

Beware of Blind Westernisation of TEFL in Asia: A Chinese Case Study

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This paper deals with the issue of potential blind Westernisation of TEFL in Asia by conducting a case study of TEFL in China and looking at such concepts as process and outcome, extrinsic motive force and inherent motive force, and teacher's qualification: scholar and teacher. The author points out that "internationalization" and "modernization" can easily turn into "Westernisation". The comparison of the occidental with the Asian system of TEFL is made to offer the kernel of a powerful argument about the future of TEFL in Asia – Go your own way.

China's "open door policy" to the West, introduced more than a decade ago, has injected an insatiable appetite for English language teaching and learning. Now, China annually recruits 100,000 foreign experts to teach English as a foreign language (source: www.Chinatefl.com). According to one Internet recruiting website there are 150,000 foreign TEFL teachers working in China (www.AbroadChina.com). With the recent influx into university students in China, there has been a growing interest in the nature of the Chinese learner in the English language learning. Some researchers focus on their learning patterns and the ways in which this will impact upon teaching. Much of the literature in this area is concerned with Chinese students' approaches to learning, from the perspective of difference and it suggests that Chinese learners' approaches to academic study are qualitatively different to a Western approach and by implication, somewhat inadequate. The

suggestion is that Chinese learners have neither the written or oral skills of analysis and reflection, nor the independence of thought and study that are required in Western universities (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991).

Professor Alan Maley, who has worked in eight countries including PR China, India and Singapore, said in 1986, “Chinese student and foreign teacher rarely share the same views on the nature of the teaching process. Even now the most widely accepted view of learning in China is that it is memory-based. The teacher, or the textbook, has the knowledge. In order to acquire it, it is sufficient for the student to commit it to memory. This inevitably condemns both teachers and students to the use of non-meaningful approaches, in which grammatical form (usually devoid of contextual meaning) takes precedence over meaningful communication.” The following metaphorical expression used to be and even now is very popular: the Chinese “students demonstrate their ability to work hard at digging a hole. But all too often, it is dug in the wrong place.” (Maley, 1986)

The following questions emerge from a discussion such as this: Are Chinese learners’ approaches to academic study qualitatively different to a Western approach? In what way? Are they inadequate by implication? Do we really need to transplant the Western education models? What do we really need in the Asian context, modernisation or Westernisation?

MODERNISATION OR WESTERNISATION

In Kachru’s model of new Englishes, he has visualized the spread of English around the world as three concentric circles representing different ways in which the language has been acquired and is currently used. The Inner Circle refers to the traditional historical and sociolinguistic bases of English in the areas where it is the primary language (native or first language; UK, Ireland, Canada, the USA, Australia, New Zealand). The Outer Circle comprises regions colonized by Britain; the spread of English in non-native settings, where the language has become part of the country’s chief institutions,

and plays an important “second language” role in a multilingual setting (India, Singapore, Malawi). The Expanding Circle involves nations which recognize the importance of English as an international language, but they do not have the history of colonization, nor does English have any special status in their language policy. In these areas, English is primarily a foreign language. Asia is an important part of this circle.

The increase in the use of English in Asia is overwhelming: at present, the estimated population using English in Asia adds up to about 380 million. With the birth of the University of Nottingham, Ningbo, China comes the latest stage in higher education’s expansion into a global market. This £40m project, agreed with the Chinese education authorities, is the first time a UK university has opened a purpose-built campus in China. Professor Douglas Tallack, Nottingham’s Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Internationalisation, said: “The University is following the UK Government’s approach and making its own positive contribution to the development of China.” “China, itself, has moved to a new stage in its relationships with foreign educational institutions and recent legislation permits and encourages foreign institutions to establish campuses in order to modernise the high education system. ... The University believes this will sit well with current programmes of reform and modernization in China itself.”

Then what does it mean by internationalization? If internationalization is an essential part of higher education, can it be a kind of modernization or a kind of Westernisation?

First of all we have to define the term Westernisation. Westernisation is a process whereby traditional, long-established societies come under the influence of European or American culture. It is a pervasive and accelerating influence across the world in the last few centuries. In other words, Westernisation is a form of mimicking of the west – a case of “what works for them should work for us.” While the word modernization has far less geocentric connotations, and as a result gains much more affection from developing societies who are keen to retain some sense of their own history (Knock, 2000).

Modernisation is not necessarily synonymous of Westernisation in the

realm of TEFL in Asia, but we should be on guard against distorted modernization or blind Westernisation. As we have noticed that an essential difference between “oriental” teaching and “western” teaching can be called Asian (inductive) and Western (deductive) patterns although it is exceedingly dangerous to make such broad generalizations as “Eastern” and “Western”. Hideo Oka (2004) argues that some of the so-called “universal” aspects in TEFL are not compatible with the Asian context, for linguistic but also cultural and historical reasons. Now we know why when we export Western pedagogies to China, expatriate teachers often encounter difficulties transferring Western teaching methods to the Chinese classroom. “In transplanting Western educational models to Chinese classrooms, (English native speaking teachers) did not sufficiently acknowledge the cultural distance between these models and the Chinese local socio-cultural and educational realities.” At some Chinese universities, “the discourse of participation was strongly resisted by Chinese students and teaching by native speakers often failed to achieve the desired results ... there existed a vast gulf in their perceptions of what constituted ‘good’ teaching and learning, of what appropriate roles they were fitted in and what they expected of each other” (Li, 1999). This situation is really thought-provoking.

The above-mentioned points of view suffice us to think that when China or Asia has become an educational world market, both expatriate teachers and local teachers of English should be more conscious of and more sensitive to the growing potential Westernising tendency in the TEFL endeavor. English teaching in China is characterized with its unique functions, significance, nature and physical settings, establishing a novel concept with a specific connotation. In English teaching in China, the learners have special learning tasks, special learning motivation and special learning environment. They have particular basis in their mother tongue and Chinese culture. They have particular cognitive basis, cognitive habit, cognitive style, cognitive developing rules in English language learning and culture acquisition. They have special regular patterns in developing their foreign language skills. The present paper will look at some concepts such as process and outcome, extrinsic motive

force and inherent motive force, and teacher's qualification by a contrastive analysis between the English teaching characteristics in China and that of the Western world hopefully to come up with an appropriate way to escape blind Westernization of TEFL reform in China and the whole continent.

THE ASPECTS OF EAST VS. WEST

Process and Outcome

English teaching and learning are conducted through a certain method of course. The traditional English teaching usually attached great emphasis to knowledge (the outcome), but in recent years the Western scholars emphasize the process of obtaining knowledge (how to solve or probe the problem etc.). While in present China, equal stress is laid on “outcome” and “process”, believing that if there is no “outcome”, there will be no way of referring to “process”. However, the Western scholars seem to have over-emphasized “process” and neglected “outcome”.

The Western scholars also advocate happy learning. But in contrast, diligence is the due attitude towards learning in the Chinese tradition. Chinese people usually look on learning as a serious job or thing instead of regarding it as a trifling matter. The foreign scholars have also found that overseas Chinese tell their offspring that diligence is the key to success even from their childhood. While the traditional Western concept indicates that one should emphasize the simplification of the content of learning and introduce interesting activities to the classroom to arouse the students' interest in learning. As a matter of fact Chinese people are pursuing “happy learning” not only in English, but also in other subjects, but what they seek after is the sense of satisfaction and pleasure of obtaining knowledge through making great efforts. It is certainly difficult to make all students obtain the sense of satisfaction and pleasure of learning at this kind of level, yet this is a goal that the people in China are pursuing all the way.

What is more, the two concepts diligent learning and happy learning are always followed up by hypermnesia and understanding. The Chinese scholars admit that in the course of learning, understanding is of paramount importance, but they do not deny the function of recitation, including reciting some content without total understanding. To them understanding is a sort of gradual process. Western education, however, does not usually value memorization. Most Western scholars claim that recitation is nothing but “hypermnesia”. But Chinese scholars disagree with this over-simplified view. They point out that in the Chinese context, the various repeated exercises do arrive at profound understanding. The students can study and understand the concept behind the content through repeated practices and recitation. This comparison reflects different understandings of the nature of learning. Approaches to learning can be defined as a person’s perceptions and practices in a learning context (Biggs, 1987). Biggs identified three approaches to learning—surface, deep, and achieving. A surface approach is reproductive, involving only a minimal degree of analysis or reflection. It relies largely on memorization. In contrast, a deep approach is more concerned with meaning and understanding, utilizing a probing and analytical approach. An achieving approach is the skill of using whichever of these approaches will maximize success in terms of assessment (Biggs, 1987). In the special TEFL context in China, the surface approach counts a great deal. Chinese students are said to have a memorizing muscle which is usually well exercised and well exploited. That’s one of the reasons why Chinese students are more likely to get extremely high scores in TOEFL, GRE, IELTS, etc. This also helps people to further understand the fact that Chinese learners are more conscious of the “outcome.”

Extrinsic Motivation

As we know, the Western scholars usually advocate inherent motive force, and regard extrinsic motive force such as examination stress as the harmful one. But in China, proper extrinsic motive force is described as the positive

and essential factor. Proper examination stress (e.g., CET Band IV and Band VI; CET stands for College English Test for non-English majors in China) can arouse the students' enthusiasm, so while encouraging students to study, we take advantage of both internal and external motive forces. I would like to refer to the famous motivational study by Lukmani (1972), which revealed the Asian uniqueness in leaning English. Lukmani said, "The higher their motivation to use English as a means of career advancement, etc., the better their English language scores." There is a slogan in China: Examination is the baton of teaching and reform. Good exams can push teaching to go on in the right track. As we know, hundreds of millions of English learners in China generally don't have the practical needs to communicate with English native speakers, so their inherent motive force of learning is generally relatively low. They only learn English as a compulsory course and to obtain the achievement of this subject or the credit (at this stage at least) is the primary source of their learning motivation.

Teacher's Qualification

Hanyu, one of the eight masters of the Tang-Sung period in ancient China, once said *Gu zhi xuezhe bi you shi. Shi zhe, suoyi chuandao shouye jiehuo ye. Ren fei sheng er zhi zhi zhe, shu neng wu huo? Huo er bu cong shi, qi wei huo ye, zhong bu jie yi* (in Chinese Pinyin). The English version of this quotation could be "In ancient times scholars always had teachers. It takes a teacher to transmit wisdom, impart knowledge and resolve doubts. Since man is not born with knowledge, who can be without doubt? But doubt will never be resolved without a teacher." So Chinese students traditionally tend to consider their teachers the main source of learning, which, to a great extent, results from the philosophical foundation for education in China laid by Confucius, one of the greatest thinkers in ancient China. Many of his wise sayings and maxims still govern the behaviour of learners in China. Take TEFL for example, students are still accustomed to speech dominated education by a teacher-centred, book-centred, grammar-translation method and an emphasis

on rote memory. “Can language be taught?” Cook (1991) thinks that asking such a question is like asking a doctor whether medical treatment benefits patients. Cook argues that in places where L2 has no function in the society, teaching is the chief or only source of L2, for whatever learners know, whatever learners can say or understand, is the effect of teaching. Language instruction does make a difference (Long, 1983; Ellis, 1999). In China, people still think a teacher should be first of all a scholar, one who is supposed to have a thorough understanding of the discipline he is engaged in. The teaching method itself is important, but to grasp the content of the discipline can be more important. A recent research report indicates that if one does not grasp the content of the discipline well enough, he won’t be able to put proper teaching methodology to good use. According to the Chinese tradition, only when one becomes a scholar, can one become a good teacher. What is behind this comparison involves different views about the teacher’s role: Is the teacher basically a scholar or a teacher on earth? Then how do we evaluate expatriate teachers’ qualifications in China and indeed in the world?

Mingsheng Li (2004) reports the findings of a qualitative study conducted from December 2002 to March 2003 at two New Zealand English language schools. The study reveals that, in spite of the positive learning experiences in the schools, there also exists a significant mismatch with Asian students’ learning expectations. The recurring themes that reflect Asian students’ negative perceptions and experiences relate to issues of teacher competence, teacher quality, teaching approaches, course content and learning materials. It was found that the interactive teaching methods adopted by New Zealand teachers are culturally incompatible with Asian students’ learning conceptualizations. Some teachers’ adoption of the communicative or interactive teaching approach just led to Asian students’ negative learning experience in New Zealand. The paper recommends that teacher quality should be taken as a priority. To improve teacher quality, issues such as ESOL teacher validation criteria and teacher training standards need careful attention. Ben Hill once spoke from his own experience, “Sixteen students are absent from my grade one lesson. Almost half the class. This is by no means a common occurrence – there’s no

place for truantism in China's rigidly disciplined school system - yet they seem to think they can get away with it during my lessons because to them I'm simply not a teacher. I'm a Foreign Teacher, an entirely different species, and what I say or do just doesn't carry the same weight as my Chinese colleagues."

Mr. Bob Zong, a former presenter of Canadian National Broadcasting Service, now engaged in foreign language teaching and research in Shenzhen, China, points out that there are two kinds of "foreign experts". One of them refers to those foreign experts who are not given "foreign expert credentials." Most of them are Greeks, Turks, Indians, Pakistanians, Bangladeshi, etc. They don't have any teaching experience, their own English levels are quite limited and their spoken English is extremely deficient, let alone their pronunciation. The second kind have undergone formal training and are given credentials, but their teaching might still not be suitable for Chinese students. This is because Chinese students' learning habits and demands can be quite different from the students of the Western countries. (<http://www.sznews.com.cn/n/ca99334.htm>). Therefore if the foreign experts just copy the Western teaching mode, their practice will never work well.

CONCLUSION

In summation, TEFL in China with its uniqueness involves people's outlook of human nature, of language, of teaching and different views about the teacher's role as well. To introduce the Western TEFL theories and models blindly may not work for us since internationalisation and modernisation can easily turn into Westernisation. Therefore the comparison of the occidental with the Chinese system of TEFL is made to offer the kernel of an argument about the future of TEFL in Asia—Go your own way. Even Maley, who once said that Chinese students dig holes in the wrong place, now seems to have modified his idea. In response to a couple of questions in a recent interview - What aspect of TEFL methodology are you interested in?

What themes are you pursuing now? He said one of his themes is “The role of inner representations in acquiring language. I am thinking of visualization, rehearsal, inner speech etc. I think we have been led astray by SLA research, which I believe to be a blind alley, instead of looking more at psychological inquiry in the area of memory.” (Evidence empowered by Maley (http://www.eltnews.com/features/interviews/007_alan_maley1.shtml))

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