

Teaching English to Primary School Students in the People's Republic of China

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Introduction

English nowadays assumes an important position in the school curriculum as well as in people's daily lives in the People's Republic of China (PRC).¹ As a required subject from primary to postgraduate school, it has a special position in Chinese education (Cheng 2002). From the mid 1990s, together with Chinese and Mathematics, English has become one core element in China's university entrance examinations. Ford (1989: 2) once said that there were more Chinese studying English than there were Americans, with estimates ranging as high as 250 million Chinese students of English.

Today, the number can only increase as China officially begins to implement its policy to introduce English as a standardised compulsory subject for all participants in compulsory education (Ministry of Education, 2001). According to Lai (1993) significant progress is being made. In 2001, all schools in Shanghai taught English in Primary One, for instance. Nationwide, eight million primary school pupils were studying English as a school subject for two to three hours a week, according to Hu (2002a). The goal is to have English courses available for seven to nine years of the compulsory education stage and a total of ten to twelve years for those who go on to university (Cheng 2002: 258). With an estimated total of 121.57 million Chinese primary school students in 2002, according to official statistics, the challenge of providing English language instruction to them all is likely to be a demanding one.

This chapter begins with a history of English teaching since the late *Qing* dynasty. It then reviews the current policy context of English teaching at Chinese schools, followed by an investigation of the realities of program delivery at the local level. It attempts to explain the current English language teaching situation in primary schools, and to evaluate challenges and issues facing policy makers, administrators and teachers. Major issues addressed in this chapter range from curriculum construction, teaching and learning methods and quality and availability of textbooks, to proficiency of teachers and quality of instruction. The analysis is based on the researcher's longstanding personal learning and work experience, and on some primary as well as secondary sources of information about the current situation in China.

The history

In many countries, English is controversial as a school subject because of its resonance of imperialism (Adamson, 2001). The role and status of English in the Chinese school curriculum since it was first introduced in 1902 have been described as a ‘barometer of modernisation’ (Ross, 1992: 240). As the tongue of western imperialists and capitalists, English language teaching (ELT) was treated as a pariah in times of hyper-political activity, such as the Anti-Rightist Movement and the Great Leap Forward in the late fifties and early sixties when languages of political allies, such as Russian and Albanian, were promoted in the curriculum instead (Adamson, 2001).

On the other hand, learning foreign languages has been one of the basic means for China’s nation building (Yang 2002a). Interestingly, while the Chinese may not always welcome English speaking country cultures, and especially westernisation, most Chinese governments have stressed the significance of learning foreign languages. The commercial dominance of, first England, then America, in the twentieth century, has meant that English has become the global language (McKay 2002), a status that is further strengthened by the fact that the international communication system, particularly fuelled by the electronic revolution of the twentieth century (Crystal, 1997), operates primarily in English and further advantages academic communities which use that language (Altbach, 1998).

The tensions surrounding English have created difficulties for education policy makers in their providing, designing and producing of the various components of the intended curriculum, such as the syllabus and textbooks for schools. They often have to navigate a tricky course through a minefield of conflicting demands in choosing content that is culturally and politically appropriate, and approaches to teaching and learning the language that are compatible with local practices (Adamson, 2001).

English has been taught differently during different periods of time in Chinese history (Yang, 2000). Dividing the history into four periods – the late *Qing* dynasty period, the Republican period, the socialist revolutionary period and the open door period – provides convenient units of analysis. This periodisation, however, is not hard and fast. The phenomena are fluid and overlapping, as Adamson (2002) has suggested.

The late *Qing* Dynasty Period (1840–1911)

Formal education in the field of English as a foreign language (EFL) was initiated by two groups of people in the late

Qing dynasty (Yang, 2000). One group included Roman Catholic and Protestant missionaries from the United States and other western countries (Porter, 1990), who set up mission schools with English as the official medium of instruction (Ford, 1989, Deng, 1997). By 1918, mission schools enrolled eight per cent of the total national student population, a substantial number considering that these schools were located only in more industrialised coastal areas, where forty per cent of secondary students were trained by mission schools (Ross, 1992).

The other group of EFL providers were high officials in the *Qing* government. China's door continued to be burst open by western powers during the Opium War of 1839–1842. Before 1840, the Chinese attitude towards foreign languages and cultures was one of disdain and rejection (Yang, 2000). Western learning was, however, imposed after China's humiliating defeat in the Opium War, and began with the learning of western languages. Foreign language education then developed at a speedy pace with the establishment of many foreign language institutions and military technical schools in many major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Wuhan (Mao and Shen, 1988, Wang and Yan, 1994, Feng, 1998).

English was seen particularly as a useful tool for strengthening the country in the face of foreign aggression. The *Tongwen Guan* (literally 'School of Combined Learning'), for example, was established in Beijing by the Foreign Affairs Office in 1861 to enable China to absorb western science and technology (Dzau, 1990), which was facilitated by the study of English (Ross, 1992). This was the beginning of English teaching in government schools. By 1903, English had become a required course in the national secondary school curriculum (Cleverley 1985).

The Republican Period (1911–1949)

English became more important in the society during this period. In coastal cities, English was the language of business, commerce, finance and education. British and American movies, newspapers, magazines and posters could be seen everywhere (Fu 1986).

University admissions were based on the results of competitive entrance examinations that required foreign language competence. Subjects in universities used original English textbooks and reference materials, except for Chinese language, literature, history and philosophy (Yeh, 1990). Proficiency in English was perceived as a gateway to social, economic and geographical mobility (Ross, 1992).

In mission schools, English was almost always taught by native speakers. Original English works were adopted as textbooks. Many other subjects also used English textbooks (Fu 1986), as in the universities. Teachers taught and questioned students in English. There was an emphasis on practice in the target language, more exposure to the language through extensive reading, and use of English as a medium of instruction and for social intercourse. Consequently, students learned to express themselves well in English (Dzau, 1990).

The scenario in government schools was totally different. The prevailing teaching approach used was the grammar-translation method (Richards & Rodgers, 2001), with much rote memorisation and translation on a word for word basis (Dzau, 1990). The emphasis on grammar and translation was determined by the aim to train students to extract foreign language information for domestic use (Yang, 2000).

During this period, English language teaching flourished only in urban areas. In terms of proficiency in English, there was striking variation between the coastal areas and the hinterland and between government and mission schools. In the hinterland, most students

found no use for English in their lives. The question of whether or not teaching English was a waste of time and resources in rural areas was often raised (Yeh, 1990).

The Socialist Revolutionary Period (1949–1978)

The third period started when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came into power in October 1949. This led to a completely new social, political and economic system in China and a national campaign to ‘resist America’ (Price 1979: 32). Parallel to this anti American campaign was China’s lean to the Soviet Union. Russian replaced English as the primary foreign language in China’s schools and universities. Many teachers of English were ordered to switch to teaching Russian (Chen 1981). English teaching was mainly confined to some specialised institutes to train foreign language teachers, translators and interpreters.

After the Sino Soviet split in the late 1950s, the slogan changed from ‘Learn from the Soviet Union’ to ‘Learn from all advanced experience of the world’ (Dzau, 1990: 19). Foreign languages again became compulsory subjects in China’s university entrance examinations in 1962 (Ross, 1992). In 1964, the

Seven Year Guideline for Foreign Language Education was issued. English was officially designated to be the first foreign language in China (Fu 1986). This situation did not last long once Mao Ze-dong launched the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). In the late sixties, English was not taught in schools for several years. English teachers were vilified as ‘spies’ and ‘worshippers of everything foreign.’ Some were murdered by their own students (Adamson, 1998). Foreign classical literature was burnt or hidden away; foreign contemporary literature was banned; and foreign newspapers, radio broadcast and movies were regarded as the forbidden zone (Yang, 2000).

The early 1970s saw English back in some schools’ curriculums. However, English was not viewed as a tool for individual intellectual and academic development, nor was it seen as a gateway for China’s interaction with the other nations. Rather, it was used as a weapon for preaching political dogma (Price 1979). The general goal of the English curriculum was for students to acquire a working knowledge of the literature, without acquiring foreign ideas. Intensive reading and the adaptation of the grammar-translation method were the main methods of English instruction in China (Yang, 2000). Political slogans, moral doctrines and negative descriptions of the capitalist society constitute the themes of the textbooks during this period.

Due to China’s lack of contact with English speaking countries and the position English had in Chinese society, the English learned during this period lacked authenticity. English teaching was characterised by the inculcation of political expressions and an extreme lack of understanding of English speaking countries’ cultures (Yang, 2000). The quality of teaching was also low.

The Open Door Period (1978 – late 1990s)

This period began when China reopened itself to the outside world, a policy adopted at the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China

held in December 1978, after being closed to international intercourse for decades. Maoist utopianism was replaced by Dengist pragmatism (Burton, 1990: 1). Foreign languages were considered to embody the 'scientific, progressive and creative' thinking that China's leaders advocated for modernisation. English became a core course in schools and universities. According to Ross (1992: 251), ninety seven per cent of China's fulltime secondary school foreign language teachers taught English in the early 1990s.

With the open door policy, English was not only a tool for China's modernisation, but a ticket for individual social mobility and academic advancement. One needed to pass English proficiency tests as a secondary school graduate to enter universities, as a university student to graduate, and as a university academic to get promoted.

As for educational objectives, there were increasing calls for the study of foreign language teaching theories and for a synthesis of western and Chinese educational philosophies. With the introduction of western teaching methodologies, the communicative approach gradually gained favour in China. Traditional Chinese teaching and learning styles and 'three centredness' (teacher centred, text centred and grammar centred) became the target of criticism, although this was largely limited to theoretical understanding and to the well resourced schools in developed areas.

With a general focus on communication, overall proficiency in English listening, speaking, reading and writing all received attention (Adamson & Morris, 1997). Diversified English textbooks appeared, embodying various language teaching theories, and in many cases accompanied by colourful pictures and audio and/or video tapes (Yang, 2000). Some textbooks compiled in English speaking countries such as

English 900 from the United States, *New Concept English* from the United Kingdom and *Follow Me* (a TV series produced by the BBC) became popular. The increasing access to authentic English favoured China's developed areas, and again leading to great disparities of English proficiency between different regions within China.

Due to its direct link to modernisation, openness to the outside world and a certain social cachet, English has become a prized commodity and a prerequisite for access to higher education and lucrative employment opportunities since the introduction of economic reforms from 1978 onwards (Adamson & Morris, 1997). Subsequent interest in learning English has been described as a 'mania.' It is estimated that, of the three foreign languages currently offered in secondary schools in China, about 350,000 students learn Russian and about 160,000 study Japanese, but 45.5 million students are learning English (Liu, 1995). In this respect, few countries can compete with China in terms of the priority, time and energy given to the learning of English (Yang, 2001).

The current situation

English is clearly the actual and even quasi-official *number one* foreign language. This is reflected in the special importance the government attaches to English language teaching.

China has a nine-year compulsory education system, from primary school to junior secondary school (Chinese Government, 1998). Normally primary school education takes five to six years, while junior secondary school education takes three to four years, the situation being decided by local governments. During this nine-year period, the Ministry of Education (MOE) requires that English education begin in grade three and that primary school students have at least four periods of English education per week (Cheng 2002). This requirement was to be enforced in all cities and county seats by the Fall of 2001 and in townships twelve months later (Ministry of Education, 2001). In another policy document, *Criteria for English Courses at the Compulsory Education Stage*, MOE defines nine levels of English proficiency, among which the second is the level required for graduation from primary schools (*Zhongguo Jiaoyu Bao* 13 February 2001: 3).

Nevertheless, English is not an official language in China and is not the only foreign language in Chinese education. Other foreign languages, particularly Japanese and Russian, are treated officially on an equal footing with English in primary and secondary schools and in all national examinations. In the drive to promote English teaching in primary schools, MOE also expresses the wish to 'protect and support the teaching of other languages such as Japanese and Russian' (Ministry of Education, 2001) and has drawn up guidelines for Japanese and Russian teaching in junior and senior secondary schools (Ministry of Education, 1995a, 1995b, 1996a, 1996b).

In practice, however, only English flourishes. As MOE 'actively promotes the teaching of English in primary schools,' but only 'protects and supports the teaching of other foreign languages such as Japanese and Russian' (Ministry of Education, 2001), few schools at the compulsory education stage provide foreign language courses other than English (Cheng 2002).

Furthermore, MOE is most recently implementing an ambitious project entitled *The Flowing Dragon of University, Secondary and Primary School English Teaching*, for the coordination of English education from grade one in primary schools to tertiary level, sponsoring and authorising the compilation of textbooks for the project. It has held two work conferences on this project in July 1998 and November 2000 (Cheng 2002).

Long before this latest development, MOE had been sponsoring, authorising, financing and coordinating the compiling of English textbooks for all levels, including grade one in primary schools. Some schools in more developed areas take advantage of this and start their English education in first grade. The Foreign Languages Department of Tsinghua University, for example, receives financial support and official approval from MOE to compile a series of English textbooks for all levels. This series is being used by a host of primary schools, including the affiliated schools of both Peking and Tsinghua Universities from primary grade one (*Zhonghua Dushu Zhoubao* 14 February 2001: 22).

Since 1985, local governments in China have been increasingly participating in formulating teaching programs and selecting teaching materials. Some provincial governments have

taken initiatives to develop their own curricula to suit their local needs. These courses and curricula tend to be more market driven, stressing practical and applied values.

By adopting the policy of decentralisation and making use of market forces in the educational arena, more stakeholders have been encouraged to provide educational services, and the initiatives and enthusiasm of local educational institutions have been enhanced.

Within this policy context, new curricula for all school subjects are being encouraged, while the responsibility for devising the syllabuses remains within MOE, except for Shanghai and Zhejiang Education Commission, which can produce their own. Although some provinces and cities could produce their own teaching resources instead of automatically using those published by the People's Education Press (PEP), all textbook and other resources have to be submitted to the National Evaluation Committee of Primary and Secondary School Textbooks, a bureau within MOE (Adamson, 2001).

Meanwhile, with China's accession to the World Trade Organisation (*Renmin Ribao* 9 November 2001: 1), international cooperation is playing an important role in China's educational development. China has cooperated closely with international organisations such as UNESCO, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNDP, World Bank and many other international or regional organisations. The World Bank alone, for example, has provided China with a loan of US\$14.7 billion for education development programs. Educational aid from other international organisations exceeds more than US\$100 million (Ministry of Education 2003).

Educational objectives: primary and secondary schools

Education objectives in Chinese primary schools have been undergoing great changes, with an aim to move towards more active learning (*Zhongguo Jiaoyu Bao* 27 July 2003: 2). While the general goals of primary education in China remain 'to enable young children to develop morally, intellectually, physically and aesthetically; to lay a foundation for the improvement of the national quality; and to cultivate the socialist citizens with ideas, morality and discipline' (State Education Commission, 1989: 2), increasing attention is being paid to students' positive attitudes towards active learning, with content knowledge itself less and less emphasised.

The textbooks compiled by the People's Education Press, China's most prestigious and authoritative textbook publisher, justified the purpose of English education in primary schools in 1984 as follows:

English is an important tool widely used in international communications all over the world. Teaching English to primary school students has its special significance in training a large number of personnel who are both 'red and expert'² with thorough knowledge of English, and in achieving our country's goal of 'four modernisations' (People's Education Press 1984: 7).

This has been reflected in different syllabi and textbooks issued by the government. Firstly, there is a shift from acquiring knowledge of foreign languages to the capacity of using foreign languages in actual situations. Secondly, the focus is shifting from the political to the economic and the cultural, with increasing positive portrayal of foreign cultures and a

central stress on intercultural understanding. This confirms Xu's (2002) finding that a change in China's higher education syllabuses signifies an 'internationalisation' of cultural references in English teaching, moving away from strict American dependence and even from westernisation.

The official policy documents define the goals of English teaching in primary schools as 'to emphasise the arousal and further fostering of students' interest in learning English,' and 'to guide them to participate actively in simple communications in English' (Ministry of Education, 2001). MOE requires that emphases of teaching be on students' English competency and their interest in communicating in English. In order to achieve this, most evaluation in class should be formative. 'Ranking students' achievements and any competition and selection based on such ranking should be avoided.'

As an integral part of the national reform agenda, recent changes in educational objectives in primary schools are in line with those in secondary schools and universities. Since teaching English to primary school students is a relatively new phenomenon in China, a brief comparison of three secondary school English syllabi here sheds light on the changes over recent years.

In the 1982 *English Syllabus for Fulltime Secondary Schools*, foreign languages were considered an important tool for the study of cultural and scientific knowledge and the promotion of international relations. The purpose of teaching was to provide students with basic training in listening, speaking, reading and writing (Dzau, 1990). Emphasising the access to western technology as the only purpose of English learning, this definition of English education goals shows its heritage from the arbitrary century old *Ti-yong* dichotomy (also called *Ti-yong* formula) (Yang 2002a: 176): 'Chinese learning as the essence, western learning for its utility.'

A syllabus published by the PEP in 1993 remained focused principally on pursuing economic goals, as the preface stated:

A foreign language is an important tool for making contacts with other countries and plays an important role in promoting the development of national and world economy, science and culture. For the purpose of meeting the needs of our Open Door Policy and speeding up the socialist modernisation, every effort should be made to enable as many people as possible to acquire certain command of one or more foreign languages (People's Education Press, 1993: 1).

Such a focus leads to an emphasis on the four skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking, which have been described clearly and separately in China's new *Nine year Universal Education Syllabus* (Lai, 1993).

As China further opened itself, communications between China and the outside world were greatly extended through a variety of cross cultural activities. This ever increasing communication further stimulated English education in China (Feng, 1998). A demand for further educational objectives was raised and a distinct shift was seen in the 2000 *English Syllabus for Fulltime Secondary Schools* which pointed out that:

Foreign languages are an important tool to learn cultural, scientific knowledge and to acquire information from every corner of the world to communicate internationally. By means of learning foreign languages, our understanding of the cultures in other countries will be deepened, our respect for other languages and cultures enhanced, and therefore, our understanding of our own language and culture further strengthened, and the humanistic quality of our students consequently improved (Ministry of Education, 2000: 1).

According to this syllabus, meaningful oral communication was viewed as a primary goal. Students' communicative competence was to be promoted through a variety of teaching strategies. It explained emphatically that attention to language form had to be combined with attention to meaning and to what the students think and want to say. It required that special attention be paid to turning the language skills acquired through practice into the capacity for using the language for the purpose of communication. It urged full integration of listening, speaking, reading and writing. In order to assist students to relate English to their daily life realities, the syllabus insisted that English be used as much as possible in teaching and learning activities, while the use of mother tongue to communicate in class be restricted to the minimum necessary (MOE, 2000).

Such a stand does not lack theoretical ground, as Adamson & Morris (1997: 22) remind us. When students realise that they can communicate in English, they go on learning with more interest and motivation. This is further confirmed by Professor Liu Dao-yi (1995, 2003), an influential figure in Chinese English teaching, who has repeatedly pointed out that the cultural use of the language for communication is being placed in a prominent position for the first time in the history of EFL in China. The shifting emphases indicate that schools will no longer simply teach students about the language but also how to use it (Liu, 1995: 2).

The ambit of nationwide English education has been expanded to include some study of foreign cultures reinforcing the new focus on going beyond the development of communicative competence. Besides providing basic training in the four linguistic skills, the English curriculum in Chinese schools also strives to develop students' thinking ability, to help them acquire more knowledge of foreign culture, to strengthen international understanding, to arouse their learning interest, and to form correct methods and good habits of study so that an initial foundation can be laid for their further study of English (Ministry of Education, 2000).

This evolutionary process suggests a link between the sociopolitical climate and the nature of ELT pedagogy that is officially promoted (Adamson, 2001). During periods of hyper-politicisation, the contents of textbooks tended to be centred more on written texts, with transmissive pedagogy as an appropriate means of disseminating propaganda. The radical ideologues denounced the slogan of learning from foreign countries and condemned anything foreign as counter revolutionary (Feng, 1998). In the new syllabi and textbooks, the political curriculum has a much lower profile.

The following table serves as a summary of recent shifting emphases in English teaching in Chinese schools:

From	To
1. Knowledge of English	→ English Language use
2. Ideological orientation	→ Intercultural awareness and understanding
3. Moral doctrines	→ Crosscultural competency
4. Knowledge based instruction	→ Appropriate learning interests, habits and methods
5. Explanation	→ Performance
6. Rote learning	→ Thinking ability
7. Written work	→ Oral work
8. Text	→ Situation
9. Uniformity	→ Individuality
10. Reading in chorus	→ Group work
11. Minority acquisition of TL	→ Majority access to TL
12. Criticism	→ Praise
13. Grades for promotion	→ Quality for life
14. Receptive skills	→ Productive skills

Table 1. Shifting emphases of English teaching in Chinese schools

The new textbooks

The contemporary model of curriculum development in China was first shaped in the 1950s based on the Soviet experience. As China's educational reform continues, local government initiatives are being put under the spotlight (Ding, 2003). While the curriculum in China's primary schools is still formulated by MOE, it varies, dependent on resources, language and economic needs (Ashmore, 1997: 13), with more and more modifications in recent years.

New developments in curriculum construction focally give expression to textbooks. This is especially the case when we look at the most widely used textbooks across regions within China. They are normally published by the PEP, which works closely with the Curriculum and Teaching Materials Research Institute, a unit of MOE founded in 1983 and comprising PEP staff and consultants from tertiary institutions inside and outside China. Given PEP's resources, experience and prestige as part of MOE, textbooks produced by PEP represent seventy per cent of the national market value (Liu, 1995).

Since the mid 1980s, the Chinese central government has also encouraged local authorities to produce textbooks for use in primary schools. This is to better serve different regional needs and to further diversify education (Hu 2002a). Alternative textbook services for English are being produced by a variety of agencies. In Guangdong, for instance, there are textbooks compiled by the South China Normal University, while similar work has been done by Beijing Normal University, Sichuan Educational Science Institute and the Southwest Normal University, and a team from Jiangsu Province.

	Primary English Book 2	Primary English for China Book 1	Primary English Book 2	Primary English Book 2
1. Publisher	Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press and the Pearson Education North Asia Ltd (Longman)	People's Education Press and The Pan Pacific Publishing Company	People's Education Press	People's Education Press
2. Year of publication	2001	1992	1985	1985
3. Number of lessons or units	7 units	8 units	13 lessons	13 lessons
4. Colour pages	79 out of 81 pages	103 out of 107 pages	3 out of 87 pages	3 out of 87 pages
5. Structure	Unit <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lessons -Dialogues/Vocabulary -Dialogues Practice -Language Focus -Language Focus Activities -Sounds 	Parts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Units -Lessons 	Lesson <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drill • Dialogues • Words and Expressions • Exercises 	Lesson <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drill • Dialogues • Words and Expressions • Exercises
6. Political themes	No political themes identified	Tiananmen Square in Unit 4 on page 44 Tiananmen Square on	National flag on pages 1, 9 and 22; page 17; Young Pioneers with red scarves on page 63; Children of New China on page 65	National flag on pages 1, 9 and 22; page 17; Young Pioneers with red scarves on page 63; Children of New China on page 65
7. Moral messages	Being polite in Units 1, 2, 3, 5, 6 and 7	Being polite in Units 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7 and 8; Environmental protection in Unit 7 on page 74	Love of Motherland China on 2 pages; Offering help on 1 page	Love of Motherland China on 2 pages; Offering help on 1 page

	Primary English Book 2	Primary English for China Book 1	Primary English Book 2	Primary English Book 2
8. Scientific and technology information	No attention to technology and science	Spaceship in Unit 2 on page 20	No attention to technology and science	No attention to technology and science
9. English-speaking countries mentioned	Never mentioned	USA, UK in Units 5 on page 61; Foreign buildings in Unit 5 on page 61	Never mentioned	Never mentioned
10. Textbook characters	Chinese characters in Lessons 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 13; western characters in Lesson 7	Chinese in Units 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8; western in Units 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8	Chinese characters in Lessons 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 13; western characters in Lesson 7	Chinese in Units 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7; western in Units 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7
11. Names of places	Chinese in lessons 2 and 4	PRC, USA and UK in Unit 5 on page 61	Chinese in lessons 2 and 4	None
12. Names of people	Chinese in Lessons 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 12 and 13; western in Lesson 7	Chinese in Units 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7; western in Units 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 8	Chinese in Lessons 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 12 and 13; western in Lesson 7	Chinese in Unit 1; western in Unit 1
13. Recurrent characters	Few	Units 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6	Few	Units 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7

Table 2. Some comparisons between three primary school English

In consideration of the longstanding dominance of the PEP and the newly emerging local textbooks market, I now offer some comparisons between three primary English textbooks (see Table 2 below): the first is *Primary English Book 2* compiled by PEP (1985), the second is *Primary English for China Book 1* published jointly by PEP and the Pan Pacific Publishing Company in Singapore (1992), and the third is *Primary textbooks English Book 2* jointly produced by the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press and Pearson Education North Asia Ltd (Longman) (2001).

The similarities and disparities between these selected textbooks first demonstrate clear, increasing international influence in the compilation of English textbooks used in Chinese primary schools. More foreign scholars are participating directly in such activities. At the same time, Chinese editors are accommodating to international trends. Chinese scholars are fully aware that there have been significant developments in the theory and practice of ELT in recent decades in many parts of the world, especially with regard to the use of the language for purposeful communication. A more communicative approach is seen by them as the way to improving the ability of students to use realistic English.

Secondly, the increase in the use of western characters and names is substantial. In the latest editions, the percentages are almost fifty fifty, with more use of the same characters in several units or lessons than previously. Most topics in the new textbooks focus on children's daily life as they interact in school or engage in activities at home. The presence of western characters is not new, but their placement in a variety of specific contexts is. This is, according to Adamson (2001), the result of involving foreign and Chinese scholars in textbooks compilation.

Thirdly, the new textbooks are oriented strongly towards the communicative aim of the curriculum. They are full of everyday interactions and cultural information. Most interactions comprise functional dialogues. Interesting examples are found in every unit. As they are designed for very young children, there is not much portrayal of English speaking countries, yet, it is evident that a balance has been carefully kept between representations of Chinese and western cultures. For example, in *Primary English Book 2* (2001), there are two specific cultural topics: one is Easter and the other The Dragon Boat Festival.

Fourthly, it should be acknowledged as a big step forward that English textbook compilers in today's China avoid political instruction, a dominant feature of English textbooks after 1949 when political essays, especially those written by the famous CCP leaders, were much used. The current emphasis has shifted to moral education. When possible, reading passages contain some form of moral message, focusing particularly on polite behaviours. Compared to the 1985 textbook, there is absolutely no mention of the CCP or its leaders, and no passages casting foreign countries in a poor light. Instead, messages promote international understanding of other nations, in line with open door policies rather than hardline ideology, and is in step with the trend of the times (Yang 2002b).

Overall, the latest primary English textbooks are characterised by innovations such as use of more communication oriented pedagogy and the promotion of a greater understanding of western cultures. An eclectic approach used in them to suit the diversified local needs and experience of teachers throughout China is discernible. While some traditional aspects, such as the use of memorisation and drilling are still evident, the general focus of the course is on communication. It is also well worth mentioning that as China's economy develops and financial support for English education has grown, new textbooks are much better designed with larger page size, better quality illustrations throughout, and most pages including colour pictures.

Teaching and learning methods

The fact that English has attracted a large enthusiastic learner population in China (Owens, 1998) does not necessarily ensure good progress of most Chinese students in their English learning. A survey carried out by the then State Education Commission (SEC) in fifteen provinces and cities in 1986 alarmed educators by showing that most secondary school graduates could not communicate in simple English after attending 900 hours worth of English lessons. SEC thus decreed that English curriculum reform was necessary and a more communicative approach to teaching should be promoted.

Today, Chinese school teachers are encouraged by official policies to act freely to choose their own pedagogy to suit the individual needs of their classes and students, with the stress upon the cultivation of language competence and performance in English rather than upon knowledge about the language (Adamson, 2001). Some teachers like the communicative and situational methods and even pledge that they will teach in a more communicative manner (Lai, 1993). Some academics also welcome this trend, although it has, however, been controversial in China. Some educationalists argue that communicative pedagogy does not match the cultural context and learning styles of Chinese students (Hu 2002b). The result is a cautious approach to pedagogical reform to synthesise the appropriate western practices with Chinese beliefs about teaching and learning.

Indeed, every teaching approach has its strengths and weaknesses for different learners. Indiscriminate use of communicative approach may result in failure, something many foreign teachers have experienced in the Chinese classroom (Li, 1999). As a Chinese professor of English argued:

According to my own experience, there are no methods that are absolutely good or bad. Even the long neglected grammar-translation method has its strengths that can be used to facilitate teaching. The question, I think, is not whether a method is good or not, but whether or not the teacher knows how, for what purpose, for what kind of students, and in what language situation, a particular method is used to enhance learning effectively. Therefore, in my opinion, a good teacher should be able to select as well as to blend the methods available to him/her to fit his/her own purpose (Xu, 1993: 3).

There are several reasons why there has been limited use of the communicative approach. Firstly, it requires not only native-like fluency in English, but also native-like knowledge

of the culture of English speaking countries. Not many teachers have received such training. Secondly, the role played by Chinese students in their classrooms is to listen to their teacher. This is in sharp contrast to the strategies central to the communicative approach, with students taking a more overtly active role in learning. Also, many students taught with the communicative approach do not perform well on tests and complain that they do not feel they are learning anything.

Compared to major English speaking countries, China is culturally, politically and linguistically different. Teaching and learning methods which are effective in the former may not be applicable or suitable to the latter (Ashmore, 1997). More specifically, unlike English as a second language learners, EFL learners do not live in the target language community and are not immersed in the language. In China's primary schools, the medium of instruction is Mandarin Chinese and students are exposed to English only during class time. The English input given by teachers is essential yet far from enough to support the development of learner fluency (Lai, 1993).

The majority of students are exposed to English for one to three hours per week in class. Outside class, English is seldom heard apart from a state television program and foreign radio broadcast. This has created a number of problems for EFL teachers. Students have extremely limited chance for oral practice, only a few minutes a week. Moreover, teachers of English in China have almost no authentic English support materials.

In practice, attention, discipline, whole class instruction, recitation and drill characterise classroom instruction. Knowledge level thinking is emphasised. The teacher directs instructional activities and manages student behaviour (Ashmore, 1997). In English classes, students are taken through a text on a word by word, phrase by phrase basis, the teacher explaining points of vocabulary, syntax, style and content along the way. Traditionally, exercises for practising were substitution drills, combination drills, translation between Chinese and English, and reading aloud. Grammatical and lexical accuracy, attention to form rather than meaning and explanation and memorisation of individual words and their usage are obvious outcomes of this kind of teaching approach. Language is taught largely through pattern drills instead of communicative activities (Dzau, 1990).

Other concerns

The increasing responsibility of local governments for educational investment has reduced the role of central government and increased the power of the provincial and county governments in educational planning and administration. While there remains an increasing rural urban disparity in terms of educational opportunity, recent economic reforms have also contributed to regional disparities in education. Huge changes in social stratification have created large disadvantaged social groups. Under these circumstances, local governments with few resources cannot provide adequate education support.

It is thus not surprising that while a secondary graduate from a remote rural area might barely have a vocabulary of 1,600 words as required by the national syllabus and have

literally no ability in listening and speaking, graduates from some secondary schools in Beijing and Shanghai often have vocabularies of 5,000 words and may be fairly proficient in listening, speaking, reading and writing. This situation is due to differences in financial conditions, level of exposure to western media, and more importantly, availability of qualified teachers.

For instance, in a less developed area like Shanxi province in 2000, sixty per cent of secondary school English teachers were not fully qualified, many of them having received no tertiary training at all (Yang, 2000: 18). In Jiangxi province in the 1988-89 academic year, there were, altogether, 13,754 secondary school English teachers. Only about five per cent had a Bachelor's degree, about thirty three per cent had a two to three year college associate degree, and the rest were rated 'underqualified' (Dzau, 1990).

A related issue is that while local textbooks keep appearing, it is necessary to highlight the rationale for the popularity of textbooks produced by the PEP. This is because many local publishers are not well staffed enough to compile textbooks that can strike an appropriate balance between various demands. But even *Primary English Book 2* (Longman), for example, throws out the baby with the bathwater as it tries to limit political messages and incorporate more cultural information about English speaking countries. Many scenarios within it are entirely based on English speaking societies. Even when it tries to sound culturally neutral, messages communicated by illustrations are often too western. For example, on page 32 in Unit 3, there is a huge house with a big western style kitchen, quite unlike what exists in China. There are also many western cartoon figures that are unlikely to make much sense to most Chinese children, especially as most of its target group are young students in an economically poor region where a substantial proportion of the population still lives in poverty.

Another issue that concerns Chinese language policy makers is the so called 'side effect' of the importance of English in society – the possible decline in respect for, and capability in, Chinese history and language. This is not an utterly new issue. Once in the past, everything western was worshiped. Many graduates from mission schools found it difficult to work with their own people and were ignorant about rural China (Gregg 1946, Yeh, 1990, Deng, 1997). As a student of Nankai University wrote in 1924:

The University teachers teach American politics, American economy, American commerce, American railways, American this, American that. They praise the United States in the same way old scholars praised the sages *Yao, Shun, Yu, Tang* and the like (Price 1979: 97).

Moreover, many rural students who were not good at English were denied opportunities to enter universities (Yeh, 1990). A much discussed issue is the question of whether or not starting early is important when it comes to teaching new languages to very young children. While these young children might have a greater likelihood of acquiring alternative phonological patterns along with their first words in the target language than older people, there are serious concerns about insufficient immersion in their home language and culture (*Zhongguo Jiaoyu Bao* 3 September 2002: 3). While the importance of teaching about

target culture in the classroom is recognised, care should be taken not to present foreign values and beliefs as universal truths to be embraced without discrimination (Hu 2002a).

Furthermore, because of the sheer size of China, many proficient English teachers are lured away by the business sector. Like their counterparts in many countries, English teachers in China are being faced with the challenge of teaching English to younger and younger learners. However, they have been provided with minimal retraining for this new responsibility. The reality is that their oral proficiency is far from fluent. This hampers their use of situational or communicative methods. In order to improve EFL, more training must be given to help them improve their oral proficiency.

In addition, with the ongoing process of decentralisation, regional governments in China are now promoting local varieties of English. Instead of spending large sums of money on importing native speaking teachers and externally developed materials, funding could be set aside for the professional development of local teachers and for the development of regionally appropriate ELT curricula.

Concluding remarks

Similar to the situation in many other countries, recognition of the role of English as an essential medium for business and intercultural communication between speakers of other languages underpins the provision of ELT as the official vehicle for intercultural education in Chinese schools. The potential dangers of linguistic imperialism brought by the international spread of English have been well documented (see, for example, Phillipson, 1992, Pennycook, 1994), yet countries could turn the language to their own advantage, under the right conditions and with the right strategy. ELT with Chinese characteristics is used by the state as a tool in its quest to promote the economic and cultural wellbeing of the citizens of the PRC, and to enable China to enjoy international status as a strong, independent nation, rather than one subjugated by foreign powers (Adamson, 2001).

China's case is unique in many ways. The twists and turns of English education over the past century in China are the result of the quest for western modernity and the interplay of western values and Chinese traditions (Yang, 2001). The case of China provides other countries with a valuable example with its blend of enthusiasm for English and resistance to western approaches to teaching and learning. Internationally, it demonstrates both similarities and disparities when compared to other countries, where there is an evidence of centralised, top down language planning policy.

China is planning to fully achieve modernisation of English education in schools by the mid twenty first century (Liu, 2003). Judging by the current development, this is not a too ambitious task, provided China's economy keeps growing and political stability is maintained. By 2050, it will be interesting to observe how the landscape of world languages might be transformed dramatically when a population group of this size has reasonable English proficiency. While the world of our children's future will be one where knowledge of English will certainly be helpful, if not essential, for very large numbers of people, we

also wonder whether or not many of world populations will feel under greater pressure to learn Mandarin Chinese when such a group is fluent in English.

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Endnotes

- ¹ I use 'People's Republic of China' and 'China' interchangeably throughout this chapter for ease of expression. The situations of English teaching in Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan are not included in this chapter. I recognise that, in constitutional terms, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan are all parts of China.
- ² 'Red and expert' was a term coined in the Mao era to refer to professionals and academics with strong political conscience.

