

Published in Pp. 249-257 in *Education in China: Educational History, Models, and Initiatives*, edited by Q Zha. Great Barrington, MA: Berkshire Publishing Group [2013].

Foreign Language Education

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Foreign language education, especially when it results in English competency, is seen as playing a vital role in realising China's Four Modernisations, especially in providing access to modern scientific and technological advancements. At the same time the spread of English competence promotes business and international trade, as well as enhancing China's international status in a globalised world. An English-competent person in today's China has social and educational capital, and access to economic capital through improved employment opportunities, higher salary, increased promotion chances and the possibility of further education. Because English-language education enjoys such a prominent position in China since the 1980s many aspects of it have recently been subject to incremental reform and improvement, through policy changes, syllabus renewal, curriculum renovation and class-room practices. In earlier times policy and syllabi were more erratic. Each of these issues will be considered below.

Policy.

Language policy directly impacts on syllabus, choice of foreign language to be taught and the position of foreign languages in the curriculum. Policy concerning foreign language education has undergone a clear shift of emphasis from the period 1950s to 1970s, during which a political orientation was paramount, to the period from the 1980s to the present, during which time an economic orientation has tended to predominate. Three distinct periods representing different stages of foreign language education policy can be identified: first, a socialist construction period (1950-1965), followed by the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and finally, from 1977 to the present, the Four Modernisations period (Hayhoe 1991; Scovel 1995).

In October 1949 the People's Republic of China was founded under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. From this time China was in a 'cold war' with the Western powers and turned to Russia for both a model for building a socialist country and as an ally in redressing China's international isolation. When the Beijing Foreign Language Institute was founded in 1949 Russian became the dominant foreign language taught and studied, with the same pattern being followed by other universities and foreign language institutes. At this time, while English and other

foreign languages were taught they were totally overshadowed by Russian (Mao & Yue 2004:320; Hu 2009: 163-164).

In 1950 an ambitious national plan was announced to teach foreign languages in both junior and senior secondary school for the first time. By 1954, however, this was revised as the Ministry of Education stalled foreign language teaching in junior secondary school. Political trends determined that Russian prevailed over other foreign languages teaching in secondary schools. Between 1949 and 1956 the teaching of Russian expanded to such a level that the number of graduates exceeded demand (Lam 2005: 75). At the same time antipathy to colonialism and imperialism meant that it was politically difficult to specialize in the teaching of Western European languages, even though these languages did have a minor place in the curriculum.

During the period 1957 to 1965 China's relationship with Russia cooled, while there occurred at the same time a slight thaw in its previously icy relations with the West. In 1957 a new draft syllabus for teaching English in junior high schools was distributed. By 1959 the Ministry of Education announced that 'better' junior secondary schools would teach foreign languages, one-third of these schools were to teach Russian and two-thirds to teaching English and other languages. At the same time the Ministry of Education announced an increase in English-language teacher training as well as an expansion of English classes in high schools (Lam 2005: 75-76). This shift of policy meant that English gained a new prominence in foreign language education and became the principal foreign language taught in higher education.

The ten years of Cultural Revolution in China, from 1966 to 1976, affected all education throughout the country, including the depletion of the teaching and learning of foreign languages. From 1966, classrooms in schools and lecture-rooms in universities were emptied with large numbers of students and teachers sent to the countryside to be 're-educated' through arduous manual labour. A new slogan swept through the country in 1967, 'bu xue ABC, zhaoyang gan geming', meaning 'revolution can be made without learning ABC'.

China changed again in 1971 when it joined the United Nations. In the same year US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger visited China, followed by a visit in 1972 from US President Richard Nixon. These developments signalled a new relationship with the United States and a new interest in English-language teaching. In 1971 the Beijing Foreign Language Institute began to recruit increased numbers of students to foreign language education, especially English. Politics continued to predominate, however, as entry was limited to those from worker, peasant, soldier or revolutionary cadre backgrounds. Thus ideological and class 'correctness' was more important than the educational preparation of students and therefore the quality of teaching and learning. As a result foreign language education did not reach a level of competence that the deployment of resources at the time might have suggested (Ross 1993: 59).

Further reforms in education were introduced in 1977, including reinstatement of admission to higher education by examination rather than class background. Deng Xiaoping's policy of Four Modernizations was announced in 1978, which led to reforms in all areas of Chinese society and economy, and to China 'opening its doors' to the world, leading to foreign imports and Chinese exports, including large numbers of Chinese citizens studying abroad and also engaging in economic migration, as well as the welcoming of Westerners studying and working in China. In recognising the significant role to be played by foreign-language – and especially English – education in realising the Four Modernizations (Adamson & Morris 1997), the Ministry of Education held a foreign-language education symposium in 1978 at which a statement

was issued addressing the importance of foreign language education for China's future development. Additional support for foreign language teaching in both primary and secondary schools was announced in 1979 and English was declared the principal foreign language to be taught in secondary school. Guidelines for teaching English in primary school were also made public at this time.

Thus it can be seen how the different stages of China's development are reflected in its foreign-language education policy. The above summary has highlighted the shift in focus from Russian (1949-1956) to English (1957-1965), then the collapse of foreign language education (1966-1970), and the slow but clear return to limited foreign language education (1971-1976) followed by renewal (1977-1980s), and finally concerted and wide promotion (1990s-present). There is also a change in emphasis, in foreign language education as in all things, from political and ideological correctness (better to be 'red' than 'expert') to attention to the technical quality of teaching and learning.

Curriculum.

The current dominant position of English-language teaching in China can be gauged by recognizing that while more than fifty foreign languages were offered in China's tertiary institutions by 2008, English is taught in 1000 or more faculties, Japanese in 385, German and French each in 70, and Spanish in 14 (Dai 2008). Arabic languages are mainly studied in the northern interior of China, while Vietnamese and other Indo-China languages are popular in southern regions (Lam 2005: 120).

During the period of socialist construction, from 1949, foreign language education in China was delivered by rote learning, it was teacher-centred, with grammar-translation underlying the dominant method of instruction. Students taught at this time through these methods typically acquired a narrow range of competence in English listening, and reading and writing, but generally lacked the ability to effectively communicate in the language. From this low base improvement has been made after the 1980s by incorporating modern Western theories and foreign language education methodology, leading to qualitatively better outcomes in foreign language teaching and learning in China.

Since the 1990s, even earlier in some metropolitan areas such as Beijing and Shanghai, there has been development in curricula design from a focus on a narrow range of knowledge acquirement to more sophisticated communicative competence, and also from a teacher-centred approach to a learner-centred approach. At the same time there has been modification in the broad curriculum of university level English majors. In the earlier period language specialization was narrowly conceived whereas since the late 1990s language skills are taught to enhance composite abilities, so that English language education is combined with vocational subjects such as diplomacy, commerce, state security, and so on.

The emphasis of the non-English major tertiary syllabus in the 1980s was on the passive skills of listening and reading, grammar and translation, and again a teacher-centred approach was encouraged. A new syllabus issued in 1999 gave emphasis to the development of students' productive skills, especially speaking and writing, and to communicative competence in authentic situations. Needless to say, a student-centred approach was now also promoted. In the 1990s syllabi for English majors also moved in the direction of strengthening students' communicative competence. These syllabi upheld the importance of the skills of reading, writing, translation and thesis writing, and students were encouraged to cultivate cultural knowledge. In a revised 2000 syllabus English majors were encouraged to undertake

multi-disciplinary courses, including foreign affairs, education, culture and technology. The direction here was to generate graduates with composite expertise both in English and also a particular non-language subject area or profession.

Reforms such as these were implemented not only in tertiary education but also in primary and secondary schools. In 1992, 1993 and 1996 national secondary English syllabi were issued which emphasised cultivation of communicative competence in English, fostering learner autonomy and the development of various intellectual abilities. Just prior to these developments economically developed provinces as well as the centrally administered municipalities of Beijing and Shanghai were granted autonomy to develop their own English curriculum, syllabi and textbooks. This move away from a situation of central control of the production of primary and secondary textbooks by the People's Education Press under the direction of the Ministry of Education meant that local education agencies could independently publish innovative and improved textbooks or teaching and learning materials, frequently by working with overseas publishers (Hu 2002a).

Perhaps the most significant development for the teaching and promotion of English was the decision in 2001 to make the subject compulsory in the nation's primary schools. Up until this time, since the mid-1980s, it had been taught in only some urban primary schools. While English has become the dominant foreign language to be taught in China's primary schools, those schools which had offered instruction in Japanese, Russian and other foreign languages have been encouraged to maintain these programs.

The basic requirements for primary school English education include the encouragement of students' interests, self-confidence and the inculcation of a positive attitude towards learning English; cultivation of students' language sense, and development of good pronunciation and intonation; and, most significantly, the development of students' preliminary ability to use English in daily exchanges and to build a basis for further study (MED Document 2001). Formative assessment is required in this new educational regime and examination-oriented evaluation is not encouraged. Specially tailored textbooks are produced to achieve these ambitious goals, serving students' needs and their cognitive development. The Ministry of Education encourages English primary teachers and school students to use satellite TV, through which training sessions for teachers and lessons to be used in class are provided.

In facilitating the implementation of new syllabi and curricula requirements efforts have been made to support teachers to apply new theories and findings in foreign language education, to improve teaching and learning, to rejuvenate classroom practices and make assessment more valid.

Teacher training.

A series of reforms have been implemented to keep class-room practices up to date with recent developments in the theory and methodology in foreign-language education. A number of pre-service and in-service professional development programs of various types are now undertaken by teachers to facilitate implementation of new curriculum and to improve teacher language proficiency and teaching strategies. Foreign-language education research institutes have been strategically established, and increasing amounts of funds and other resources have been provided to them.

Transformations in class-room practice have been in recent times undertaken in tertiary institutions and in secondary and primary schools. New teaching methods

and new teaching technologies are now available to teachers, and their application has created increased opportunities for students to develop communicative competence. In order to meet the requirements of new syllabi and the class-room methods that accompany them, pre-service and in-service courses to prepare and train primary school English teachers, as well as secondary school and university teachers, have been developed (Hu 2005; Wang 2002: 100).

These measures mentioned here required a prior expansion and restructuring of pre-service and in-service training itself. Short and long-term professional programs were developed and offered by various institutions including universities, tertiary teacher education institutions, distance education agencies, television universities and self-study education programs. More than 60% of senior secondary teachers and 91% of junior secondary teachers had acquired programmed foreign-language teaching qualifications by 2000, compared with only 26% of senior and 30% of junior secondary teachers in 1988 (Hu 2005).

Some universities have begun experimenting with the teaching of non-language subjects in English. Teachers have been encouraged to use multimedia technologies in the class room and teachers are increasingly employing multiple teaching methods in the classroom, including multi-media materials, electronic communication, computers, language labs, video clips, slides and transparencies, in the provision of authentic language situations (Kleifgen & Wang 1995).

Challenges.

In spite of the wide expansion of foreign language (mainly English) education in both primary and secondary schools, there remain a number of problems that have drawn attention in China. These include a lack of progressive transition or coherent continuity of programs and educational delivery between students' primary and secondary school experience (Wang 2002: 99). Existing textbooks are not graded in a way that prepares students for the movement from primary to secondary levels of learning. Because of the limited class time which the overall curriculum permits for language teaching, and remaining inadequacies in teaching methods, as well as the limited opportunities to apply their English-language skills, many students tend to lose their interest in acquiring English even after a frequently experienced initial stage of enthusiasm.

It must also be mentioned that the expansion of the English-language teaching program in China is hampered by a shortage of teachers and other resources, and by a gap between syllabi expectations and real classroom practices. It is recognised by both policy makers and teachers that professional development programs must be made more readily available as large numbers of foreign-language teachers remain in need of in-service training to keep them abreast of new developments in theory and methodology, to improve their language proficiency and cultural awareness, to change their approach from a knowledge-based to an ability-based teaching orientation, to move from a focus on grammar and rote learning to one emphasizing communicative strategies, from a teacher-centred to a student-centred approach, and to learn how to utilise modern teaching technologies.

In fact, many teachers fail to understand the underlying principles of recent syllabi changes, and how to properly use the new textbooks, because of insufficient pre-service preparation and inadequate in-service support (Leng 1997; Ng & Tang 1997; Jin & Cortazzi 2003). There are insufficient resources and reading material beyond the prescribed textbooks provided to teachers so that students are unable to broaden their reading experience (Wang 2002). Because students do not have access

to external materials they tend to receive vocabulary input more or less exclusively from scheduled class-room lessons (Tang & Nesi 2003). There are few opportunities for foreign-language discussions between a teacher and students in Chinese classrooms, and textbooks remain the predominant source of linguistic authority (Wang & Coleman 2009).

Although the communicative approach is widely promoted in Chinese foreign-language policy, it is not extensively implemented in the classroom, with the obvious consequence that many students are unable to communicate effectively in a foreign language (Zhu 2003). Students are frequently found to have difficulty in expressing views on a range of topics and cannot readily convey complicated thoughts or ideas. Teachers are required to ensure that the delivery of large amounts of content can be achieved so that students are able to pass examinations so that the formal requirements of curricula are satisfied. Creative learning is largely sacrificed to the pervasive practices of devouring thick textbooks and memorizing large amounts of vocabulary and rules of grammar, and drilling for exam questions (Zang & Xu 2001: 82). The prevalence of the imperative to pass different proficiency tests or examinations – for graduation or admission to tertiary study – largely overshadows processes of creative teaching and learning.

Class size is another reason why there is constraint on the implementation of communicative approaches in foreign-language teaching (Fang and Warschauer 2004). Because Chinese class size is typically 40 or more students, teacher-centred learning is more favoured than student-centred approaches in order to maintain class-room discipline and management. Under these conditions activities such as group work, pair work, oral presentation and role play are seldom conducted.

Another factor frequently mentioned in the context of concern at the limited outcomes of English-language education in China associated with teacher-centred and grammar-focused approaches still widely practiced is that Chinese students are seen as reserved, passive and silent learners (Hu 2002; Wen & Clement 2003; Yu 2001). This latter profile is explained by many researches in terms of Chinese cultural traditions and especially the Confucian model of student deference to teachers and to authority in general (Jin and Cortazzi 1998; Ting 1987). This assessment is not universally accepted, however, as there is evidence and argument that Chinese students are active learners who have interactive relationship with their teachers and participate in classroom activities (Shi 2006). Thus, rather than Chinese traditional culture, teachers' continuing habitual adherence to the grammar-translation method (Wang & Gao 2008), or inadequacies in teachers' language proficiency (Yu 2001), or a combination of teachers' lack of confidence and students' insufficient English proficiency (Cheng 2000; Huang 2005), or an absence of knowledge concerning foreign cultures (Littlewood 2000; 2001), have all been seen as playing a role in the relative absence of interactive teaching and learning in Chinese classrooms.

Future direction.

Chinese policy makers and professionals acknowledge that a number of matters must be addressed for foreign-language teaching and learning to be further improved. The quality of pre-service and in-service programs has already been mentioned in this context. The adequacy and variety of teaching and learning materials is another area in need attention. The question of teacher autonomy in the choice of teaching materials best suited to students' need is a further issue about which there is discussion among Chinese educators. Availability of foreign videos for use in class, providing students with opportunities to experience authentic language

environments, is also acknowledged as a problem. Exchange programs between Chinese and overseas universities exist in small numbers and endeavours are being made to expand them, and possibly extend them to secondary and even primary schools, so that students might have opportunities to learn native-like expression and also cultivate a sense of the use of language in real life situations.

Foreign language, especially English, proficiency testing and the extensive regime of examinations are increasingly being seen as undermining creative teaching and learning, although there is no consensus among Chinese educators that they should simply be abolished. There is, though, much agreement that the variety of assessment tasks, including projects, pair work, group work, oral presentation, and role playing, for example, might be more widely used than they are currently, in order to expand student's foreign-language abilities and skills.

It has to be recognized that remarkable achievements have been made in foreign-language education in China since 1949. When China 'opened its door' to the outside world in the 1980s the extent and speed of the expansion of foreign-language (predominantly English) education across the nation and at all levels, from university to secondary to primary schooling, has been extraordinary by any measure. The number of graduates of foreign language education increases each year and their competency is improving. There remain a number of challenges facing foreign-language education, but there is some encouragement in the fact that many of these are recognised by Chinese educators.

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