



Teaching Note

A CHINA-FOCUSED TEACHING SESSION: HOW FINDINGS HAVE BEEN USED FOR TEACHING IN ANOTHER DISCIPLINE

Research findings from the project 'Collaborating for Success' informed the development of a teaching session within Murdoch University's Master of Education program. In order to highlight language acquisition in diverse cultural contexts, education students were required to work through case studies, including one on English language teaching and learning in China. Below is the content for the China-focused teaching session which was available online in Semester 2, 2014.

CHINA CASE STUDY

for the unit EDU604 Different Englishes and Interpretations of Language, Culture and Identity

Introduction

This session allows us to examine many of the ideas addressed through the themes of this unit in respect of a specific context, namely English language teaching and learning in China. Nineteen percent of the world's population lives in China and all of these people are required to engage with the English language through school curriculum. This means that there is an extraordinarily large number of people, in this one nation, who can be described as EFL learners. Their experience of English, however, is not perhaps what would be considered to be preparation for intercultural exchange with other speakers of English – native speakers as well as ELF speakers. English in China is different and serves a different purpose. It is, in essence, English for China appropriated in a quite different way from Englishes in other parts of the world.

What is this thing called English within China?

So what is this thing called English in China? English curriculum in schools and also tertiary institutions suggests that there are similar goals for English language learning in China to those for second or foreign language learning in Western countries such as Australia. Rhetoric around the importance of communication and culture abound but the reality of classrooms is far removed from the language of government curriculum and policy documents. English in China is about grammar and lists of words. It's not about listening, speaking or writing, or about understanding the world views of English language speakers.

“[Chinese students] use grammatical rules to try to read texts in the same way that they would work out a puzzle or a mathematical equation.” (Norris, n.d.)

English learning is focused on 'cracking the code'. It is not about appreciating and using language as social practice. English is removed from real communicative contexts. Students learn English to pass exams in order to facilitate educational advancement and open educational and professional opportunities.

Focus questions

Andy Gao (2012, p.352) has made the statement “China for essence, the West for utility”.

- What do you think is meant by this statement?
- How does such a statement position learners, users and teachers of English in China?

Empowerment and disempowerment through English

Increasingly in China the forced learning of English in schools and universities is being challenged. How is this compulsory element of curriculum going to be of benefit to most Chinese? Questions are being asked as to what extent EFL is actually empowering for the population of China. The Olympics of 2008 provided impetus and a reason for English learning that was tangible for Chinese. However, the post Olympic period has not seen the opening of China to the outside world in the way that was envisaged. As such, learning English grammar to pass tests has 'lost its gloss' in terms of being perceived by many as being empowering.

Even for those who pass the tests and then study abroad there is often an initial

period of disempowerment as they experience, and then struggle to negotiate 'real' English. For those who do use English in a more global context there are advantages and opportunities within China, and thus English is empowering. What needs to be remembered, however, is that these opportunities are afforded to very few in the grander Chinese scheme of things.

Focus questions

- In response to your reading, and to the knowledge you have of China, articulate your position with respect to English being a compulsory element of curriculum in China? Make a case for why you think it should or shouldn't be.
- Provide additional and specific examples of where English can be empowering or disempowering for Chinese.

Language, culture and identity

In Session 8 you were introduced to 'Crazy English'. Crazy English exemplifies much with respect to how English language learning and teaching can be interpreted in China - a pedagogy that involves 'shouting English out' without attention to meaning or interaction with other English speakers, and a rationale that is about Chinese nationalism and China's strength. English is internally focused. It is about China and Chinese identity. There is little or no exposure to authentic English text. Instead, Chinese learners of English study the importance of face, and other values and virtues that are integral within Chinese society. Exposure to culture is to Chinese culture or, if there is a foreign focus, it is on what is commonly referred to as 'high culture' - art, literature etc. Little is included that directs learners attention to the cultural norms of L1 English speakers, or to the real conventions of English language usage. The West is essentialised (just as in Australia we tend to essentialise Asia). Thus, for Chinese graduates who have ostensibly done well in English, there is very little knowledge or awareness of what people who speak English are really like, as well as just how different English speaking contexts can be – geographically, historically, politically, socially and culturally.

Focus questions

Discuss the appropriation of English in contemporary China.

- How does it differ from other examples you have encountered in your readings for this unit?
- What specific factors have influenced the appropriation and why has their influence been significant in shaping English in China?

Bringing the session together

English in China forms a quite different picture from English in many other parts of the world. The readings you have for this session give you a good indication as to what, and why, the situation in China is as it is. In particular, the paper by Wang Wenfeng and Xuesong (Andy) Gao, through its review of research in China, identifies salient factors, significant features and current (and possibly future) issues and trends with respect to English in China. The learning and teaching of English in this context is political, it's huge, it's contentious, and it also has the potential to be very significant globally given the way in which China is positioning herself for her future. The interpretations of, and interfaces between languages, culture and identity in China are not only of great interest but deserve attention and consideration as China strengthens its connections around the world.

References

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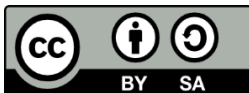
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Additional materials and resources are available from
<http://chinapostgraduates.murdoch.edu.au>

Project Team

Christine Daymon (Murdoch University, Project Leader)
Lindy Norris (Murdoch University)
Maree Keating (Victoria University)
Fiona Henderson (Victoria University)
Haixia Yu (Communication University of China)
Dawei Wang (Communication University of China)
Jennie Bickmore-Brand
Linda Butcher (Murdoch, Project Manager)
Yibing Liu (Research Assistant)

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