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A Brief Introduction about the Current State of Teaching English in China

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Abstract

English teaching and learning are very popular in China. Recently, English language instruction has been reformed to meet the needs of economic development in both China and the world. In this paper, the current state of English language teaching in China is introduced from an “insider’s” perspective, regarding enrollment in colleges and universities; the change from test-oriented English teaching to ability-oriented English teaching; issues concerning the teaching of English in the multimedia environment; and the use of computer and online formats to cultivate students’ English language abilities, such as speaking, reading, and writing. The information presented in this article will help meet the needs of those teachers who are interested in teaching in China or who wish to have a better understanding of their students from China.

Introduction

Since stepping into the 21st century, English language teaching in China has been faced with two challenges, one internal and the other external. The first stems simply from the educational institutions themselves, which have been impacted by the increasing use of modern educational devices, such as computers and the Internet. Almost all universities and colleges in China have established learning centers equipped with computers for use by students learning English as a foreign language (EFL). These centers have the dual functions of providing teachers with the materials needed to teach English through media or online formats and of supplying students with the materials to learn English independently outside of class. The external challenge has come from the environmental tension of the international economy after China’s entering the World Trade Organization (WTO). Many foreign businesses, run solely by foreigners themselves or by both foreign and Chinese corporations, have mushroomed in China with the result that Chinese people use English more than ever before.

To accommodate these situations, there has been a great change in all aspects in English language teaching in China, the most significant change being the one from a test-oriented approach to an ability-oriented approach. This is important for all educators to understand—not only those in China, but also educators in the U.S. who teach students from China—because English language teaching in China is no longer focused on test scores but rather on the English skills and abilities of students.

Enrollment Expansion in Colleges and Universities in China

Higher educational opportunities, along with the need for English language skills, have increased in China due to the above changes in the international scene. One of the greatest changes in higher education in China is the expansion of enrollments at
colleges and universities. This can be seen in student enrollment numbers from 1985 to 2002 (China Education and Research Network, 2005):

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Student Enrollments</td>
<td>170,300</td>
<td>206,300</td>
<td>290,600</td>
<td>556,100</td>
<td>719,100</td>
<td>903,400</td>
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The statistics above show that the number of student enrollments in 1985 was 170,300; in 2002 it had reached 903,400; therefore, within 17 years, it had increased 5.3 times. This expansion of enrollment, however, has kept pace with the needs of the development of the Chinese economy, because so many companies and businesses need their employees to use English to communicate with their customers both domestically and internationally. That need, in return, has impacted traditional English language teaching and caused a reform in English language teaching at all colleges and universities in China.

**English Language Teaching in China**

Since English is one of the basic courses at universities and colleges, all students are required to study English during their first two years of schooling at the post-secondary level. After this, students are free to enroll in related English electives, such as English literature, American culture, translation, and so on, in order to continue developing their English skills and abilities. English, as a basic course in the first two years, as well as English electives in the next two years, are all required to be conducted in the English language. Therefore, students have more opportunities to practice and improve their English language skills, enabling them to better meet English requirements in their work positions after they graduate from a four-year educational institution.

As has been established above, at one time, English language teaching in China was simply designed to meet the needs of the country’s requirement, but now it has been shifted to meet the needs of both domestic and global economic development. In the matter of English teaching in China, there are two situations: one is that English is taught to English majors, which occurs mostly in language universities or colleges, such as Shanghai Foreign Language Studies University, Beijing Foreign Language University, and Guangzhou Foreign Language University. The other situation is that English is taught to non-English majors, which is the case at all universities, colleges, and schools in China. Thus, all students, both English majors and non-English majors, are required to study English, to some level of proficiency, in Chinese universities and colleges, as well as in other school levels.
In addition to traditional language teaching, new elements have been added to all levels of English teaching, such as computer-assisted English instruction, multimedia classroom, online teaching and learning, and even televised English courses on TV programs, as shown in Figure 1.

As can be seen in this brief illustration of levels of English instruction in China, English as a major area of study forms a separate level for university or college students and different English courses are required in their curriculums compared to other major areas. At this level, the courses and concurrent requirements for language ability are much higher than those in the level of non-English majors, and therefore the number of students who can select English as their major is limited.

On the second level of Figure 1, it can be seen that English is one of the important courses being taught in all classes, as every student at every school receives English lessons. Because of this and the aforementioned changes in the global economy, including China’s role in said economy, and also because of China’s need for interaction with foreigners, students’ motivation for learning English has grown stronger than ever before.

Most recently, there has been considerable attention given to the fact that English teaching is quite different from other areas of teaching, such as teaching history, mathematics, or physics. In English language classes, language is taught through language (Cook, 2000, p. 121). That makes English language teaching and learning more difficult (Nunan, 2001, p. 40). The Chinese government realizes this fact clearly and, therefore, invests large sums of money into English language teaching in order to make a new environment for both teaching and learning, with the long term goal being to better serve the needs of the developing Chinese economy.

**Dual Oriented Approach of English Teaching in China**

During the time that university and college enrollments began expanding, it was also the time that the computer was being applied to teaching, especially to English language teaching, and that caused the concepts of teaching English to change. A significant change (as mentioned above) was from a test-oriented approach of English language teaching, in which students’ language abilities were measured by test scores, to an ability-oriented method of English language teaching, which focuses on more practical ways of teaching students how to apply and use the English language. This
new concept has improved and enhanced the communication and cooperation between China and the world. For instance, those students who have graduated from a test-oriented approach have found it difficult to communicate with foreigners in their workplace. Because of this, some of them have gone back to school to attend part-time classes in order to improve their oral English. This situation occurred because the test-oriented approach of teaching English was concerned more with test scores that students earned than with students’ actual language applications. In contrast, those who have graduated from an ability-oriented approach of English language teaching have experienced fewer problems in communicating with foreigners because they have received more time to improve their actual use of language in the ability-oriented classroom. In other words, the ability-oriented approach of English language teaching emphasizes students’ language use rather than how high of a test score they can achieve.

As noted above, for many years, teaching English in China followed the test-oriented approach to the teaching of English and the classroom was a “crowded human environment” in which one person, namely the teacher, was responsible for all activities that happened in class, as well as encouraging and enhancing the learning processes (Cazden, 2001, p. 136). This situation was common in English teaching ten years ago, when most schools focused on teaching English subskills as separate areas. For example, if the teacher dealt with reading comprehension in class, he/she would probably concentrate on a reading project. For a listening project, it was the business of the listening class. Therefore, each subskill area was measured by its own score unconnected to the other language subskill areas. This can be simply described as seen in Figure 2.

![Fig. 2. The mode of Test-oriented English Teaching](image)

Figure 2 above illustrates a model of the test-oriented approach to English language teaching. It concerns students’ specific test abilities, stressing the scores the students could achieve rather than the abilities the students could apply in their daily lives. As can be seen in Figure 2, English teaching was actually divided into two parts: ability and test score. On one hand, this model seems logical for the sake of learning a language, but on the other hand, it is not acceptable, because students actually worried more about their test scores than their abilities to use the language.

In order to address this problem, since 1999, the test-oriented approach to English language teaching has been changing into an ability-oriented approach, and this change has been accompanied by the advent of the computer being utilized in the classroom. Now, student-independent learning is advocated, including the students’ active participation in class learning, students’ self-directed online learning, and English activities incorporated both in and out of the classroom. These activities have
come to be almost as important as the students’ class work (Datesman, Crandall, & Kearney, 2005), where students are encouraged to ask and answer questions, discuss topics, and think both individually and in peer groups. Students are also encouraged to use the Internet and learn online. The purpose of this new approach is not only to teach students content area knowledge but also to teach them how to learn, how to develop their abilities to apply English, and how to solve problems they might encounter while learning English. This ability-oriented approach can be characterized as in Figure 3.

The ability-oriented approach to English language teaching, as Figure 3 shows, is supplemented by the computer, networks, and media, all of which engage students in more vivid activities of English learning, as well as the incorporating higher cognitive processes of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Brophy & Good, 1997). This approach centers on the development of the students’ ability to use English, specifically, language subskill areas such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation, all taught jointly in the ability-oriented teaching environments, so that students have more opportunities to practice and internalize the English language.

Most importantly, the ability-oriented English language teaching approach advocates for student-independent learning in whichever type of classroom is encountered—traditional, multimedia, or even computer classrooms. Classroom teaching, therefore, is regarded as only a part of the whole English language teaching and learning process. To be more exact, in the ability-oriented English class, the teacher will likely demonstrate or explain for students the difficult points which students have met or will meet in their learning according to the textbook or teaching process. The teacher will then try to build in class activities in which students can practice their English in different ways: writing, listening, speaking, and even debating. In the ability-oriented English class, students are encouraged to demonstrate their abilities of using language, including fulfilling their assignments on-line or out of the classroom. Therefore, the teacher, as Figure 3 shows, has a dual-status: teacher and coach. As a teacher, he or she functions as a participant or attendant in class rather than simply as an organizer or director. The teacher helps students to deal with the teaching projects and students sustain their own abilities to inquire about and reflect on their own subjects of interest. As a coach, he or she acts as an instructor to help students carry out their learning plan and help students solve problems in their self-learning either face-to-face or through the internet. Both teachers’ and students’ achievements are evaluated by their work in and out of class.
Conclusion

English teaching in China has its own characteristics and, overall, has improved significantly in its effectiveness in recent years. The fact that English teaching in China has made such great progress is partly because of foreign teachers who have and still continue to help in the teaching of English. Hopefully, this brief introduction has served a dual purpose: first, as a useful reference for those who are planning to teach English in China; and second, for those teaching in the U.S.A., as a source for understanding Chinese students’ past teaching and learning experiences, prior to coming to the United States, in order to better support their transition.

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