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# Globalization and new ELT challenges in China

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An account of the teaching of English and the kinds of English used in a vast, varied, and rapidly changing society

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AS ECONOMICS and trade turn the world into “a global village”, English is playing an increasingly important role in China as a lingua franca for such matters as business, information, international travel, the Internet, cultural entertainment, and the environment, all of which have brought great changes in every aspect of our lives. Native English speakers are regarded as linguistically privileged, but such non-native English-speakers as the Chinese, in order to overcome their disadvantage, are launching campaigns to enable themselves to use English more accurately and fluently. ‘Communicative competence’ has become the chief goal of English language learning and teaching. This essay seeks to analyse the great changes that are taking place educationally in China, especially in ELT, emphasizing the importance of communicative language teaching (CLT), teacher training, reform of the examination system, and raising people’s awareness of new challenges in education and life.

## Globalisation

According to Held & Thompson (1999, online), “Globalisation can be thought of as the widening, intensifying, speeding up, and growing impact of worldwide interconnectedness”. According to Walraff (2000, also online), “the conventional wisdom holds that English is destined to be the world’s lingua franca – if it isn’t already”. As McCrum *et al* (1992) pointed out some years ago, English is the first truly global language. In such a situation, ELT professionals, in China as elsewhere, need to understand the current socio-economic situation and its impact on their work, particularly as regards three major changes.

The first of these changes is the evolution of industrial societies into a new age of information technology based on economic globalization and inter-cultural communication. In such an age, the most prominent feature is the popularity of the Internet, and “English continues to be the chief lingua franca of the Internet – a position which is now beginning to be acknowledged in the popular media” (Crystal, 1997:107). People who try to keep themselves informed and up-to-date must have a solid command of English, a state of affairs which has already had a great influence on language teaching worldwide, and the role of English as an international language (EIL) has become increasingly prominent.

The second major change is in employment patterns. Many jobs that existed in the industrial era are being replaced by new types of work: “The changes are based on both a shift

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from manufacturing and service toward jobs that require information processing and analysis skills rather than brute force" (Castells, 1996, in Warschauer: online article). As a result, the nature of manufacturing in China is changing. New forms of manufacturing and service are emerging which rely on the application of science and technology, marketing, distribution, and a high level of national and international communication (cf. Carnoy *et al.*, 1993). The trends in the change of employment patterns in the 21st century in the world will have a great impact on ELT in China.

The third major change is information exchange, the application of science and technology, and the emergence of transnational corporations, which place great emphasis on mastering English as an international language. Warschauer (2000: on-line) says: "The last few decades have seen a growth in the role of English around the world as the lingua franca for economic and scientific exchange." According to information gathered by Crystal (1997), 85% of international organizations make official use of English, although they may not be headquartered in an English-speaking country, at least 85% of the world's film market is in English, and some 90% of published academic articles in some academic fields are written in English.

Nowadays, people in China can see or hear English everywhere. Names, especially clusters of initials, are highly visible, such as CCTV, MTV, McDonalds, KFC, Bar, Restaurant, Hotel, VCD, and DVD. When taking a bus or tube, one can hear the stop announcements in both Chinese and English. Many local TV stations have English programmes alongside CCTV (China Central Television) English channels. A lot of Chinese films and videos are shown with both Chinese and English captions. A great number of publications in English are coming out every year, notably from Beijing Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press and Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press. More and more international conferences are held in English in China. And many joint ventures in China adopt English as a lingua franca, a development which creates a national need for training in English (cf. Graddol, 2000).

Because of society is in a constant state of change, a large and increasing number of people need to be able to communicate and collaborate in English with people from different cultures. In learning English, students in China

expect to improve their communicative competence "not only for domestic and international educational, vocational, and social purposes, but also as a means of accessing the information sites which exist in the abstraction known as the "global village" (cf. Modiano, 2000:29).

### **Communicative language teaching in China**

Communicative language teaching (CLT) was introduced in China in the early 1990s, and at first met with considerable resistance. In particular, many teachers who at that time had accepted the advanced teacher training offered by some universities in China, sponsored jointly by the State Education Commission of China and the Overseas Development Agency in Britain were the pioneers who changed the dominant grammar-translation method into a student-oriented approach, but because of the local teaching conditions, teacher qualifications, and especially the national testing system (particularly the Band 4 College English Test, or CET-4, the national college entrance examination), most of the ELT teachers who pioneered CLT quickly grew frustrated, lost their initial enthusiasm, and returned to traditional grammar-translation.

As a result, CLT gained only partial popularity in some trial classes in some universities and high schools. At the end of 1990s, following the efforts made by the Chinese educational authorities and the British Council, CLT began to be accepted slowly. A functional syllabus was introduced to set CLT goals and list the communicative functions to be taught at schools. At the same time, in cooperation with Longman, Oxford University Press, and Cambridge University Press, a new CLT textbook series, and a reference series for L2 learning and teaching, were published recently. The syllabus and the textbooks require teachers to teach communicatively and interactively in classrooms.

At the turn of the century, College English teaching in China began to suffer severe attacks, being criticized as inefficient and test-oriented, as many students with CET-4 certificates are found unable to communicate effectively when talking with native speakers. The students themselves are dissatisfied with their present achievement, and long to convey their thoughts and feelings fluently.

Chinese students are strongly influenced by Confucian concepts of learning, such as "Learn

for one's own sake and not for the sake of showing off, and show respect for authority" (cf. Lee, 2000). As a result, they are less likely to reveal their opinions, tend to hide their abilities, and seldom challenge the authority of tutors and parents. From early childhood, they have been trained to be obedient and learn by rote. They seldom interrupt their teachers, even when they want to ask questions or disagree, because the belief in obedience and respect for teachers is deeply rooted in their minds. Voicing their opinions in class is not encouraged. So they are usually passive recipients of knowledge. In addition, most students are very conscious of making errors in front of their classmates and teachers for fear of being laughed at and losing face. Although they have difficulties in participating in classroom communicative activities, as the economy and trade turn the world global, they are eager to improve their communicative competence so as to catch up.

Under pressure from society, international economic development, and the communicative syllabus and textbooks, CLT has become very popular in primary education, but has been only partially adopted in middle schools and universities because of the testing system, large classes, teachers' academic abilities, poor teaching facilities, and so on. For reasons like these, most conservative teachers still consider that the communicative approach is neither possible nor feasible in China. However, the need to use English as an additional language is changing people's attitudes toward CLT. More and more teachers have come to change their attitude toward teaching their students to communicate genuinely, spontaneously, and meaningfully in English.

### **New challenges in ELT in China**

Since "world economies and cultures are becoming increasingly interconnected and interdependent, politically, socially and technologically" (Graddol, 2000:32), there is a growing number of people who, at some point in their lives, need to use English for social or economic reasons. They will no longer be satisfied with classes that only resulted in exam passes. Meeting these new expectations and providing learners with real language skills will be a major challenge for teachers. There is clearly a growing tendency for learners around the world to view English as their own language

of wider communication, rather than as a foreign language controlled by the "other". Learners increasingly need English in order to make themselves understood by people from different countries. In such circumstances, narrow emphases on teaching language rules, sentence patterns, vocabulary will serve these learners poorly. As a result, ELT in China needs to go beyond lexical and grammatical limitations and focus on improving communicative ability.

Traditionally, an English teacher in China has been a ruler, dictator, and speaker instead of an enlightener. What he says is usually accepted unquestioningly. When he asks questions, they are usually questions "to which he already knows the answers" (Widdowson, 1990:185). Teachers' authority is seldom challenged, and this authoritative role awes the students into obedient listeners. If the students want to contribute in class, they need to make a bid by raising the hand and when this is acknowledged and ratified as a claim for a speaking turn, they have the opportunity to stand up to air their opinions. Interaction between students and the teacher and student and student is highly controlled in ELT classes in China.

In fact, in ELT we have teachers, lecturers, instructors, trainers, tutors and so on. Are they all doing the same job? In many ways this range of terms has risen from trends in methodology and reflects changes in our expectations. In most western universities, however, the roles of 'lecturer' and 'tutor' are preferred. Although a tutor teaches, he or she also gives special attention to each student. In China, teachers are on the whole like lecturers in universities in western countries, but the role is different.

The teacher's authority is reflected in the answering of questions. It is usually the teacher who gives the 'standard' answer, the only 'correct' answer. This is taken for granted to such a degree that students believe there is only one answer to any question. This belief is further enhanced by multiple-choice questions, which constitute 70-85% of the whole test content, in which only one answer is to be chosen. It has seldom dawned on them that there may be many other possible answers.

As far as Chinese English teachers' English language proficiency and academic abilities are concerned, most of them are not proficient enough to be native-like, and are at a disadvantage because they lack familiarity with

western culture. Many College English teachers have only a first degree in English language and literature, and many have not had any formal teacher training, but have been fully occupied with a heavy teaching load because the number of university students is so high (cf. Wang, 1999). As a result, university management cannot arrange for in-service training programs. Teachers therefore follow the banal traditional teaching method without considering developing the students' communicative competence.

Last but not least, both teacher and parents have long held the view that success in learning English and in English examinations means learning by rote what is taught by the teacher and learned from the textbooks (cf. Wang, 1999). As a result, spoken English, which cannot be formally "taught" at all, has suffered from years of neglect.

Nowadays, however, teachers in ELT are more like trainers or instructors. In a communicative classroom, Harmer (1983) mentions that the role of the teacher may be as a facilitator, organizer, assessor, prompter, participant and information source, depending to a large extent on the function that he or she plays in different teaching activities. In a single class, his or her role may frequently change.

### **Cultural awareness**

As the chief purpose of learning English is international communication in a broad sense, cultural knowledge of the target language and its community of users is necessary for both teacher and learner. Culture has been defined as "the ideas, customs, skills, arts, and tools that characterize a given group of people in a given period of time" (Brown, 1994:164). So language and culture are closely related to each other. Brown (1994) describes the two like this: "A language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture."

All in all, culture plays an instrumental role in shaping speakers' communicative competence, which is related to the appropriate use of language. Generally, discourse appropriateness is determined by the social and cultural conventions of a particular group of speakers. It is therefore necessary to recognize different sets of culturally determined rules in communi-

cation. However, the awareness of the role of cultural traits in foreign-language acquisition has usually been neglected in ELT in China. Consequently, there are many situations in which Chinese students are likely to talk inappropriately when communicating with native English speakers.

For example, many Chinese non-English majors have the habit of starting a conversation with a newly acquainted English speaker with such questions as: "How old are you?", "What is your job?", "How much do you earn?"; "Are you married?", and so on. What causes them to ask the native English speakers such inappropriate questions is ignorance of the target culture. In order to develop the learners' communicative competence, efforts are needed to establish "pragmatic coherence" (Kramsch, 1998:28); that is, make the sentences meaningful and appropriate, because culturally unacceptable language and behaviour are worse than linguistic mistakes.

Generally speaking, misunderstanding between people from different countries arises from cultural differences. "Researchers in the language socialization tradition believe that language and culture are not separable, but are acquired together, with each providing support for the development of the other" (Mitchell & Myles, 1998:183). Successful communication therefore largely depends on mutual understanding, rather than simply being able to produce grammatically correct sentences. In teaching English, in addition to linguistic information, teachers should be able to provide more cultural input and place more attention on how language varies according to social situation.

Students need to learn not only the rules of language, but also the rules of social appropriateness. As for College English teachers, they should help their students increase their awareness of the cultural appropriateness of what they may say. The following ways are recommended: introducing more information on traditions, customs, beliefs of the English speaking countries in classroom: using video film, CD-Roms, and the Internet to display cultural information to students; and inviting teachers with cross-cultural experience to talk to them.

### **Needed: Multi-skilled teachers**

With the swift changes brought about by development in communication and technology,

there is a high expectation that teachers' understanding of, and proficiency in, the language will be at the core of their professional skills. However, professional knowledge is not enough. It is necessary to understand how languages are taught and learned, what factors influence learning, and what kind of teaching conditions and teaching skills help the learning process. It is also essential to master both the use of modern teaching equipment, such as the computer and the OHP, and use of the Internet and on-line teaching.

Teacher training is therefore crucial. Most Chinese English teachers, especially in rural schools, lack a decent level of English proficiency. Even university English teachers have not had any formal teacher training. One of the major reasons for this is that many school authorities or leaders believe that if the teachers learn more English, they will automatically teach well, but reality is not so simple. Teacher training is urgently needed in this new era.

One of the tasks in teacher training is to raise the teachers' professional proficiency. Apart from learning the language, the teachers should not only learn about the communicative approach but also be familiar with trends in teaching methodology at large and modern teaching facilities. As a result of this training, the teachers may realize that teaching English is not simply a matter of teaching grammar rules and new words, but also of communicative competence. In addition, EFL teachers should also learn how to improve students' learning strategies.

### **Examination reform and increased autonomy**

The present-day examination system in China still follows the traditional Chinese imperial examination system. In ancient China, a written examination was held to choose candidates for top positions in government, and in subsequent centuries this approach has continued to be taken seriously by teachers, students, parents, and some authorities. In China, success in one's studies has always been measured solely by examination, under the influence of Confucian doctrine.

As far as higher education in China is concerned, according to official statistics there were about 11.5 million full-time undergraduates up to June 2001, most of whom were non-English majors. In order to test their English

proficiency, the national Ministry of Education in China set up the College English Test 4 (CET-4) in 1986. All non-English majors in China are required to pass it after two years of College English study; otherwise they cannot get their first degree. The results of the CET-4 are regarded as the main indicator of the quality of English teaching. As a result, most College English teachers pursue a high pass rate, as a result neglecting students' communicative abilities. The CET-4 includes listening comprehension, reading comprehension, vocabulary, and structure, all tested in the form of multiple-choice, cloze, and writing. Although an optional CET oral test has been introduced gradually in some provinces and big cities since 1999, only students who get top marks (that is, more than 80%) in the CET-4 have the opportunity to opt for it.

Non-English majors' shortcomings in communication have been largely laid at the door of the examination system. Although exams should relate to what students have been taught, in China the exam syllabus clashes with the teaching syllabus, causing a mismatch between the CLT approach (which values listening and speaking abilities in real life communication), and the examination (which emphasizes accuracy in language form). This conflict directly affects the development of spoken English. Examinations should therefore be more communicative. Since speaking is a crucial skill, the exclusion of a formal oral test devalues the testing system. Oral English should be a compulsory component in English examination, especially for non-English majors, and not be restricted only to the top students (as described above).

However, to change the content of English exams would be a big step in English teaching. Although many universities have since 1999 changed to learner-centred textbooks, the majority of Chinese English teachers have to resort to the teacher-centred method to present new materials because they want their students to have a high passing rate in the grammar-oriented examinations. In other words, if the exam system in China is not revolutionized, it will not be surprising to find English teaching lingering in an exam-oriented mode. After all, both the teachers and the students are judged by examination results. With an appropriate change in examination content, teaching methods could be significantly changed for the better.

In China, a majority of students view knowl-

edge as something to be transmitted by the teacher rather than to be discovered by themselves. Parents always enjoin their children to 'listen to teacher' at school, for 'listening to teacher' is the principal virtue in a good student, according to the Chinese cultural perspective. What the students learn seldom goes beyond what their teachers have taught. They have little incentive therefore to undertake learning outside the classroom, not to mention taking responsibility for their own learning.

McClure (2001) notes: "Asian students are accustomed to sitting attentively and following the teacher's instructions, but when questions are directed at them, they are reluctant to reply in case their answer should be wrong." Asian students are not adept at taking charge of their own learning in the service of their own needs and purposes. The teacher should therefore help them develop a capacity to learn independently. The term 'autonomy' is often used interchangeably with 'self-direction', which in effect refers to "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec, 1981:3). This means empowerment, with a wide range of strategies to achieve self-assurance and competence when seeking to communicate. This in turn means that Chinese EFL professionals must invest the necessary time and effort to cultivate learners' independence in learning. ELT in China faces great challenges. ■

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