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Essentials

EDUCATION IN CHINA
Educational History, Models, and Initiatives

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Foreign Language Education

Wài yǔ jiàoyù 外语教育

China’s foreign-language education policy has shifted over the years—from the political orientation of the 1950s that favored Russian, to the economic focus of the Four Modernizations that led to English dominance in the twenty-first century. Curriculum design has evolved too, and now embraces communicative, student-centered approaches that promote composite skill development. Teacher training, innovative materials, and a creative learning environment should improve the quality of Chinese foreign language education even more.

Foreign language education—and English competency in particular—plays a vital role in China’s modernization drive. Its primary value lies in providing access to modern scientific and technological advancements, but at the same time the expansion of English proficiency among the Chinese population also promotes business and international trade and enhances China’s international status in a globalized world. A person who is able to speak English in today’s China has social and educational capital, and access to economic capital through improved employment opportunities, higher salaries, increased promotional opportunities, and the possibility of further education. Because English language education has enjoyed a prominent position in China since the 1980s, many aspects of it have been subject to incremental reform and improvement through policy changes, syllabus renewal, curriculum renovation, and revised classroom practices. Prior to the 1950s, however, government policy regarding foreign language education was more erratic—and course syllabi reflected this.

Policy

The government’s language policy directly impacts which foreign languages are taught, the class syllabus, and the position of foreign languages in the curriculum. The policy concerning foreign language education has undergone a clear shift of emphasis over the years—from the 1950s to 1970s a political orientation was paramount, whereas from the 1980s to the present 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 modernization and then globalization period (Hayhoe 1991; Scovel 1995).

Socialist Construction Period

In October 1949, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was founded under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). From this time on China was part of the Cold War with Western...
powers, and the country turned to Russia as a model for building a socialist country as well 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, and other universities and foreign language institutes followed the same pattern. Although English and other foreign languages were taught at this time, they were totally overshadowed by Russian (Mao and Yue 2004, 320; Hu 2009, 163–164).

In 1950 an ambitious national plan was announced to teach foreign languages in both junior (grades seven through nine) and senior (grades ten through twelve) secondary school for the first time. By 1954, however, the plan had been revised as the Ministry of Education (MOE) stalled foreign language teaching in junior secondary school. The political climate determined that Russian prevailed over other foreign languages in secondary schools. Between 1949 and 1956, in fact, 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, although these languages did have a minor place in the curriculum.

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

THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

The years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) affected all education throughout the country and were characterized by a decline in the teaching and learning of foreign languages. Beginning in 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" (zhì jiào yù 再教育) through arduous manual labor. A new slogan swept through the country in 1967: "bù xué ABC, zhòng yáng gén gèng míng 不学 ABC, 照样干革命" — meaning, "revolution can be made without learning ABCs."

Change came again in 1971 when China joined the United Nations. The US secretary of state Henry Kissinger visited China in the same year, followed by a visit in 1972 from President Richard Nixon. These developments signaled a new relationship with the United States and a new interest in the teaching of English. In 1971 the Beijing Foreign Language Institute began to recruit increasing numbers of students to learn foreign languages, especially English. Politics continued to predominate, however, as entry was limited to those from worker, peasant, soldier, or revolutionary cadre backgrounds. Ideological and class "correctness" thus was more important than the educational preparation of students, and therefore also more important than the quality of teaching and learning. As a result, foreign language education did not reach a level of competence that might otherwise have been expected from the resources deployed (Ross 1993, 59).

MODERNIZATION AND GLOBALIZATION

Further reforms in education were introduced in 1977, including the reinstatement of higher-education admission standards based on examination rather than class background. Deng Xiaoping announced the policy of Four Modernizations 四个现代化 in 1978, which led to reforms in all areas of Chinese society and the economy, and to China "opening its doors" to the world. Foreign imports and Chinese exports followed, including large numbers of Chinese citizens studying abroad and engaging in economic migration, as well as Westerners who were welcomed to study and work in China. In recognition of the significant role to be played by foreign language—and especially English—education in realizing the Four Modernizations (Adamson and Morris 1997), the MOE held a foreign-language education symposium in 1978 at which a statement was issued addressing the importance of foreign language education in China's development. It announced additional support for foreign language teaching in both primary and secondary schools in 1979, and designated English as the principal foreign language to be taught in secondary school. Guidelines for teaching English in primary school were also made public at this time.

The different stages of China's development thus are reflected in its foreign-language education policy. The preceding summary shows the shift from Russian (1949–1956) to English (1957–1965), the collapse of foreign language education (1966–1976), the slow but clear return to limited foreign language education (1971–1976) followed by renewal (1977 through the 1980s), and finally concerted and wide promotion (1990s to the present). As with everything else
during these developmental stages, the evolution in foreign language education was accompanied by a change in emphasis from political and ideological correctness (better to be “Red” than expert) to a focus on the technical quality of teaching and learning.

Curriculum

China’s tertiary institutions offered more than 50 foreign languages in 2008, but English currently holds the dominant position and is taught in 1,000 or more faculties, compared to 385 for Japanese, 70 each for German and French, and 14 for Spanish (Dai 2008). Students in the northern interior of China study mainly Arabic languages, while those in southern regions favor Vietnamese and other Indo-China languages (Lam 2005, 120).

AN EVOLVING DESIGN

During the period of socialist construction from 1950 to 1965, foreign languages were taught by rote using a teacher-centered model, with grammar and translation underlying the dominant method of instruction. Students taught at this time and with these methods typically acquired a narrow range of competence in English listening, reading, and writing, but generally lacked the ability to communicate effectively in the language. After the 1980s instruction plans incorporated modern Western theories and foreign-language education methodology, leading to qualitatively better outcomes in foreign language teaching and learning in China.

Since the 1990s (or even earlier in metropolitan areas such as Beijing and Shanghai), curricula design has evolved from focusing on a narrow range of knowledge acquisition to aim for a more sophisticated communicative competence, and has shifted from a teacher-centered approach to a learner-centered approach. At the same time the broad curriculum of university-level English majors has been modified: whereas language specialization previously was narrowly conceived, since the late 1990s language skills have been taught to enhance composite abilities—meaning that English language education is combined with vocational subjects such as diplomacy, commerce, state security, and so on.

Composite Expertise

The syllabus of the 1980s for non-English majors in tertiary institutions emphasized grammar, translation, and the passive skills of listening and reading, delivered through a teacher-centered approach. In 1999 the MOE issued a new syllabus that stressed developing students’ productive skills, especially speaking and writing, and fostering communicative competence in authentic situations. Needless to say, the syllabus also promoted a student-centered approach. As noted above, in the 1990s syllabi for English majors also moved in this direction. These syllabi valued skill in reading, writing, translation, and thesis writing, and students were encouraged to cultivate cultural knowledge. In the revised syllabus for the year 2000 English majors were encouraged to take multidisciplinary courses—including foreign affairs, education, culture, and technology—with the goal of generating graduates with composite expertise both in English and a specific non-language subject area or profession.

Fostering Innovation

These kinds of reforms were implemented not only in tertiary education but also in primary and secondary schools. The national secondary-school English syllabi issued in 1992, 1993, and 1996 emphasized developing communicative competence in English, fostering learner autonomy, and cultivating various intellectual abilities. Just prior to these developments, the MOE granted economically developed provinces and the centrally administered municipalities of
Beijing and Shanghai autonomy to develop their own English curricula, syllabi, and textbooks. Previously the People's Education Press, under the direction of the MOE, controlled the production of primary and secondary textbooks. This change in policy meant that local education agencies could publish innovative and improved textbooks or teaching and learning material independently, frequently by working with overseas publishers (Hu 2002).

**BUILDING CONFIDENCE**

The 2001 decision to make English compulsory in the nation's primary schools was perhaps the most significant development in its teaching and promotion; from the mid-1980s through 2001 it had been taught only in some urban primary schools. Although English now has become the dominant foreign language taught in China's primary schools, those offering instruction in Japanese, Russian, and other foreign languages have been encouraged to maintain these programs.

The basic requirements for primary-school English education include encouraging students' interests and self-confidence, and instilling a positive attitude toward learning English; cultivating students' language sense, and developing good pronunciation and intonation; and—most significantly—strengthening students' preliminary ability to use English in daily exchanges and to build a basis for further study (MOE 2001). This new educational regime requires formative assessment of progress and discourages examination-oriented evaluation methods. Specially tailored textbooks that serve students' needs and their cognitive development have been produced to achieve these ambitious goals. The MOE encourages primary-school English teachers and their students to use the teacher-training sessions and classroom lessons that are provided through satellite TV.

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

**Teacher Training**

The MOE has continued to implement a series of reforms to keep classroom practices up-to-date with recent developments in the theory and methodology of foreign language education. Teacher stake a variety of pre-service and in-service professional development programs to facilitate implementation of new curricula and to improve their language proficiency and teaching strategies. Foreign-language education-research institutes have been established strategically as well, and they are receiving increasing amounts of funds and other resources.

Classroom practices in tertiary institutions and in secondary and primary schools have been transformed since the beginning of the twenty-first century. New teaching methods and technologies are now available to teachers, and their application has created increased opportunities for students to develop communicative competence. The MOE also has developed pre-service and in-service courses for English teachers at all levels to help them meet the requirements of new syllabi and the classroom methods that accompany them (Hu 2005, Wang 2002, 100).

These measures required a prior expansion and restructuring of pre-service and in-service training itself. Various institutions—including universities, tertiary teacher-education institutions, distance education agencies, television universities, and self-study education programs—have developed and offered short- and long-term professional programs. By 2000, more than 60 percent of senior secondary teachers and 91 percent of junior secondary teachers had acquired accredited foreign-language teaching qualifications, compared with only 26 percent of
senior and 30 percent of junior secondary teachers in 1988 (Hu 2003).

Some universities have begun to experiment with teaching non-language subjects in English. Teachers also have been encouraged to use multimedia technologies in the classroom, and increasingly teachers are using a variety of tools—such as multimedia materials, electronic communication, computers, language labs, video clips, and slides and transparencies—to create authentic language situations (Kleifgen and Wang 1995).

**Challenges**

In spite of the wide expansion of foreign language (mainly English) education in both primary and secondary schools, a number of problems that require attention remain. One is the lack of progressive transition or coherent continuity in both the programs themselves and in the delivery of content between primary and secondary school (Wang 2002, 99). Another is that textbooks are not graded in a way that prepares students for the movement from primary to secondary levels of learning. Additionally, many students lose interest in learning English (even though many are initially enthusiastic) because class time for language teaching is limited, inadequacies in teaching methods remain, and there are not enough opportunities to apply their English-language skills.

**Training and Resources**

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 actual classroom practices. Both policy makers and teachers recognize that professional-development programs must become 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 education theory and methodology, to improve their language proficiency and cultural awareness, to change their teaching orientation from knowledge-based to ability-based, to move from a focus on grammar and rote learning to one that emphasizes communicative strategies, to shift from a teacher-centered to a student-centered approach, and to learn how to utilize modern teaching technologies.

In fact, insufficient pre-service preparation and inadequate in-service support is the reason that many teachers fail to understand the underlying principles of recent syllabi changes and the proper use of the new textbooks (Leng 1997; Ng and Tang 1997; Jin and Cortazzi 2003). Students are unable to broaden their experience with reading due to a lack of resources and reading material beyond the assigned textbooks (Wang 2002). Students tend to receive vocabulary input more or less exclusively from scheduled classroom lessons because of the same lack of access to external materials (Tang and Nes 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 and Coleman 2009).

**The Examination Imperative**

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

Class Size, Culture, and Confidence

Class size also constrains the implementation of communicative approaches in foreign-language teaching (Fang and Warschauer 2004). Chinese classes typically have forty students or more, so to maintain classroom discipline and management teacher-centered learning is favored over student-centered approaches. Under these conditions, activities such as group work, pair work, oral presentation, and role-play seldom are conducted.

Discussions about the limited results produced by the teacher-centered and grammar-focused approaches that are still widely practiced in teaching English frequently include the observation that Chinese students are seen as reserved, passive, silent learners (Hu 2002; Wen and Clément 2003; Yu 2001). Many researchers explain this perception 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 1997). This assessment is not universally accepted, however, as there is evidence that Chinese students are active learners who have interactive relationships with their teachers and participate in classroom activities (Shi 2006). Rather than Chinese traditional culture, teachers’ continuing habitual adherence to the grammar–translation method (Wang and Gao 2008), inadequacies in teachers’ language proficiency (Yu 2001), a combination of teachers’ lack of confidence and students’ insufficient English proficiency (Cheng 2000; Huang 2005), and 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 improved further. The quality of pre-service and in-service programs has already been mentioned, as has the adequacy and variety of teaching and learning materials. Another issue being discussed by Chinese educators is the question of teacher autonomy in choosing teaching materials that are best suited to students’ needs. Foreign videos need to be made available in classrooms so that students have opportunities to experience authentic language environments. Exchange programs between Chinese and overseas universities currently exist in small numbers, and efforts are underway to expand these programs and possibly extend them to secondary and even primary schools, so that students have opportunities to learn a native style of expression and cultivate a sense of the use of language in real-life situations.

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

Remarkable achievements have been made in foreign language education in China since 1949. After China “opened its door” to the outside world in 1978, the extent and speed of the expansion in foreign language (predominantly English) education across the nation and at all levels—from
university to secondary to primary schooling—was extraordinary by any measure. The number of graduates from foreign-language educational programs increases each year, and their competency is improving. A number of challenges related to foreign language education remain, but it is encouraging that Chinese educators recognize many of them.

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See also: Education and the Cultural Revolution; Education Technology; HSK (Chinese Proficiency Test); National Higher Education Entrance Examination

Further Reading


