

2 English Language Teaching and Learning at the National Level in China

By now, many people have heard the alleged statistic that China has the largest English-speaking population in the world. While this may not actually be the case—there may be an estimated 400 million learners of English in China, but many of them are not proficient speakers—such beliefs reflect the reality that English has become an extremely important language and symbolic resource for citizens of China. English is especially important at the university level, and the goal of the English major at Chinese universities is “developing students’ language proficiency to an advanced/sophisticated level” (H. Wang, 2006, p. 5). Every postsecondary institution is different, of course, and there are many different university or college settings in which foreign teachers may work when in China. Still, it is useful for a teacher at any institution to know something of the history and trends involving English education in China, particularly at the university level.

This chapter, then, gives some background information about postsecondary English language education in China with a particular eye to those factors that may be important for foreign teachers to be aware of. First, we describe the history of education and English education in China to provide some context. We then discuss recent trends in college English teaching for both English majors and non-English majors, which is an especially important distinction in China, as each group studies different content, takes different tests, and is assessed differently. It is important to note here that when we refer to “foreign teachers working in China,” we are usually referring to native-English-speaking teachers working as teachers of English in China. Although there are some nonnative English speakers working as English teachers in China, in our experience these are still few and far between.

Education in China

While the entire history and philosophy of education in China is much too long and complex to outline here, it is worth noting that Chinese education has a historical basis in Confucianism—and that what has been seen as the “traditional” Chinese model of education has been rapidly changing in recent years. One of the most common adjectives used to describe Chinese education, both historically and today, is *exam-oriented*. The historian Thomas H. C. Lee argues that the “Confucian ideal of a universal education and the use of merit as a criterion to determine students’ access to schools is the foundation on which generations of Chinese governments created a comprehensive system of education” (as cited in Starr, 2012, p. 12). For many centuries, education in China “revolved around the hierarchical highly centralized series of government examinations” called *keju* 科举, “which were the stepping stones to official status and power” (Dello-Iacovo, 2009, p. 241). These exams primarily tested traditional subjects such as Confucian classics, history, literature, essays, poetry, and calligraphy. Because these examinations, which would give access to stable, desirable civil service positions, were the focus of education, teaching methods included a high degree of memorization and recitation.

The traditional values of Confucianism—including *ren* 仁 (humaneness), *yi* 义 (justice), *li* 礼 (ritual or propriety), *zhi* 智 (knowledge), and *xin* 信 (integrity)—have also had a major influence on education in China, such that the purpose of education has been seen as “cultural transmission, service to society, and moral transformation” (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006, p. 12). Jin and Cortazzi (2006, p. 13) identify several principles of Confucian-influenced education from a student perspective: Through continuous, self-motivated effort, students learn from models and authorities (teachers and textbooks), through a process of both rote learning (memorization and repetition) and reflection (reading, questioning, and internalizing). The process results in extrinsic outcomes like passing exams and finding employment as well as intrinsic outcomes like self-cultivation and development of moral principles. This model gives a broader picture of the Chinese culture of learning than the stereotype many in the West may have of Chinese education as an inflexible, doctrinaire system with passive learners. Though rote learning and memorization are much more important in China than in, for example, North America, they are by no means the only components of Chinese educational practice.

Though the heavily exam-oriented system remains largely in place, as does an emphasis on education as a transmitter of moral values, the communist revolution of 1949 displaced many traditional Confucian values. In addition, Chinese education has been rapidly changing since the reform and opening-up policies of the 1980s were put in place, most recently with the 2001 national curriculum reforms.

Understanding the Confucian heritage of Chinese education is important, but it is equally important not to begin a job teaching in China with stereotypical assumptions that students are, for example, limited in their abilities to engage critically with educational material in a so-called Western style. Chinese society is rapidly changing, and the 21st century is likely to bring as much cultural, political, and educational change in China as the 20th century did. One of the most important areas of ongoing change is English education in China, which has gone from being a highly specialized expert skill to a cornerstone of the country's education system in a little over a century.

A Brief History of English Language Education in China

The first recorded interaction between Chinese-speaking and English-speaking peoples in the geographical areas we now know as the People's Republic of China (PRC) occurred in 1637 (Bolton, 2003, p. 126). This took place in the larger context of European contact with China, which included, in the mid-16th century, the establishment of Portuguese trading settlements as well as Jesuit missions. Therefore, interaction between China and English can be understood as part of the history of "an extended encounter with the deep cultural beliefs of others" (Lo Bianco, 2009, p. 52). British and U.S. trade activities in southern China led to the birth of what is known as Chinese Pidgin English (CPE), which was "mostly a means of communication between foreign masters and Chinese servants, and a medium used in retail shops catering to foreigners" (Cheng, 1992, p. 164), though it had some other limited uses among Chinese and European interlocutors. CPE was characterized by Leland (1876) as a "word-for-word translation, with very little attempt at inflection or conjugation" in which English words were "strangely distorted, owing to the difficulty of representing their sounds in Chinese writing" (p. 1).

After the defeat of the Qing dynasty in the Opium Wars (ca. 1839–1842), scholars and other influential Chinese citizens began to promote the learning of foreign languages and other foreign subjects, desiring "to preserve China's cultural heritage while placing the country on an equal technological and economic footing with others" (Adamson, 2004, p. 25). This led to the establishment of the Tongwen Guan 同文馆 (1861) and Guang Fayan Guang 广方言馆 (1863) in Beijing and Shanghai, respectively, both government-run language learning institutes primarily focused on translation. Eventually, these institutions were absorbed by universities, where "a more standard English began to be taught" around the turn of the 20th century (McArthur, 2002, p. 356). It was this period that produced a maxim still frequently cited in debates about English education in China, referred to as the "*ti-yong* dilemma" 中学为体, 西学为用: "Chinese learning for fundamental principles, Western learning for practical application" (Bolton, 2003, p. 241)

or “Chinese learning for moral principles (*essence*), Western learning for practical application (*utility*)” (Orton, 2009, p. 81).

The *ti-yong* 体用 (*essence-utility*) dilemma suggests a binary opposition in which Chinese is associated with traditional subjects, but not practical, modern knowledge, and English with Western science and technology, but not Western philosophy, which was seen as potentially harmful. However, this was not initially the case in the Christian colleges established by Protestant missionaries beginning in the second half of the 19th century. You (2010) argues that such schools initially taught “only Christian subjects and only in Chinese” (p. 31). You (2010) and Bolton (2003) imply that Christian colleges tended to prefer the Chinese medium for both their religious and pedagogical purposes and that English was not widely taught until it was demanded by students. St. John’s University in Shanghai introduced English in 1881, and by 1890, most colleges taught English language courses (You, 2010, p. 31).

The status and use of English during this period, now a language of the educated rather than the servant or merchant classes, continued to grow after the founding of the Republic of China by Sun Yat-Sen in 1912. The increased prestige of English during this period, according to Zou (2002), was due to the number of foreign missionaries in China, “the institution of English as a component of the general curriculum for school children,” and the increasing popularity of studying at foreign universities (p. 295). It is estimated that 15% to 20% of Chinese students during this period were educated at missionary colleges (Bolton, 2003, p. 239), but a backlash against foreign influence was already leading some Christian colleges to merge with Chinese institutions. English was seen as “a vehicle for exploring Western philosophy and other ideas” during a period of ideological upheaval and was mainly used by intellectuals (Adamson, 2004, p. 22).

When the People’s Republic of China was founded by the Communist Party of China in 1949, the role of English in Chinese education and society drastically changed. The early period (the 1950s and early 1960s) is seen by most scholars as an era in which Russian language education dominated, with a limited role for English. English education began to reemerge when China’s relations with the Soviet Union broke down in the late 1950s. The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), a “radical political movement to re-establish class struggle” in China, saw the official removal of English (among other foreign influences) from almost all aspects of public life, as it was “associated with imperialism and capitalism” (Gao, 2009, p. 62). Those educated during this period often mention their first English lesson being the slogan “Long Live Chairman Mao” (e.g., G. Wang, 2009). Finally, the “reform and opening” period, beginning in the late 1970s, ushered in a dominant role for English, which by the early 1980s had become an important component of a rapidly modernizing Chinese society.

During this period, the unrest of the Cultural Revolution began to subside, admission to universities (which had been suspended) was reinstated, and

English education was again emphasized, as modernization policies “increased people’s dealings with English speakers” and once again raised the language’s status (Adamson, 2004, p. 130). The early 1980s saw the firm establishment of English as “the main foreign language in secondary education” (Lam, 2002, p. 247), and Chinese institutions began inviting foreign linguists and English language professionals to teach in the country. Against the backdrop of the “reform and opening up” policy of Deng Xiaoping, which introduced economic liberalization to the country, ELT reforms, especially the adoption of communicative language teaching, were promoted (Ouyang, 2000).

The 1980s and 1990s were a period of growth and development for English teaching in China: Standardized English exams were introduced, national syllabi at the secondary and tertiary levels were created and revised, and more links were established between Chinese English teachers and their foreign counterparts, through organizations like the TESOL International Association (Lam & Chow, 2004, pp. 240–241). Although some saw the future of English in China as uncertain after the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989, which caused a cooling of relations between China and the West, English teaching and learning continued to flourish throughout the 1990s. The success of two private English language education companies represents the English “craze” in late-20th-century China: Crazy English, a somewhat dubious system of English learning created by entrepreneur-cum-motivational speaker Li Yang in 1994, (Woodward, 2008) and the New Oriental School, a chain of English training centers founded by Yu Minhong in 1993 (Jiang, 2003). Both have grown into multimillion-dollar enterprises, and the popularity cult of their founders has continued (though Li was ignominiously convicted of domestic violence in a very public incident in 2011, which was a blow to his public image).

The most recent changes in China’s English education can be traced to 2001, a vitally important year for China, during which it joined the World Trade Organization and won its bid for the 2008 Olympics. Those events seemed to signal the unofficial beginning of China’s taking center stage in global affairs, which in turn seems to have led to significant education reforms. In 2001, the Chinese Ministry of Education lowered the grade level for beginning English instruction from Grade 5 to Grade 3 and instructed key universities to “use English as the main teaching language” in “information technology, biotechnology, new-material technology, finance, foreign trade, economics, and law” (Nunan, 2003, p. 596). Although a lack of resources in some regions makes the actual implementation of widespread English education initiatives difficult, English has been regarded as a necessity, and there has been “a sustained government-initiated campaign . . . to promote English” (Fong, 2009, p. 45). There tends to be agreement among contemporary scholars of English in China that, to some extent, English is a Chinese language (see Jiang, 2003). Each year, vast numbers of Chinese students are graduating from universities with some degree of English proficiency—it is estimated that 390 million people in China have had

at least some experience studying the language—and English is becoming a part of everyday life for the young people there (Bolton & Graddol, 2012).

English Language Education at Chinese Universities: English Majors and Non-English Majors

Postsecondary education is perhaps the social domain in which English is most “in play” in China. On nearly every campus, one can find students reciting English aloud early in the morning; posters advertising English corners (usually open-air places, not necessarily actual corners), where student learners gather to talk in English; and English test preparation courses and official (textbooks and newspapers) and unofficial (pirated movies and TV shows) language learning materials. Every Chinese university student will, by the end of his or her degree program, have spent at least 10 years studying English. All college students, regardless of their majors, are required to take 2 years of English; English majors will take 4 years of mostly English and English-related classes.

Even before students enter university, their preparation for it includes intensive study of English. Here it is necessary to say a few words about the *gaokao* 高考, or China’s National College Entrance Examination, of which English is one component (the other two are math and Chinese, though other subjects can be added depending on students’ interests, similar to SAT subject tests). To prepare for the English test, senior high school students have to answer thousands of grammar questions, do pages and pages of reading, and engage in rote learning of about 3,000 to 4,500 words, depending on the provinces where the students are registered. To them and their teachers, this is the only way out of the maze of English. Attaching that much importance to English has invited vehement critique from the public as well as from education experts, who argue that an unreasonably intense focus on teaching and learning English has failed the learners and that the time may as well be spent studying other subjects.

In response to this outcry, the government announced in 2013 that it was considering removing the English portion of the *gaokao* (Qi, 2014). While English was not ultimately removed, in the summer of 2014, the Ministry of Education (MOE) announced a number of reforms to the test, including giving students the option to sit the English exam twice and use the higher of the two scores (Bi, 2014). In addition, more reforms to the *gaokao* and the college admissions process were piloted in Zhejiang province in 2015, giving students more flexibility in choosing universities and majors. As of this writing, it is too early to tell whether these reforms will become widespread, but if they are, as Shen (2015) argues, the Chinese education system may see “more independent thinking than rote learning, more persistence than cramming, and more understanding of personal interest” (para. 13).

Once students have taken the *gaokao* and entered postsecondary education, English departments will have two different groups of students to educate: a

relatively small group of English majors and a much larger group of non-English majors. These two groups have different sets of English curriculum, different exams, and, usually, different goals.

Non-English Majors, College English, and the CET

During their first 2 years of study, all non-English majors take a course called College English for 3 to 4 class hours each week, 17 weeks each semester. This culminates in their taking the College English Test (CET), scheduled in June and December each year. Though the 2-year course of College English is mandatory in accordance with the MOE's regulations (MOE, Higher Education Department, 2007), the CET is not. However, taking the test is demanded by almost all colleges, some of which even bind their conferring of degrees to an approved test pass score, usually above 60%. In a sense, the CET has become an unavoidable indicator and measurement of how well college graduates have performed academically and how dedicated they appear to have been to their studies. As a result, when applying for a job or graduate school, college graduate candidates are required to present their CET reports in order to be evaluated as qualified or not. This situation places great pressure on non-English-major students. For 2 years, most of them work very hard memorizing words, grammar rules, and model essays or writing templates and practicing their listening and reading in hopes of being able to get a satisfactory result.

The CET has two levels: Band 4, which is the level of English expected for second-year university students, and Band 6, which is a more advanced level for those in their third year of university or higher who have already passed Band 4. A passing CET certificate is an elementary passport to desirable jobs, a decent salary, and graduate schools. Without it, one could be ostracized from middle-class success. But, in fact, it is often not an accurate gauge of students' actual English proficiency, as students with high CET scores cannot necessarily speak or write in English, and their ability in reading and listening is very likely to be tenuous. As You (2010) puts it,

A typical college English curriculum in China works under the guidance of the College English Syllabus and is evaluated almost exclusively by the results of students' scores on the CET. In such a curriculum, students' individual needs for English are hardly acknowledged; many teachers are predominantly concerned about teaching language knowledge and test-taking skills, instead of language skills for communication purposes. (p. 208)

Shu (2013) criticizes the testing system, writing that

one of the most serious problems with college English teaching (CET) in China is that it lacks clear or realistic objectives. For many universities or colleges, CET only serves the purpose of helping the students to pass College

English Test Band 4 or Band 6, which means that most, if not all, students do not learn English for any practical purposes. (p. 26)

Despite all the criticism and its identifiable flaws, the CET will likely remain intact for many years to come and its influence on China's English education will still permeate nearly every postsecondary institution.

English Majors and the TEM

The English major is popular across the country, with the number of colleges offering the major in China skyrocketing from 200 in 1995 to nearly 800 in 2005 (Hong, 2011, p. 1). In 2000, approved and released by the MOE, *The Suggested Curriculum for College English Majors* (MOE, Panel of English, National Foreign Languages Teaching Advisory Board, 2000) was implemented across the country, which, according to the MOE, serves as a reference for organization of teaching, textbook compiling, and assessment of teaching. Covered in the curriculum are very detailed requirements regarding, among other aspects, what courses and subjects are to be taught, how many class hours each of them should be given, and what pedagogies can be employed. Since it is non-mandatory, colleges have the freedom to develop their own policies and procedures using the 2000 MOE document as a guide.

The Test for English Majors (TEM) was launched in 1991 by the National Foreign Languages Teaching Advisory Board under the Ministry of Education, which is also its organizer and supervisor. Over the last two decades, though a few adjustments have been made, the main composition and nature of the test have remained unchanged. The TEM has two levels: TEM-4 and TEM-8. As required by the board, only second-year or above English majors are entitled to take TEM-4, and TEM-8 is exclusive to seniors and first-year graduates who also must be TEM-4 holders. To finish TEM-4, usually in late April, candidates have 135 minutes to go through six parts: dictation, listening comprehension, cloze, grammar and vocabulary, reading comprehension, and composition. A passing score is 60/100. The TEM-8 (early March) is more demanding, containing—in addition to listening, reading, and writing (which are more difficult than on the TEM-4)—translation, proofreading, and general knowledge, which tests how much candidates know about English-speaking countries, particularly the history, literature, and geography of the United States and Britain.

Like the CET, the TEM is non-mandatory according to the MOE, but the colleges impose the test on English majors, which is used as an index to evaluate their proficiencies in English as well as ELT effectiveness in these organizations. In fact, without TEM 4, English majors at some colleges are not allowed to apply for a BA degree.

Conclusion: English in Chinese Society

If the discussion of English in China above seems to be mainly focused on examinations, this is no accident (see Cheng & Curtis, 2010, for a more in-depth treatment of this issue). In one of the earliest published sociolinguistic profiles of English in contemporary China, Zhao and Campbell (1995) state that in China, “language is not always for communication” (p. 404). While many Chinese people do use English in their daily lives, especially if they work in areas like tourism, foreign trade, education, media, and politics, for the majority of people in China, English is a language learned to gain access to desirable jobs, many of which in practice involve very little English use. Thus, rather than intrinsic or instrumental motivation, Warden and Lin (2000) have proposed that we understand the motivation of EFL learners in countries such as China as “required”; that is, students are “studying English simply because it is mandatory” (p. 539).

Because English has such a major gatekeeping function in China, there are now growing concerns about whether Chinese society has been putting too much emphasis on English as a “judge of talent and value” in general (Gil & Adamson, 2011, p. 39) and about the unequal access to quality English education for rural and ethnic minority students (pp. 39–40). While recent discussions about removing English from the *gaokao* show that policymakers are listening to the concerns of those who think there is too much emphasis on English in Chinese education with not enough positive results, at the moment there is reason to believe that English will continue to be a very important part of education, and university education in particular, especially as Chinese universities continue to follow the trend of internationalization. Foreign teachers need to be aware not only of the great importance of English in China, but also that for the majority of students they will come in contact with, English is being learned for, as it were, “Chinese purposes,” regardless of the popular rhetoric about English as an “international” language.