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# 'Practical' English and the crisis of English studies

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Is the recent focus on 'practical' English undermining the academic quality of English studies at China's universities?

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## Introduction

Perhaps there is no better illustration of Bourdieu's view that language can be converted to political or economic power (1991) than the success of the New Oriental School, which started as an English teaching organization, with the motto 'Language is power', mainly to prepare Chinese students for the TOFEL and the GRE tests. They have been so successful that they have now expanded into a full-scale educational institution, with English as its key component. Also, many people in China have prospered through English, including the world-famous teacher Li Yang, who achieved phenomenal success with his 'Crazy English' method, whose approach pushes a language-as-power message. In addition, the prosperity of the publishing houses selling English materials, the huge number of the teachers, and the enormous English-learning population in China all seem to contribute to the belief that English can enrich anyone who can find a way to capitalize on the language. However, despite the booming success of various English training agencies, it is ironic that English departments at Chinese universities now face an unprecedented crisis for survival. One major reason for this is that the recent craze for English in China has been accompanied by a parallel and steep decline of interest in the study of English as a 'major' at university level. In this article, I will address the problems that English departments in universities have in their response to the practical turn in English studies, with reference to the teaching of writing to English majors in particular.

## The practical value of English in one's life

English has always been regarded as a tool of power in China, as in many other places in the

world. However, what was unusual about English's relevance to life in China is that, in previous decades, English was seen as a politicized weapon meant to serve the communist movement for the hypothetical purpose of liberating all the people enslaved by the capitalist system around the world after 1949. From 1949 until the late 1970s, English never had serious practical relevance to people's social and personal life except for those who were involved in foreign affairs. The impractical, uncommunicative but politicized nature of English learning in the fifties and sixties can best be seen from the first two sentences students were made to learn: 'Long live Chairman Mao!' and 'A long long life to Chairman Mao.' At that time, any unauthorized possession of the skills of English would mean disloyalty to the political system, since it could allow a person to gain an unauthorized access to the outside world or have the potential to work for the political enemies. For instance, listening to the BBC English programs



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was then considered a crime of espionage. Research was allowed in the English departments but only under Marxist guidance. In a sense, the English departments were not independent academic institutions but training centres that were required by the government to produce English professionals for political missions and limited economic activities. They operated in strict accordance with the austere centralized planning.

It was only after the reforms that followed the Cultural Revolution that English was in a sense depoliticized and became relevant to individuals' lives (Qu, 2009). The government, in its eagerness to rid China of its backwardness with help from the West, promulgated in 1979 a document entitled 'Views on promoting foreign language education', which stated unambiguously 'High-level foreign language education is indispensable in raising the standard of science and culture of the whole nation' (Fu, 1986: 90), granting English the status of one of the basic literacies and a requisite qualification to promotion in one's career. Thanks to the opening-up of the country and rapid development of economy, there was a sharp rise in demand for English, which led to a flurry of establishing new English departments to produce English professionals, even in technical colleges, colleges of agriculture, colleges of aeronautics and astronautics, and other similar institutions.

The market for English has remained huge since then. The direct relation of English to the economy has highlighted the practical value or commercial potential of English. People are now interested in English for various reasons. Overseas study has become a popular and expedient way to acquire modern knowledge and achieve personal success. For the majority who do not plan to study abroad, English is still regarded as important in the highly internationalized business environment in China, and English is usually required at interviews for jobs in foreign or joint-venture companies. Even in the state-run business sectors or governmental agencies, English has high currency, and anyone who wishes to be promoted needs to pass the English qualification examination at the requisite level. No matter how established one is in the field, one needs to take the exam to get promoted.

Thus, there has never been a time in the long history of China when the possession of a foreign language has meant so much and has been able to seriously affect individuals' personal lives; there has never been a time in history when a foreign language has been so important a part of linguistic capital for personal success (although

in actuality in many places the communicative skills in English are seldom put into practice); and there has never been a time in which English has been in such great demand.

## The dilemma for the English departments

The emergence of English as a valuable element in the capital of individuals who wish to succeed in a fast-developing world has posed unexpected challenges for the English departments whose main mission is to train English professionals. After years of opening-up, there has been a steady rise in the general level of English among young people, and so most companies or institutions expect people to have expertise in special fields as well as a mastery of English, or as one of the human resources managers put it in a blunt manner: 'We cannot afford the luxury of hiring an English professional who has no other skills.' English departments in China's universities suddenly find their mission and their courses for the training of English majors inadequate to meet the new situation, and English majors suddenly find themselves stranded in the job market, and may be regarded as not competitive, especially compared with other majors who are also capable of communicating in English.

Owing to the pressure on the job market, those who choose English as their major have no intention of pursuing literature or linguistics as their future careers. They visualize the training in the English departments as a way to facilitate their participation in international business activities. Consequently, most of the students majoring in English are not interested in the traditional courses which are founded on literature and linguistics. This in turn creates significant problems, as teaching English through literature has long been the core of the English teaching tradition in China. Studying literature has long been regarded as the best way to learn a foreign language, and many of the older generation of the English teachers in China readily agree with Booth that:

As a stimulus for thinking and writing, as a source of subject matter, and as a model for style and grammar, imaginative literature is, as the students say, the best thing with which they can come in contact. (Booth, 1956: 35)

Certainly, this literary approach to the teaching of writing is not uniquely Chinese, as seen in Briggs' following observation:

In order to learn to write well, can students do better than to learn from the best writing that already exists and to understand its qualities? The learning of any skill – athletic, artistic, or intellectual – requires study and imitation of the best models. . . . If literature enhances the teaching of composition, let us not impose an unwanted and unwise divorce upon them. Reunited with literature, freshman composition can be an exciting course. (Briggs, 2001: 4)

The Ministry of Education has reacted to the changing climate by revising the national syllabus for English majors in response to the practical turn. In outlining the challenges, the syllabus now makes special mention of the demands of the ‘socialist market economy’ and argues for a less literature-oriented and more diversified approach to English teaching, stating that English majors should be capable of meeting the demands arising from the ‘socialist market economy’. However, given the academic background of the professors who worked on the revision of the syllabus, one can easily detect the heavy presence of literature in the reading list offered in the recently revised Chinese national syllabus for the English majors. A total of 106 out of the 118 books recommended to the English majors on the reading list are selected works from British, American, Australian and Canadian literature.

Despite this, most students in English major programs do not read the set books on the reading list, and students demand more space for non-literary subjects in the curricula. They hope to cover topics in the curriculum which can prepare them for the requirements of the job market. The pressure from the students may be partly related to the instrumental importance students attach to English, and partly to the general crisis of the humanities in an age of commercialization. Although many teachers are unhappy to see English departments dropping literature, most English departments have responded positively to students’ pressure, faced with deteriorating enrolments. The crux of the problem is now whether English departments are ready for the practical turn. Most of the academic faculty agree on the need for a content-based approach but are uncertain of exactly what form that content should take. Many have argued for the teaching of ‘professional English’, which is supposed to be a response to practical needs. But as the practical turn requires expertise and experience in entirely different areas, are the English teachers whose academic backgrounds are mostly in literature and linguistics prepared to take on professional English?

To illustrate the problems in the practical turn for the English departments, I will use the teaching of English writing as an example. The question Faigley and Thomas (1982: 568) raised about the US writing courses is pertinent here: how will the needs of postindustrial America shape college writing courses? Grabe and Kaplan think that the need for writing in modern society is extensive:

The need for writing in modern literate societies – societies marked by pervasive print media – is much more extensive than is generally realized. When one examines the everyday world, one finds people engaged in many varieties of writing, some of which may be overlooked as being routine, or commonplace, or unimportant. (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996: 3)

### **Instrumentalism and the demand for practical writing courses**

The instrumental function attached to English by students largely determines their attitudes towards writing in English. As a result the unitary literary approach to teaching English writing, which was previously taken for granted, is under serious challenge. Gong and Mao (2004) point out that the general literary nature of the writing tasks in the English departments is the main factor that makes students lose interest in English writing class because they think the general tasks are too remote from real work situations and are in no sense real. Their research indicates that many students are impatient with or uninterested in the English writing class. In their study, only 16.4% of the students (many of whom planned to study abroad) were interested in learning English writing, while 52.4% openly expressed their dislike of the subject, and 31.2% professed apathy. Many students believed that it was a waste of time to practice general writing that aimed at cultivating both their thinking and writing, arguing that their thinking was not problematic if they turned to their mother tongue (Gong and Mao, 2004: 41). They were not interested in the corrections the teachers made about the language, and they felt that the topics they were asked to write about were so unreal or irrelevant that their motivation was greatly weakened. They felt humiliated writing about simple topics at university level, and felt that their intelligence was insulted simply because of their inadequate English ability. As a result, they do not want literature but instead they demanded that their writing courses should be more responsive to the practical needs of the real business world.

Interestingly, another separate study showed that the writing class was one of the most unpopular classes among the English courses even for teachers. Many teachers are reluctant to teach such courses, and believe them to be among the least rewarding but most demanding (Li, 2003: 49).

To cater for such needs and to bend to such pressures, many English departments have developed practical writing programs as a response. However, when English writing becomes practical, this entails that writing should have a practical relevance, or, put another way, when writing turns practical, it requires a realistic environment for the writing task. For one thing, and perhaps most importantly, practical writing should always have a specific audience. According to Beaufort, this creates a problem, as:

there is greater complexity associated with issues of audience and purpose in work-place writing than in the writing for most undergraduate classes, where writing tasks are usually directed to a single audience – the teacher and for a single purpose, displaying knowledge. (Beaufort, 1998: 180)

Since the 1980s, there have been some important discussions on cultivating a sense of audience in writing in university contexts (Raimes, 1991). ‘Audience’ has been generally seen as part of a general communicative framework; in other words, a sense of audience is a vital part of contextualizing writing. Anderson thinks that context and convention are important in cultivating students’ sense of audience:

The exploration and development of context and convention may actually do more to help students discover a ‘sense’ of audience than attempts to analyze how they should write to a generalized audience. (Anderson, 1987: 119)

Yasuda (2011) points out that compared with general tasks, a task of a particular genre may invoke a more explicit sense of audience. But invoking audience is no easy matter given the pseudo-communicative environment in a classroom. Lu and Horner have described the complexity for us:

Taking the common advice to know your audience involves a complex process of access and responding to the expectations, knowledge, interests, demands, and desires that shape the reading tastes and habits of the people we believe are actually going to be reading what we write. (Lu and Horner, 2008: 118)

Ursula in Beaufort’s paper discusses the difference between the audience as a teacher and audience in the real business world:

[Y]ou’re writing for an audience . . . and you want something from that audience. I want an ‘A,’ I want you to donate money. You want them to read it in both cases and be interested in it, and to, only in the case of business writing I guess, take some action on it. And the action I would want them to take on my papers was to give me an ‘A.’ (Beaufort, 1998: 194)

This difference has not been appreciated in the teaching of practical writing in most English departments in China. In the practical English writing classes where great importance is still accorded to language, the notion of audience has not been given sufficient attention, because, despite the nature of the writing tasks, students mainly write for the teachers. Deng (2002) in his research found that 95% of the respondents never thought of the audience for their writings when they wrote. And even if the students can vicariously perform the practical writing tasks with different audiences in mind, it is still the teacher who plays the part of the audience, doing the reading and marking in a writing class, for all the methodological innovations. When writing is literary or intellectual in a general sense, teachers may be able to cope with different discussions but when writing turns practical and has closer links with everyday or working situations, is it possible for the teachers in their turn to live in the writing space vicariously? Are they equipped with the necessary expertise and experience for the professional empathy required for responding to writing tasks in different working situations?

When writing assignments start to have practical reference, reading a text is not simply about responding to a text in a general non-utilitarian way. The practical turn demands more specialized empathetic reading skills and greater knowledge of highly specialized conventions and contexts. Given the general educational background of the English teachers in China, it is difficult for them to respond to the writing tasks in a wide range of personae as required by the real business world. This is certainly not a problem that baffles only Chinese foreign language teachers. With diversified audiences and different purposes, the criteria for marking compositions should vary. Davis and Birbili contend that one singular notion of prescribed standardized practices is no longer applicable when it comes to the teaching of practical writing, noting that:

evidence of research suggests that we need to recognize that it really is not plausible any more to use a singular notion of prescribed standardized practices as the basis for learning to write in all the areas of life where writing matters. (Davis & Birbili, 2000: 430)

### **Practical writing and the 'real world'**

When the teachers are required to read essays from the perspective of various personae in 'real-life working situations', what they should look for in a composition are not simply language points. Grammar is important but when the message is unequivocally communicated to the audience, how much should we bother about the grammar? When we are to replace the 'prescribed standardized practice' which is traditionally based on the literary approach, what criteria can we follow? Do the teachers have the expertise required for setting up the new criteria? If the teachers do not have the expertise necessary for the reading and marking of the essays, then what is the point of giving such practical assignments? Or how can the reading or marking of the practical writing tasks be different from the general ones?

As most of the teachers are not prepared for the practical turn, even if the class is called practical English writing, the writing tasks are actually of a general type. Here is one example of a writing task which is intended to be practical in nature:

Suppose one of your friends or family members has failed in the National College Entrance Examination. Write a 250-word letter to him or her. In the first part of your letter, tell him or her how you have learned the news. In the second part, give him or her your encouragement. In the last part, offer some suggestions on how he or she can do better next time. (Zhu, 2004: 11)

This is a task in Unit One. In Unit 14 of the same book, we have another writing task:

Suppose your parents live in the country and do not like city life. Write a 250-word letter to persuade them to come and stay with you in the city for a couple of months. In the first part of your letter, send your invitation. In the second part, tell them what changes have taken place in the city in recent years. And in the final part, tell them what arrangements you have made for their visit and urge them to come immediately. (Zhu, 2004: 223)

If the readers are familiar with China's English learning situations, they may find that these tasks

try to kill many birds with one stone. Apart from the practicality of the topics or the relevance to the everyday life situations, they also try to cater to the needs of the biggest population of the English learners, who want the writing classes to help them pass the national examinations, the certificates of which will lend strength to their standing in the job market. The length of the writing tasks is noteworthy because it is approximately the same length required for the writing task in the national test, and approximately the same length for the TOFEL writing task. The entrance examination for postgraduate studies is about 200 words. This is undoubtedly another dimension of practicality.

How do the students respond to such adaptations to the practical turn? Are these adaptations what the students want? Surveys have shown that when writing tasks are presented in this practical fashion, students feel these are artificial tasks not greatly different from traditional writing exercises.<sup>1</sup> Some even complain that they are worse, because they are set at a much lower level of intellectual interest. They argue that because of their pseudo-practicality, such tasks make writing not only less challenging intellectually but less relevant to the work situation as well. To them, practicality means relevance to the real world professional work situation. Real-life topics refer to the topics recurrent in the business world which they are aiming to join. They suggest that since teachers do not know much about the business communication, we should either invite people working in the business world to come to teach practical writing or simply arrange for the students to do field work in foreign companies. However, while such suggestions might be appropriate for a language school, they would be disastrous for university English departments as academic institutions.

### **Conclusion**

The push for practical English is real and hard to resist, and consequently, English departments find themselves caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, English should be of direct personal relevance to students – which means it should be adapted to the life outside university given that most students will not make a career in academia – and yet on the other hand if English teaching caters mainly to practical needs, university English teachers may be unprepared, and English studies is in danger of losing its intellectual rigour. As a result, English departments may lose their

academic lustre, and degenerate into mere language schools or training centres.

As the dilemma in the adaptation of the teaching of English writing shows, a marriage between English teaching and the practical world may not only make university English departments less academic and more vocational, but also render them almost impotent. Longaker (2005) makes a sharp observation on the problems the teachers are faced with when education takes an uncritical practical turn:

While these arguments point to some certainly extant connections between economics and education, to the language-arts instructor, they bring grim news of impotence. (2005: 508)

The practical turn has already thrown many English departments in China into a deep crisis. Some have tried to develop a 'one plus one' integrative model, i.e. English plus another subject, such as English plus finance. This is certainly one way out of the crisis but the solution is worked out at the expense of the English departments. By design or accident, the role of the English department in China's universities is being rewritten, and some departments are being reduced to quasi language schools or training centres. In addition, there are also growing complaints about the standard of English attained by English majors. As a consequence, in some years' time, we may have an even larger crisis, when the English majors lose their competitiveness both with reference to their academic English abilities as well as their practical 'real world' communicative skills. ■

### Note

1 This is based on an investigation done in Fudan University in 2009.

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