ENGLISH TEACHING IN CHINA

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Abstract

This paper attempts to give a brief introduction to the history and the present TEFL situation in China, and put forward some analysis of methodological trends for the coming years. The points of view and propositions presented are only the author’s personal opinions.

A BRIEF HISTORY

English teaching in China has a history of about one hundred and twenty years. Counting from the liberation of the country in 1949, we have a history of nearly fifty years of English teaching.

The history of TEFL in China can be divided into six periods as follows:

1. Prior to Liberation (1902-1949)

The history of TEFL can be traced as far back as the famous Westernization movement of the Ching Dynasty in the later half of the 19th century.

In reality, English teaching and learning first appeared in China in the year of 1862 during the Ching Dynasty. Yet it took exactly forty years for the English instruction to be formally included in the curricula of primary and secondary schools. Between 1902, when English was first listed in “His Majesty’s Teaching Standards for Primary and Secondary Institutions” of the Ching Dynasty, and 1949, when the People’s Republic of China was founded, two periods may be roughly distinguished: A. 1902-1922, B. 1922-1949.

A. 1902-1922

During this entire period of 20 years, the overall teaching in schools basically followed the model of Japan. The teaching materials in the beginning were mostly books used in Western countries or compiled by missionaries, and only at a later stage materials written for and by Chinese made their appearance. Generally speaking, those teaching materials were difficult to learn and had large vocabularies.

B. 1922-1949

With the “Outlines for School Syllabuses of the New Teaching System” (1922) going into effect, the entire teaching structure, from teaching system and syllabus to teaching materials and methods, took a drastic turn from copying the Japanese model to following the
Western models, chiefly those of Britain and America.

2. Shortly after Liberation (1949-1952)

The founding of the People's Republic of China brought enormous changes. These changes were also embodied in the educational policy which, in clear language, stipulated that education in new China must serve proletarian politics and serve the country and the people as well. The most notable feature was its clear identification of the general goal of TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) to serve the New Republic. There was not, however, much change in teaching materials and teaching methods.

3. "The Russian Years" (1953-1957)

The period of "The Russian Years", as the name suggests, was characterized by the political bias towards learning from the former Soviet Union and rejecting the United States. English gradually disappeared from the curriculum with Russian taking its place. By 1954, Russian had literally become the only foreign language taught in both secondary schools and colleges and universities. A chance for TEFL came in 1955. There was a gradual awareness of the fact that the complete rejection of English and other foreign languages was a short-sighted view, and that to communicate in other languages, not just in Russian alone, was absolutely necessary for the progress of the country. The Ministry of Education made a decision to resume English teaching in senior high schools. Nevertheless, the influence of Russian was still there deep-rooted and well-secured. The methodological theory on which this set of books was based was also the traditional approach, which laid much emphasis on grammatical rules but paid little attention to practice. The Russian methodological principles, which were then applied to actual teaching practice in all Chinese schools, could be summarized as "three-centered" teaching: classroom-centered, teacher-centered, and textbook-centered. According to these principles, in the classroom the teachers were imparting knowledge, which the students passively took in.

4. The First "Renaissance" (1958-1966)

This was a period of great growth and change for English teaching. The growing need of the country's involvement in international affairs and in its own progress placed great demands on education and foreign language teaching. In senior high schools, class hours increased. In some big cities, such as Shanghai, English began to appear in the junior high schools. The 1958 education reform strongly challenged the existing teaching materials and teaching methods. In the field of English teaching, dissatisfaction over the Russian-style textbooks and the prevailing spoon-feeding method of teaching rose, and there was a widespread desire to discard or at least improve them.

In 1962 English became a formal requirement for the university entrance examination, and began to appear in the curriculum of the fourth and fifth year of the primary schools.
5. The “Cultural Revolution Years” (1966-1977)

With the advent of the Cultural Revolution, English was ousted from the school curriculum for the second time. The effects of the political movement and nationalist sentiment upon foreign language teaching were almost disastrous. All the textbooks were banned and criticized. Foreign language teachers were falsely accused of being spies of foreign countries or flunkeys of imperialism or worshippers of everything foreign.

When English finally reappeared in the curriculum around 1969 or 1970, it was distorted. The English in the textbooks was not the English of any English-speaking country. Textbooks were not compiled according to any linguistic theory or within any teaching methodological limitations, but rather according to instructions from the then authorities.

Textbooks always began with “Long live” and ended with “quotations”. Throughout the book, there was not a single text dealing with a foreign theme or foreign culture. To teach textbooks like this, one never had to worry about teaching methods; the teacher did not even have to prepare his lessons. All he or she had to do was teach the new words, read the text, and translate the text into Chinese.

6. The Second “Renaissance” (1977-Now)

Since 1977, English has regained its popularity, and English instruction today is better than it was ever before. Obvious endeavor and delightful improvement can be seen in a great number of ways.

A forum on foreign language teaching was held in 1978 under the auspices of the Ministry of Education. State leaders, experts on foreign language teaching and language teachers attended the conference. They reviewed the FLT of the past thirty years and discussed the future development of FLT in China. Although no substantial policy was ever made at the forum, it brought life and hope to the foreign language teaching, and gave a great deal of moral support to the vast masses of foreign language teachers.

In secondary institutions, English has again been made one of the three major subjects along with Chinese and maths. A new programme of English instruction in the primary and secondary schools has been worked out by the Ministry of Education.

English has become a requirement for entrance examinations. English learning has become a mania for the nation. Television courses, radio lessons, part-time or night schools have offered an almost unlimited variety of educational opportunities for people to learn English or further their education.

With the rise of their social status, English teachers today are more enthusiastic, and more committed than ever before. There has been a thirst for improvement, innovation, and further education among teachers of English. To meet their needs, teachers’ further-education colleges have been set up in districts, towns, and cities.
In-service teacher training courses, lectures, and seminars are given to broaden people's views and polish up their rusty English. Steadily and promisingly, the number of competent teachers is increasing with every passing day.

The application of audio-visual aids in classroom teaching is another point worth mentioning. Years ago teachers of English had for aids no more than a blackboard and some chalk, or an old gramophone, or a heavy reel-to-reel recorder. Today most teachers are equipped with record players, lanternslide projectors, and cassette recorders. Some schools even have modern language laboratories and closed circuit TV equipment. These machines have proved to be practical and helpful by bringing into the classroom a real native speaker's voice and real language situations, which not only fascinate the students and enliven the classroom but also are indispensable in the teaching of listening and speaking skills.

Now that we have learned about the history of TEFL in China and observed the improvement which characterizes present TEFL, there is little doubt that TEFL in China is indeed prospering now. However, problems do, of course, continue to exist in teaching objectives, students' motivation, teachers' competence, teaching methodology, teaching materials, and research work, and some of these practical problems, particularly methodological problems, should be noted here.

METHODOLOGICAL TRENDS IN THE SCHOOLS TODAY

The current trend in methodology seems to be in the direction of:

1. Giving priority to listening and speaking

The priority given to listening and speaking in a balanced development of the five skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation is, in fact, the method the textbook writers suggest in their teacher's book, and it is gaining popularity in some schools. It is especially popular in teaching the first- and second-year classes. Students seldom use Chinese, and teachers use it only rarely for concise explanation, with a quick reversion to English for practice. Most class time is spent on teaching listening and speaking, even though objectives include reading and writing as well. New material, whether grammar, vocabulary or text, is introduced orally before it is seen. As Zhang Zhendong (1987) notes:

In the initial stage (the first- and second-year classes), listening and speaking should be stressed so that English may be used as a means of teaching from the first day in teaching and students may be made to learn English in English speaking surroundings from the start. Materials should be restricted to spoken English, reading and writing, and students are thoroughly trained on the basis of listening and speaking. The four language skills are all attended to, but with listening and
speaking dominating in teaching. Reading and writing accommodate to the requirements of listening and speaking in material and in method of teaching. (p. 235)

In spite of all its newness and novelty, its many obvious advantages, and the recommendation of the textbook writers, this method has not been accepted and adopted widely. Reasons are varied, but it is mainly because

a) some people hold that students taught by this method have failed to acquire a good command of basic knowledge,
b) our main objective remains the development of the reading skills,
c) teachers’ oral proficiency is not high enough to follow this method,
d) teachers do not really know how to use this method effectively,
e) class size, usually fifty to sixty, is far too large for this method, and
f) many schools still lack audio-visual aids.

2. Laying equal emphasis on all five basic skills

The effort to lay equal emphasis on all five basic skills usually results in a composite or eclectic method, the method now most widely adopted in Chinese schools. ‘Teachers who favor this method tend to agree that they are not really laying balanced emphasis on all five skills at all learning stages’ (Li Tingxiang, et al. 1981, p. 122). In reality, they are taking a more practical and flexible attitude. They spend more time on listening and speaking when they are in the first and second years, but in the third and fourth years, they allot more time to reading. They stress aural-oral training while teaching pattern drills, but they emphasize grammar and translation while teaching texts and grammar items. They do not feel the need to defer reading and writing skills or separate them from listening and speaking activities, nor do they neglect listening and speaking completely when they move to more advanced levels. In classroom teaching, they follow the procedure: new words, pattern drills, text or dialogue, grammar and exercises. Generally, they use English to conduct the classes, but they do not hesitate to use Chinese when necessary.

Listening, speaking, reading and writing should all be attended to in teaching English. But in what order should they be presented? There are two practices on this question; one is that the spoken language precedes the written language and the other is that the written language precedes the spoken language. It is the old translation method that sticks to the practice of written language preceding; direct method, audio-lingual method, audio-visual method, functional approach all stick to the practice of spoken language preceding. It is the practice of spoken language preceding that reflects the modernized language teaching and the trend of reformation in foreign language teaching today (see Zhang Zhendong 1987).

Though Chinese teachers attend demonstration classes given by teachers who are in favor of the aural-oral method, they very much doubt the effectiveness of that method. ‘Though in class the students’ performance is admirable, their actual mas-
tery of the basic knowledge is questionable,” they say.

How effective this method may prove to be is not yet known. Still, how it has come to be so popular among the majority of teachers demands some explanation. People who adopt this method of teaching tend to fall into three categories:

a) those who are really committed to their profession and who are seeking a practicable path to more effective teaching in Chinese classrooms,

b) those who think this is the method of giving priority to listening and speaking advocated by the textbook writers,

c) those who passively follow the organization of the textbooks.

3. Stressing reading skills

There recently have been a few dissenting voices about teaching listening and speaking in secondary schools. “It is a waste of time,” teachers contend. Their reasons are very simple: their main objective is to develop the students’ reading ability. Few students will have the opportunity to communicate directly with native English speakers or to become English professionals. The great majority of them, in fact, will be workers and peasants, who will only have the chance, if any, to read some English. Even those who may become technicians or scientists in the future will need reading skills. To meet the needs of students, they maintain, all or most of the class time should be spent on reading, and on developing reading skills; all one needs is a good command of grammar and a large vocabulary.

In their classroom, therefore, texts are being translated into exact Chinese, sentences are being analyzed, and grammar rules are dwelt upon and learned by heart. Textbooks remain a crutch for both the teacher and the students. The classroom atmosphere tends to be monotonous and uninspiring with the teacher doing all the talking and the students listening. Under the camouflage of meeting the reading objective, the grammar-translation method is still holding its ground in some people’s minds.

There are some other causes which lead to adherence to the traditional method. The conventional method is stuck too firmly in some people’s minds to change overnight, and the heavy grammar load in the senior textbooks and the unrealistic pacing of instruction tend to drive teachers, consciously or unconsciously, into the old rut.

4. Involving a more active use of the student’s mental power

The last notable tendency in today’s English teaching is the application of the enlightening method, which tends to involve a more active use of the student’s mental power in classrooms. This method resembles, in many ways, the cognitive-code method, which views language learning as a natural creative process rather than habit formation. In such classrooms students learn the rules of grammar before
they do pattern drills. Unlike in the grammar-translation method, however, they do not learn the rules for rules’ sake; they learn to observe and to analyze in order to apply. Structures are presented to the students by comparison and contrast or by explanation and summary. This method represents a recent theory which advocates the combination of the learning of the basic skills with the training of the student’s competence and intelligence. This method, of course, is still in its initial stage and needs creative teachers to go on experimenting. However, there is great hope in it.

The following methodological suggestions (Wu Wenkan, et al. 1989) are worth mentioning:

1) The students, not the teacher, are in the center of all classroom work.

2) The teacher should do his utmost to ensure that each one of the students is actively at work all of the time.

3) Try in every possible way to arouse and maintain the students’ interest in their classroom work, to make every lesson interesting and exciting.

4) Of all forms of students’ practical activities on the classroom, the most basic are their mental activities.

Our aim, whatever the subject, is to train the students to be capable of and accustomed to using their heads; that only those things are well understood and well remembered which are thought over, that only a person able to think clearly, to reason logically is able to express his ideas clearly and logically in any language. A teacher must therefore encourage the students and create opportunities for them to use their heads. From this point of view, a “Why?” question is better than a question which requires a simple “Yes” or “No” answer (1987, p. 405).

5. Helping students master methods

The teacher has another important task in the classroom, that is, to help the students
master scientifically effective methods of acquiring English. The teacher should not limit himself to giving the students these MUSTs and MUST NOTs but should do a great deal of practical work to make them understand the necessity of doing so and the way this is done.

A few minor or subsidiary aspects in English teaching, some inspiring and some uninspiring, should also be mentioned in conclusion:

On the one hand,

a) planning for instruction becomes obvious, and the class is often well organized and structured,

b) English is used much more frequently than ever before by both teachers and students,

c) class activities are varied and carefully arranged,

d) many classrooms show high motivation as well as energy levels on the part of teachers and students,

e) a more relaxed but mutually respectful and cooperative relationship between the teacher and students can be frequently seen,

f) more serious and effective learning is taking place in many schools,

g) more teachers have become committed to the profession and are making an endeavor to improve their language skills as well as teaching competence,

h) more and more prospective teachers from teachers colleges and universities are joining in the teacher contingent, bringing with them modern language and teaching skills, and new innovations and experiments are taking place in the schools.

On the other hand,

a) most teachers obviously lack a sufficient knowledge and a systematic training in teaching methodology,

b) teachers' language proficiency, especially oral proficiency, needs to be improved,

c) the overloaded textbook and unrealistic pacing have caused superficial learning on the part of the students and hindered the creativity of the teacher,

d) Chinese is still used as the language of instruction in many classrooms,

e) in some schools discipline and motivational problems are serious, and the percentage of dropouts increases in the higher grades,

f) rigid and formal student-teacher relationships can still be observed,

g) the teaching of culture is obviously neglected by most teachers,

h) audio-visual aids are inadequate or lacking, and teachers do not know how to use them to advantage if they have any.

SUMMARY

TEFL in China has been following a zigzag course to where it is today. In spite of all the setbacks and disappointments, progress has been made, and the gain is slow but persistent. Looking specifically at the methodological problems and trends in schools, it is encouraging to see new teaching materials, new teaching aids, new teachers, and new experiments, but old ideas, continuing problems, and possible pitfalls still exist.
The new textbook series has brought about exciting and hopeful changes in English teaching in schools. The method of giving priority to listening and speaking, suggested in the teacher's book, however, is not implemented in most classrooms for the reason that it does not seem to match very well the structural sequencing of the materials. As an unexpected result, a composite method is now often being used in teaching these textbooks, but its positive effects on the teaching seem to exceed its negative effects.

References


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