

2 English Language Teaching and Learning in the United States

As we mentioned in Chapter 1, we are both now teaching English in New York City. As this English In Context series is aimed at raising English language teaching (ELT) professionals' awareness of the changes that are specific to a given teaching context worldwide, this book focuses on the teaching of English to Chinese learners, at the community college level, in New York City. Considering that people, place, and (point of) time are the three most important elements of any context of teaching and learning (Wedell & Malderez, 2013), we begin by examining the context of teaching English language to Chinese-speaking learners in the United States, starting with a brief overview of the U.S. education system.

The Education System in the United States

The education system in the United States, encompassing both public and private schools, is divided into three levels of formal education: elementary, secondary, and postsecondary. After 1–3 years of early childhood education, at an average age of 6, children in the United States enter elementary school, where they ordinarily spend 6–8 years before they move on to a 4- to 6-year program in secondary school. They normally complete the entire program through Grade 12 by age 18.

Upon graduation, those who decide to continue their education may opt to enter a specialized career/technical institution, a 2-year community or junior college, or a 4-year college or university. A 2-year college normally offers the first 2 years of a standard 4-year college curriculum as well as a selection of career and technical education programs. Academic courses completed at a 2-year college can lead to an associate's degree or certificate, and they are usually transferable for credit at a 4-year college or university. A bachelor's degree requires 4 years of coursework at the college level. At least 1 year of coursework beyond the bachelor's is necessary for a master's degree, while a minimum of 3 or 4 years beyond the bachelor's degree is usually required for a doctorate. Postsecondary,

nondegree technical training programs of varying lengths, which lead to a specific career, are also offered by career/technical institutions. In 2013–2014, according to the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; n.d.-b), more than 50 million students were enrolled in 98,271 public elementary and secondary schools. Meanwhile, 5.3 million students were enrolled in 33,620 private schools.

Requirements for becoming a public school teacher in the United States vary by state. However, all states require a bachelor’s degree as a minimum, and candidates have to complete a traditional or alternative teacher preparation program. They also need to take a certification exam and pass a criminal history background check. Many states also require student teaching experience.

What makes the U.S. public school system different from that of countries such as China, Japan, and South Korea, or France, Italy, and Turkey, is that the U.S. educational system is highly decentralized. Although there is a Department of Education at the federal level, it has no power over individual schools. Public schools are primarily run by state and local government. They are financed and controlled by the governments at all levels: federal, state, and local. According to the NCES (2013), in the fiscal year of 2011, 12% of all school revenues were provided by the U.S. federal government, 44% by state governments, and 44% by local governments.

The education department of each state is responsible for implementing the laws governing the use of public funds, curriculum planning and development, and the hiring of teachers. Decisions on public school policies, curricula, funding, teaching, and employment are made by locally elected boards of education or school boards and implemented via state education departments that set educational standards and mandate standardized tests for public school systems.

Private schools operate outside the public school system and determine their own curriculum and staffing policies. At the tertiary level in 2014, according to the NCES (n.d.-b), 20.2 million students were enrolled in postsecondary institutions in the United States, including 13.5 million in 4-year institutions offering programs at the bachelor’s degree level or higher and 6.7 million in 2-year institutions offering associate’s degrees.

In 2014–2015, there were 4,627 postsecondary institutions in the United States, including 3,011 four-year institutions and 1,616 two-year institutions. These institutions may be governed by publicly appointed or elected officials, with major support from public funds, or by privately elected or appointed officials, with major support from private sources. They all enroll first-year undergraduates. Private institutions may be operated on either a nonprofit or for-profit basis and fall into the following categories:

Research Universities

There are approximately 200 research universities in the United States, which account for a large majority of the PhDs awarded. The top 60 dominate the national and international rankings, award more than half of the PhDs, and receive the majority of the federal grants on academic research each year. They are the most selective, too (Bok, 2013, p. 10).

Comprehensive Universities

Over 700 comprehensive universities award a wide array of professional, master's, and doctoral programs while conducting varying amounts of research (Bok, 2013, p. 10). Constituting the majority of this category are state universities, which are typically operated and subsidized by state governments. There is at least one state university in each state, and each consists of a large group of 2- and 4-year colleges.

Many states have two or more state universities. In Delaware, for example, there are two: the University of Delaware and the State University of Delaware. As you can see, a state university does not have to have the word *state* in its name, as in the case of the University of Delaware. In addition, if a state has two state universities, the University of State Name and the State Name State University, the former is normally the flagship public university of the state, much larger, richer, and more prestigious than the latter. This is, however, not always true. The University of Ohio, for example, is much smaller and less prestigious than the Ohio State University.

Some states have more than two state universities. California, for example, has a third state university: the Californian Community Colleges System, in addition to the University of California and the State University of California.

Private, Nonprofit Colleges

There are over 1,000 private, non-profit colleges in the United States. These 4-year independent colleges are often small, with an enrollment of fewer than 2,000 students. Some of them have a history of over 20 years and are sponsored by a religious denomination. Often called "liberal arts colleges," they traditionally concentrated on liberal arts and only later started to offer vocational programs (Bok, 2013, p. 11).

For-Profit Institutions

There are more than 1,300 for-profit educational institutions of higher education in the United States. Different from public universities and most private, nonprofit institutions, for-profit institutions depend almost totally on tuition as a source of revenue (Bok, 2013, p. 13).

Community Colleges

In addition to these categories are 2-year, nonprofit community colleges. According to NCES (n.d.-b), in 2014–2015, there were 932 community colleges across the United States, with an enrolment of 6.7 million students.

Community colleges play an increasingly important role in postsecondary education in the United States. They account for almost 40% of the undergraduate students in the country (Bok, 2013, p. 11), and the past few decades have witnessed a rapid growth of these institutions (Bok, 2013, p. 12). Among several factors contributing to their increasing popularity, these are the most important:

- lower tuition and fees, which greatly reduce the cost of obtaining a 2-year associate's degree and count toward the transfer to 4-year degree programs in other institutions
- convenient school location close to students' homes, which saves time and expense on transportation as well as on room and board
- open admission policy that makes access to higher education much easier for students who did not perform as well in high school
- opportunities to explore majors without much financial pressure, which allows students to take time to make better decisions
- more flexible curriculum and class schedule; community colleges offer far more evening classes and many more schedule options than 4-year universities and liberal arts colleges
- smaller class sizes, which make it easier for students to get assistance from their professors and develop a personal relationship with them

English Language Teaching and Learning in the United States

English is widely regarded as a global language. It is also the language spoken by most people in the United States, the official language of many of its states, and the language used in nearly all its government functions (Schildkraut, 2001, p. 445).

Despite its popularity and influence at home and worldwide, however, English is not the official language of the United States, but rather the de facto national language of the country. According to the 2014 American Community Survey (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015), 79% of the population aged 5 years and older claims to speak only English; 21% speaks a language other than English, with a total of 381 languages spoken throughout the country (Ryan, 2013, p. 2).

In the United States, English is the mother tongue of native speakers, an additional language for those who have immigrated from non-English-speaking countries, a working language of the United Nations and other world organizations,

the lingua franca for international commerce and trade as well as educational and cultural exchanges, and a tool of communication for foreign investors, business people, and tourists from all parts of the world.

ELT programs are offered at different levels in different sectors of education by a variety of institutions to suit the needs of many types of students. The goal of each is based on the nature of the program and its training purpose. All programs have to follow funding guidelines and meet performance requirements. At the national level in the United States, there is no unified syllabus, curriculum, or textbooks for ELT programs. The following is a brief summary to highlight some of the most common ELT programs in the United States.

Elementary and Secondary (K–12) Level

At the elementary and secondary school level (often called K–12 or K through 12), English language arts (ELA) is part of the core curriculum. ELA is aimed at improving students' competence in oral and written English so they can read fluently, understand a broad range of written materials, and express their thoughts and ideas with clarity, purpose, and cultural awareness. ELA is also intended to develop their skills in studying, retaining, and using information from many sources as well as recognizing, analyzing, and evaluating various methods of verbal and nonverbal communication. It also enables students to use English effectively in a variety of contexts. The ELA curriculum includes reading, writing, speaking, listening, and the study of literature. In the United States, there is no national curriculum or syllabus for language arts or for any other school subjects.

While ELA primarily serves mainstream K–12 students, English as a second language (ESL) programs are designed to meet the needs of foreign-born, non-English-speaking students, usually children of new immigrants from non-English-speaking countries, termed English language learners (ELLs) by the U.S. federal government. According to the NCES (n.d.-b), in the 2013–2014 school year, approximately 9% of public school students in the United States, 4.5 million in total, were ELLs.

The United States is a country of immigrants, with a total immigrant population of 42.1 million in 2015 (Blake, 2015). There were 10.9 million illegal immigrants in the United States in 2015 (Markon, 2016). By 2011, nearly 4 million children had been born in the United States to undocumented immigrant parents (Yoshikawa, 2011). These illegal immigrants are living in constant fear of being discovered, detained, and deported. U.S. public schools are therefore under tremendous pressure in meeting the challenges of educating these children.

Postsecondary/Tertiary Level

At the postsecondary level, the English language, offered as a required course for all those who major in English, or English and literature, is a general program that focuses on the study of the English language, including its history, structure,

and related communications skills as well as the literature and culture of English-speaking peoples. Required courses typically include literature, composition, creative writing, rhetoric, discourse, linguistics, history, and so on.

For non-English majors, including international students from non-English-speaking countries, a much broader range of English language programs is offered at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, which may typically include the following:

English for Academic Purposes

English for academic purposes (EAP) programs are full-time, credit-bearing programs that aim to prepare international students for their academic study in degree programs across different disciplinary fields in U.S. universities.

EAP courses entail training that specifically focuses on sharpening international students' English language and academic study skills, including enhancing their listening and reading comprehension, developing their oral fluency and intelligibility, vocabulary, grammar and writing skills, test taking, and note-taking skills. EAP courses also teach students the conventions of academic discourse, formal composition forms and development including research papers, and academic study skills such as critical reading and writing, research and library skills, and academic vocabulary.

EAP is the highest level among all programs offered to non-English or literature majors and is designed primarily for students who have provisional admission to the institution. Students take from 3 to 12 credits, depending on their test scores and the type of skills they still need help with. Most undergraduate students can receive credit for EAP classes, and the class grades do affect their grade point average. EAP programs are tuition based.

College ESL/Academic ESL

College ESL, also called academic ESL, is a noncredit academic ESL program that is specifically designed for international students who failed to pass the institution's placement test. These students are placed in the appropriate level of ESL, based on their scores in the placement test. The primary goal of college ESL is to prepare these nonnative students for college-level classes by improving their English reading, speaking, and writing skills; increasing their knowledge of U.S. culture and history; and building the academic literacy and critical thinking skills they will need for professional advancement and in their everyday life. ESL programs at this level are noncredit, tuition based.

Intensive English Programs

Intensive English programs (IEPs) are full-time, non-credit-bearing English language and U.S. culture programs offered to nonnative-English-speaking students, especially international students, from complete beginner to very advanced levels of proficiency. Students are in classes for the equivalent of 20 hours of instruction per week, receive high-intensity language training to enhance their integrated

language skills such as listening comprehension, reading, oral intelligibility and fluency development, grammar, writing, and vocabulary building. Being intensive, the IEP curricula feature high-intensity and fast-paced instruction that allows students to be maximally exposed to the target language and culture, and actively engaged in classroom interaction with their fellow students. IEPs are tuition based.

Adult ESL

Adult ESL programs, also called basic ESL programs, provide English language classes for nonnative-English-speaking adults who have recently arrived in the United States. They are designed for students with limited proficiency in English to help them acquire the language skills they need to survive in this new country.

Adult ESL programs are offered through a broad range of public and private organizations in both formal and informal education sectors in the United States, such as colleges, universities, language institutes, public schools, churches, museums, libraries, nonprofit organizations and local community centers, settlement houses, civic organizations, and other community-based organizations.

Adult ESL programs emphasize the social and cultural underpinnings of the society in which English is spoken in order to promote students' cultural awareness of the target language.

In addressing the difference between intensive English programs and ESL programs, Stathes (2013) points out,

While many intensive English programs focus on language development, ESL programs often times take a more holistic approach and provide students with opportunities to learn English and apply it to academic, social, and cultural situations. ESL classes are often times small, and place a particular emphasis on creating a relaxing environment to make students feel comfortable as they navigate and apply the English language to their lives and studies. (para. 1)

The U.S. Department of Education also operates adult English language programs via the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education. These programs are dedicated to helping non-English-speaking new immigrants improve their English language skills in addition to the work skills they will need to survive in the United States. English language classes are also offered as part of adult basic education or continuing education programs to train native speakers who did not finish high school but wish to get a high school diploma or equivalent certificate in order to get a job or advance their career.

According to the 2010–2014 American Community Survey 5-year estimate (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015), the United States has the world's highest immigrant population, with a total foreign-born resident population of 41.1 million, which was 13% of the total population of the country. A total of 15.7 million Asian Americans live in the United States, including 3.7 million Chinese Americans.