

English Language Education in China: Progress, Problems and Reflections*

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The thesis is aimed at putting forward to some problems existing in contemporary China's English teaching by showing progress made in recent years. Reflections have formed by contemplating the gaps of English teaching with that of Asian & European countries. This thesis, through a general perspective, outlines what English teachers will do to push Chinese English learning to a new level.

Keywords: China, English language, education, reflections

Historical Background of English Education and Learning in China

Since 1978, with the end of "Cultural Revolution", China was beginning its economic, political as well as educational liberation & reforms, so was English education. As foreign exchange is gaining strength in recent years, China has been launching and conducting an impressive English education innovation with the ultimate goal of creating a bilingual schooling in Chinese and English. 2008 Beijing Olympiad was a crucial moment for us to promote the external image & influence by building strong atmosphere of learning English. Although a large number of educated people in ordinary jobs and circumstances speak relatively fluent English, many grassroots civilians without better education cannot accept English as a yardstick because they tend to be conservative or less desirous to enhance their comprehensive competitiveness in the job-hunting market. As globalization is sweeping every corner and every country, how China faces the trend and urges its people to learn English in a fruitful manner will be on high agenda. Through several decades' learning English, Chinese people have improved a lot in English understanding and acquisition. In retrospect, costs are still huge and problems are still looming, though progress has been conspicuous, however, reflections are necessary for us to contemplate how we could intensify English language teaching and learning in China by borrowing advanced experience from other countries, especially the neighboring ones in the future.

Contemporary English Education Reforms

For long, Chinese students have to take numerous tests and examinations at different levels. Besides quizzes

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and tests at school, they have to pass unified English examinations administered by local education committees or the National Education Examination Authority (generally Ministry of Education in China or MoE), in order to enter senior high school, university and graduate school. Furthermore, when people apply for a job position which requires certain knowledge of the English language, a test called PETS (Public English Test System) came into being, in which scores of applicants may be taken into consideration by employers. With things continuing this way, MoE issued unified the normal syllabuses, testing guidelines and English examinations, and meanwhile, the local educational institutes must have tried to improve English language education so that students or adults have to acquire related skills to communicate with people from other countries in English. Therefore, there are still some problems to be solved.

First, we should pay more attention to teachers' qualification and standards. Chinese learners lack the English language environment, and teaching resources and facilities are inadequate or inadvertently evenly distributed, which has been leading to expanding disparity in English learning results among different areas. Moreover, except the traditional foreign language institutes, the class sizes are not reasonably designed. Some classes are too crowded, which makes it almost impossible for an English teacher to take care of each student. Therefore, highly-qualified English teachers could make up for the lack of English language input. Second, the implementation of English Curriculum Standards should be effectively assessed and investigated because goals differ and students' learning capabilities diverge. Schools, parents and students pay most of their attention to being successful in examinations and pin much hope on grasping English. Behind the grievous anxiety, how could we measure our students' learning motivation, learning strategies, cultural awareness and communicative abilities through unified English courses and tests? Third, the merits and demerits of English tests should be fully realized. A test is not an end, but a means of assessing the efficiency of English teaching and learning. English language assessment is an important part of English language education in China. Students spend a lot of money and time on learning English in order to get high scores in various English tests. Many families facilitate their children to learn English from kindergarten. With hard work for more than ten years, students' English proficiency has been highly developed, but many students have obtained experiences and techniques of taking tests. The functions of culturally transmitting and intercultural communication have been neglected. Therefore, numerous tests in China have greatly negative backwash on teaching and learning.

As an English practitioner as well as a cultural historian, I strongly suggest that we need to remold and reflect on Chinese English teaching and learning. Initially, Students with overburdened English tests should instead take extra activities or seminars to whet their appetites to learn English, change the current situation of teaching to test, but veer to develop students communicative competence; meanwhile, meaning speaking activities require communication between to solve a problem and to complete a task, thereby teamwork spirit as well as cooperative abilities accrue. In addition, we should give students time and space for experiencing and enjoying the charm of English learning. Usually, students spend much time in doing English test books and exercise books, and have no time to read English newspapers and books or enjoy listening to English songs, novels and real conversations. MoE, as the supreme authority in formulating national syllabuses and teaching guidelines, should be decentralized and execute more flexible and efficacious policies to boost English learning. By borrowing the advanced experience in launching English education from Asia neighboring countries such as Japan, ROK, Singapore, Chinese central government ought to take responsibilities for seeking adequate remedy

for dealing with the poorly-performing status quo of English learning, namely, nationwide learning with regressive effect.

As an globally international association, TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) introduces the notion of a principles-based approach (PBA) for English language policies and practices. PBA identifies six principles aimed at helping policymakers, researchers and practitioners build effect and successful practices within varied contexts while identifying and engaging with the challenges that the implementation of these practices will encounter. The six principles are collaboration, relevance, evidence, alignment, transparency and empowerment (CREATE). In order to meet the demands of globalization and the interests of the local populations of different countries, the proposal of PBA is having major impact on global English education. By investigating PBA principles, I totally consent to the context-appropriate standards, which connects socio-cultural, political, economic and historical aspects of each individual country or setting. Besides, the political and ideological orientations of language policy and planning are closely related to dominant and powerful languages. Language becomes a power, suggesting that language policies serve the interests of dominant groups in maintaining their power and prestige while marginalizing, excluding, and even exploiting minority groups and speakers of other languages.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, now that English is given a privileged position, as an English educator and a councilor to my university and my local government, the road to English education will be long and prospective. On the one hand, we need to understand about language itself, design and deliver rational education programs to motivate students' learning enthusiasm and adopt the scientific alternatives to arrange English teaching and learning. On the other hand, we must have the notion of "language ecology" in an education setting by taking the diverse "socio-political settings" into account, where the processes of language use create, reflect and challenge particular hierarchies and hegemony. As a soft-power tool, my research first accentuates the effect and influence of English learning with view to a variety of local areas, and meanwhile work with Professor Tania will be based on empirical and field studies to accomplish the cross-cultural communication and pursue the most suitable and tenable solutions to help China draw up doable and sustainable English education policies, further promoting Chinese English education.

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