escalation of commercial, technological and cultural exchanges with other parts of the world. English has contributed to these changes and developments by serving as a vital link between China and outside world (Maley, 1995). With China's increasing presence in international affairs and growing importance in global economy, there has been an unprecedented demand for proficiency in English (Wu, 2001). English is on the whole one of the well-taught and well-researched subjects in China. English is viewed as a required test subject in the

national entrance examinations for colleges and universities, notably to PhD programmes. English learning and teaching in terms of its standard usage, teachers place the emphasis on accuracy, appropriateness and fluency. Because of the superior national, social and economic prestige that proficiency in English has accrued, English learning has received a great deal of attention from the government, the educational sector, students, parents and society at large (Hu, 2002a; Ross, 1993).

## Characteristics of young learners in China

On the basis of a series of studies of L2 learning, Jakobovits suggests that the learners' factors determine speed or success to a far greater degree than other factors (Jakobovits, 1970). Learner characteristics play a dominant role in determining and predicting L2 learning speed and success. There are two traditional conceptions about L2 learning which are relevant to a discussion of learner characteristics: Children are better L2 learners than adults; There is such a thing as a special 'knack' or 'talent' for L2 learning-aptitude in the jargon which not everybody possesses to the same degree (Theo, Theo, Guus, Charles, & Anne-Mieke, 1984). It has been widely observed that children learn second languages more easily and more proficiently than do adults. After settling in another language community, children seem to be very efficient in picking up the new language, while their parents often seem to experience great difficulty in acquiring the same level of L2 proficiency as their children. In this case, motivation is probably the most often used catch-all term for explaining the success or failure of virtually any complex task (Brown, 1980). Most psychologists would agree that a theory of human motivation concerns itself with 'those factors that energize behaviour and give it direction' (Hilgard, 1999). It is necessary to look into children's characteristics in language learning.

Children depend on adults (teachers and parents) for material support, spiritual support, psychological support and life management (Lohff, 1997). They are other-directed rather than self-directed. Children perceive the most important role in life to be that of learners instead of doers. To a large degree, children are told and forced to learn English. It is rarely for children to argue a specific idea, because they just regard the established contents thoroughly right and they seldom stand up to challenge an idea which is already proved right by adults. Children learning groups are likely to be

composed of persons with the same age, from similar socioeconomic background(Phillips, 1993).It seems to them that time has nothing to do with them, therefore they are less concerned about the effective use of time. Lacking life and social experience, children have no idea how to relate what they are learning to the life experience. Generally, children are able to learn language more quickly than (Brumfit, 1991) adults (Brumfit, 1991). They are more susceptible to accept new information and adapt their view to the new environment. They seldom reject new information which may contradict their beliefs. Partly, children believe that they learn English because English learning is useful to their future life. Their readiness to learn is related to both academic development and biological development. Children are often externally motivated by the promise of good grades, praise from teachers and parents. A young child is very active and has a short attention span. The world around children is so attractive that they are occupied with their stimuli. Their emotions can change from one stage to another within a matter of seconds.

When compared with motivation, personality factors have received scant attention in the literature on the relationship between affective characteristics and L2 learning. Those personality traits that seem to have been most widely researched are extroversion and empathy (Theo, Theo, Guus, Charles, & Anne-Mieke, 1984). When asked to describe a typically extrovert pupil a teacher would probably use labels such as outgoing, adventuresome, talkative, sociable. Introverted pupil would very likely be described as being reserved, shy and quiet. It is a popular belief that extroverts are better language learners than introverts, but the literature shows the relationship between extroversion and L2 achievement to be a very complex one. It is of great significance for language teachers to have a good knowledge of characteristics of language learners, thus tailoring the materials to meet the different needs of students.

## Chinese & English

Language is at the core of a culture. It is central to communication and closely related to thought (Schmitt, Pan, & Tavassoli, 1994). Whereas behaviours, attitudes, and values change over time, the structure of language such as its grammar, the type of writing system, and the relation between the spoken and written words remains largely unchanged (Tse, Belk, & Zhou, 1989). Like other languages in the Asia-

Pacific region, Chinese is based on a system of ideographs, whereas English, like other Western languages, is based on an alphabet. The English alphabet consists of meaningless symbols (letters) whose orthography represents the pronunciation of words. Not surprisingly, phonological aspects are dominant in the processing of English. English speakers phonologically recode (subvocalize) written words and rehearse words phonologically in short-term memory's phonological loop (Baddeley, 1986; McCusker, Hillinger, & Bias, 1981). Both spoken and written English words, the primary mental code appears to be phonological (Van & Guy, 1987).

Language processing differs considerably in Chinese. A literate Chinese reader needs to distinguish upward of 7000 characters, or logographs, which represent one-syllable morphemes. These characters have only a loose orthographic-phonemic correspondence and their pronunciation is acquired via rote associative learning. In Chinese, semantic access is unmediated by phonology, and written and spoken Chinese words appear to rely to a greater degree on a visual code (Perfetti & Laura, 1988; Zhang, 1995). For example, whether words are initially learned spoken or written, written memory retrieval is superior to spoken memory retrieval for Chinese brand names, and vice versa for English brand names (Schmitt, Pan, & Tavassoli, 1994). Similarly, Chinese consumers have been found to be more sensitive to visual elements such as font, whereas English consumers were found to be more sensitive to auditory cues such as a speaker's voice (Schmitt, Pan, & Tavassoli, 1994).

Chinese is a group of related languages that are mutually unintelligible in their spoken forms but share a common system of writing. Its main dialects are Mandarin, which is spoken in most provinces of the People's Republic of China, in Singapore, and in Taiwan. Cantonese is spoken in most provinces of the People's Republic of China and in Hong Kong. The basic unit of Chinese is the character- an arrangement of strokes that is ideographic in its origins. Most characters are composed of smaller stroke units called radicals. Characters have between 10 and 15 strokes, and each character corresponds to a definite spoken syllable. In contrast, the basic unit of English writing is the letter, and the entire English alphabet consists of only 26 letters with simple strokes. English words are typically composed of two or more syllables consisting of a string of letters. Most Chinese words also consist of two syllables and thus two characters. Although the two component characters often exists as individual words,

many two-character Chinese have a definite meaning that cannot easily be understood from a knowledge of the meaning of the component characters. For example, the two-character word ‘zuo dong’, which means ‘host’ and ‘to pay for an expense’, typically a meal, is composed of ‘zuo’ (do) and ‘dong( east). Moreover, Chinese pronunciation is tonal in nature. Each tone is associated with the vowel in each syllable, and tonal patterns of vowels signify meaning. Chinese has a large number of phonemes which correspond to several homonymous characters. For example, ‘gong’ with a high tone corresponds to at least 10 characters with distinct meanings, including ‘work’, ‘bow’, ‘public’, ‘meritorious service’, ‘attack’, ‘supply’, ‘palace’, ‘respectful’ and a surname.

The most important is that an English word is typically related to the orthographic structure of the word-spelling maps morphological and to some degree phonemic identities, while the Chinese language is characterized by its loose orthographic-phonemic correspondence. In English, on the other hand, pronunciation and writing are linked by rules: a native speaker can not possibly read a word spelled ‘cat’ as ‘dog’, because the sequence of the letters c, a and t corresponds to certain sounds. In Chinese, however, characters consisting of similar strokes are usually not pronounced in a similar manner. For example, the following word pairs differ by only one radical, but their pronunciation and meanings are completely different: ‘geng’ (third tone), meaning tough, versus ‘liang’ (second tone), meaning good; and ‘mu’( fourth tone), meaning tree. Similarly, words with one-stroke differences can have entirely different meanings and pronunciations, such as ‘guang’ (third tone), meaning wide, versus ‘chang’ (third tone), meaning plant; and ‘zhi’ (fourth tone), meaning to cure. It has presented the linguistic differences between Chinese and English. When it comes to teaching English as a second language in China, Chinese culture and educational system can not be ignored.

## Examination culture and English curriculum in China

The examination culture can be traced back to ancient China. The Chinese view of education has been much influenced by Confucianism (Feng, 1999). There are some characteristics worthy of discussion. Firstly, Confucius was a great thinker and educator in ancient China and he attached great importance to education and looked on it as an important way to turning a poor person with low social class into a

‘superior’ one. Secondly, education is not only dealing with the intellectual development but also moral and aesthetic development. The curriculum Confucius designed for his disciples was oriented towards literature, behaviour, loyalty and tact, and exhibited a combination of moral and intellectual education (Hofstede, 1986). One of the central ideas is that education has a moral component also. Traditionally, moral education included teaching how to relate to other people in society and cultivating moral virtues (Simpson, 1997). In China, people accept that knowledge and morality are power. Given this modest virtue, those people who have been successful in the academic field typically never show off their success or achievement, otherwise they would be regarded as complacent. Thirdly, education has been traditionally seen as the process of accumulating knowledge instead of applying the knowledge to the practice. It is possible to argue that the Chinese conception of useful knowledge has been regarded as the process of knowledge accumulating rather than knowledge application.

One feature of Chinese educational culture is emphasis on maintaining the hierarchical relation between teachers and students. Students are expected to respect teachers and never challenge what their teachers have stated. This view is well explained by one popular saying in China, that is ‘if someone taught you as a teacher for one day, you should respect him as your father for the rest of your life’ (*yi ri wei shi , zhong shen wei fu*) (Wu, 2001).

The role of a teacher is to ensure that all the students make progress in the academic field. This is the most important responsibility for a teacher to assume. If the student fails to receive what the teacher has taught, to some degree, it will be seen as the teacher’s failure to motivate the students, to deliver the class effectively, and to present clearly the content of the textbook. To make sure that knowledge can be transmitted correctly and appropriately, the teacher must have already mastered a great deal of the contents and have effective skills to impart his or her knowledge to students. He or she is a good teacher who can help students to obtain high scores in the final examination by transmitting the knowledge to students and introducing the examination skills.

Students must have a positive attitude to their study and make great efforts on the schoolwork. They should respect the knowledge their teachers have imparted to them, and seldom challenge the knowledge in the textbook. It is responsibility of the students to have high academic achievement to bring pride to their families. High scores in the examination guarantee a good opportunity to further study in the near future for high school students. The English curriculum is one of most important courses in high school, if he or she fails or gets low marks in the university entrance examination. It is more likely for him or her to miss the chance to go to university or college. In this case, they only have an access to go to evening school or adult-continuing school. Therefore, to gain these opportunities, high school students must take learning seriously, prepare to sacrifice extra-curriculum or social activities for the sake of study. They have to spend a great amount of time and energy on their study.

Curriculum reform in English has taken place in the People's Republic of China since the mid-1980s. In the last twenty years, China has witnessed the rapid economic development and the increasing exchange with the western countries in the fields of economy, culture, and technology. This has resulted in the high demand for English proficiency. On the national level, English is perceived by the government as a necessary means for helping the nation to further open-up, a valuable resource for realising its modernization programme, and an important cornerstone of international competition (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). Personally, mastery of English is a key to the opportunity to obtaining a satisfactory foreign-funded job, studying abroad, being admitted by the top university, and promotion in employment.

In China, secondary or tertiary education aims at the economic development and comprehensive national strength. The English curriculum designed in the secondary school aims to prepare the future generation in China to learn western scientific and technological know-how, which is conducive to the rapid development for the country. There is no doubt that English is a core subject in secondary education. In 1978, the Ministry issued a trial English syllabus for secondary schools. The people's education press published a series of textbooks for the secondary educational English courses in the same year. In 1982, the syllabus was revised and the key points of English learning in secondary school rest on the systemic and detailed study of sentence-level grammar, extensive use of translation, memorizing as many words as



possible, and emphasizing the written language. One survey showed that the majority of the secondary students have acquired a low level of grammar, and understanding of about 2000 English words for several years of studying. They are still poor at speaking and using what they have learned in class in real world interaction. This is part of the reason for poor quality of English teaching in secondary school. The major reason is that educators in high school pay little attention to the oral practice which is not required in the college entrance examination.

In China, students in high school are divided into two categories: the quick learning class and the slow learning class on the basis of the scores of the terminal examinations in middle school. Teachers in high school pay more attention to the quick learning students who are expected to enter the top universities. The students' performance is crucial to the way the teachers are assessed. Some students are too pressured by the examination and will go to extremes, such as committing suicide. It is no surprise to find that the majority of the high school students dislike school and drop-out of school. In 1985, the Ministry of Education convened a conference on reforming the national college entrance examination (Education, 2000). Largely based on the proposal made at the conference, a number of influential decisions were made to promote test reforms. First, experimentation was to be made with the implementation of competency examinations in senior secondary schools as a more all-rounded assessment of all students' achievements (Education, 2000). Shanghai was chosen to pilot the competency examination. This examination reform has been applied nation-wide. To facilitate the experiment, Shanghai has the right to administer its own version of national college entrance examination and textbooks (Education, 2000).

The English test in high school in Shanghai was more focused on the language skill than the national Matriculation English test. Various kind of tests in English have been trialled in high school in Shanghai such as moving from a teacher-centred examination to learner-centered examination (Cooper, 1997). However, this change appears difficult to use nationwide because of the country's large population.

## Strategies for English teaching in China

Given that the class size most unlikely to be reduced in the foreseeable future due to the large population in China, teachers are expected to come to terms with their problems (Hayes, 1997). However there are some advantages in large class English teaching in China: personal and material resources can be saved, and if properly practised, large classes can be suitable to the learning styles and preferences commonly found among Chinese students, namely in group inclination, reluctance to 'stand out', teacher authority and teacher centeredness (Littlewood, 1998, pp. 71-94). People have varying opinions in how 'large' the number of students should be in a so called 'large class'. There can be no quantitative definition of what constitutes a 'large' class, as perceptions of this will vary from context to context (Hayes, 1997). Most teachers tend to view teaching English in large classes rather negatively. They often associate large English classes with disorders, lack of control, lack of students' attentiveness, lack of teacher-student interactions, and lack of efficiency and effectiveness. As is hold that the number of students in class surpassing certain number will lead to difficulty in 'control what happens' (Kennedy & Kennedy, 1996). However, Learning in large classes in China needs to be understood not only in terms of patterns, but also in terms of underlying cultural values (Jin & Martin, 1998). In other words, Chinese students may not, to some extent, feel learning in large classes uncomfortable because large classes seem to suit their cultural characteristics more than small classes do. Since Chinese students tend to obey the teachers, and wait until they are being asked even in small classes, the teachers of large classes should make their teaching more of a lecture based or transmission style. In large classes, the teaching of knowledge is as important as the teaching of learning methods. Most teachers agree that telling the students how to fish is more important than merely giving them some fish, no matter how many fish they can give their students.

A good language class has an atmosphere of 'a feeling of warmth', 'mutual support', 'an absence of fear', 'a safe environment', 'a feeling of comfort', 'mutual respect', 'people mindful of other people's abilities and limitations', 'a feeling of cooperation'. Therefore, teachers of large classes should take advantage of this, and build up a collaborative and lively learning atmosphere (Senior, 1997). To build up a good learning atmosphere in large classes is feasible to take advantage of the large class size. Warming up period of a lesson in large classes can be very important. At this stage, the teacher can assign a number of students to write down a few sayings or

proverbs on the board well before the class begins. The teacher then starts the lesson by explaining or giving a few remarks on the sayings or proverbs. The teachers can also make students write down short poems of their own, which can better attract the attention of the large class. These warming up activities motivate students, arouse students' interests and associations with the texts and improve their thinking skills.(Yang, 1999)

For English language learners, visual teaching aids help them attach meaning and mental images to words and concepts through nonverbal means (Carrier, 2005; Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 2003). Diverse students often are in various stages of proficiency in the English language, teachers must become skilled in presenting information in ways that are less dependent on language. Visuals such as pictures, photographs, drawings, diagrams, and graphic organizers are highly effective when teaching students who are not auditory learners. Research has found that diverse students benefit immensely when they have the opportunity to interact with materials, participate in activities, and manipulate objects and equipment (Watson, Pettus, & Fairchild, 2001). Hands-on instructional activities that employ multiple senses make learning more meaningful for students. Teachers are expected to use varieties of hands-on teaching approaches to meet the different needs of individual students. Through laboratories, demonstrations, educational games, and simulations will have provided many opportunities for students to be engaged actively in the learning process.

Cooperative learning is an instructional strategy that is supported by a wealth of research and has been found to be highly effective in English language learning classroom (Slavin, 1991). In cooperative learning, students are placed in heterogeneous group usually comprised of five or six students and they work together on a common goal. Because cooperative learning groups require that learners interact and communicate with each other on a work-related task, students who is less proficient in English learning are able to gain chances to learn from those who have a good command of English and enhance their linguistic and communication skills (Crandall, Jaramillo, Olsen, & Peyton, 2001; Curtin, 2006). Given that the Chinese educational system and cultural influence, these teaching methodologies will be successfully applicable to the English language classes.

## Summary

China has the largest number of learners of English as a foreign language in the world (Crystal, 1985). On adopting the policy of open-up to the outside world, English has served as a significant tool for international communication. However, it is not easy to teaching English as a second language well in the context of Chinese current education which has been widely influence by ancient Confucian ideologies. There are many factors affecting the teaching English as a second language in China. For example, Chinese students' attitude toward the study of English is not positive. They study it because it is a compulsory course and their aim in English learning is only to pass the examination. In addition, young learners in China are with varieties of personalities due to the different family background and individual characters, which put the language teachers under great pressure in dealing with them appropriately. Generally speaking, Chinese has nothing to do with English in terms of phonology and phonetics. To teach English with great success in China is hard for most of English teachers. Chinese examinational culture is so tough that a large number of students are lead to develop a negative attitude toward the study of English. What is more, China boasts a large population which makes a large-size class with 50 or 60 students. It is of great significance to come up with some effective teaching strategies for English teachers. There still remain many tough issues to be addressed in the near future in terms of the teaching of English as a second language in China.

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