

# **On the Possible Pedagogy to Teach English for Chinese Undergraduate Non-English Majors**

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**Abstract:** This paper proposes a new model for teaching English to Chinese undergraduate students that considers language differences and Chinese language characteristics. Reforms in English education, issues with curriculum requirements, English teachers' eligibility, students' learning patterns and learning ability, and influences on second language acquisition are also discussed.

With the trend of globalization, English education, especially Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), has been developed significantly in China. More and more Chinese learn English for a variety of purposes. Among these learners, the non-English major undergraduates, a dominant percentage of the overall population of Chinese college students, are of more interest in English teaching and learning research. As a result of increasing college enrollment in China, more and more effort is devoted to TEFL for non-English major undergraduates. Meanwhile, many problems arise from these TEFL education activities.

Traditional TEFL teaching in China is examination-oriented (He & Li, 2009). That being said, students' proficiency in English is evaluated by scores on English language examinations. The emphasis on these examinations dismisses the importance of the English language applied in a communication context. Additionally, Chinese English learners' language background is not considered in second language acquisition.

This paper presents the current problems of English education in China, and then proposes its possible improvement in pedagogy for Chinese undergraduate non-English majors (CUNEM). It starts with literature on (a) the traditional English language teaching system for CUNEM, and then it reviews the literature in the following aspects: (b) reforms in English language teaching (ELT) for CUNEM; (c) the inapplicability of new college English curriculum requirements in the Chinese ELT context; (d) Chinese English teachers' eligibility and willingness in standard English teaching; (e) Chinese students' learning patterns and learning abilities; and (f) the primary language's influences on second language acquisition. Finally, it reviews a proposed teaching model in Teaching English for Chinese English learners.

## **Traditional English Language Teaching System for Chinese Undergraduate Non-English Majors**

According to the Chinese English curriculum for non-English majors, College English is a mandatory course. To obtain a Bachelor's degree authorized by Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE), a student is required to take 12 semester hours of College English, which are four three-credit courses (He & Li, 2009). Although English courses for CUNEM are time-consuming,

many students “are still deaf and dumb in English” (Ashmore, 2003, p.15, as cited in Song, 2009, p. 18). Song (2009) concluded that this is a consequence of the test-oriented and grammar-based English courses. Guo and Li (2004) stated that the College English curriculum for CUNEM emphasizes reading, writing and translating, ignoring students’ English communicative competence in listening and speaking.

Referring to the 1985, 1986 and 1999 curricula, Lu (2007) concluded that general English incompetence amongst Chinese undergraduate students is caused by the test-oriented nature of the traditional ELT pattern for non-English majors. The passing rate of Chinese English Test (CET) is considered as the top priority by Chinese universities (Chen & Zhang, 1998). Lu (2007) pointed out that non-English majors are required to pass two different sections of the CET before getting a degree. This impedes their linguistic competence in English learning (Chen & Zhang, 1998). Chen and Zhang (1998) argued that the content of CET was not well balanced between objective and subjective items and did not provide a valid overall evaluation of the students’ proficiency in English, since test items mainly “cover from multiple-choice questions rather than testing the students’ skills in expressing themselves in correct spelling, idiomatic sentences, coherent paragraphs, and meaningful essays” (p. 15).

### **Reforms in ELT for Non-English Majors in China**

As Hu (2004) stated, after the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE) recognized the limitations of traditional ELT methodology in improving the students’ overall English competence, efforts to raise the quality of ELT through the teaching reforms of College English had been developed. Guo and Li (2004) stated that this reform focused on improving the teaching model from test-oriented and grammar-based English courses to learner-centered, communicative and interactive courses. A multitude of Western English pedagogies were introduced. In 2004, the Chinese MOE launched the new College English Curriculum requirement on a trial basis (Hu, 2004). This standard required the curriculum for Chinese college non-English majors to incorporate learner-centered theory, communicative language teaching approach (CLT), intercultural classrooms, and collaborative group learning (Guo & Li, 2009; Song, 2009). Guo and Li (2004) concluded these standards emphasized students’ communicative competence, especially their ability in listening and speaking. Hu (2004) argued that Western pedagogical concepts are communication-oriented.

### **The Inapplicability of New College English Curriculum Requirements in Chinese ELT Context**

Many studies posited that the national syllabus implemented by Chinese MOE (2004) demanded a Standard English teaching model (Guo & Li, 2004; Hu, 2002; Lu, 2007). The Standard English model required to create a native English environment for CUNEM (Lu, 2007). However, the cultural and contextual difference in China hindered the implementation of this model. For example, Chinese students learning English may have fewer opportunities to communicate with native English speakers in China. Such a limitation impedes their exposure to the native English speaking context.

Hu (2002) argued that this model did not consider different socio-cultural contexts. The Western English pedagogy should tailor to the specific context of English teaching and learning in China (Guo & Li, 2004). The model was insufficient to satisfy the reality of Chinese ELT practice, because it did not consider teachers' and learners' cultural background (Lu, 2007).

### **Chinese English Teachers' Eligibility and Willingness in Standard English Teaching**

One problem concerns Chinese English teachers' eligibility in standard English teaching and their willingness to follow the standards (Lu, 2007). The philosophy of Western English pedagogy is a new concept to most Chinese college English teachers (Hu, 2002). Although Chinese MOE attempts to promote Chinese College English reforms by introducing new syllabi, textbooks and competence-oriented texts (Hu, 2002), these teachers have no clear understanding about how to implement them into real teaching practice. Du (2002) stated that the majority of these teachers only have the experience of learning and teaching English in China. According to Niu and Martin (2003), a limited number of competent teachers of college English have the ability to use the language in the cultural context. Therefore, as Hu (2004) demonstrated, the low teaching quality of Chinese college EFL teachers led to the ineffectiveness of the ELT reforms. Moreover, Guo and Li (2004) pointed out that many EFL teachers are reluctant to accept the new Standard English teaching model enforced by Chinese MOE, as they consider the grammar-translation model and test-oriented model in Chinese ELT as the most effective and practical. Niu and Martin (2003) stated that Chinese College EFL teachers are inclined to teach students in dissecting the grammatical rules, analyzing English writings, reading extensively, and memorizing vocabulary, while they neglect the pragmatic use of English language in class. In addition, many Chinese College English teachers' pronunciation is not standard; therefore, it is difficult for them to implement the Standard English model into teaching class. They lack pedagogical fundamentals, professional competence in the subject, and the knowledge about the recent developments in foreign language education, both domestically and internationally. According to Song (2009), the traditional teaching principle in China is one of the most important constraints in the adoption of Western English pedagogy, since most teachers prefer to be a class authority rather than a class facilitator (Song 2009). Without immersion in or exposure of native ESL culture and language environment, it is difficult for teachers to implement Western pedagogy (Niu & Martin, 2003).

### **Chinese Students' Learning Patterns and Learning Abilities**

Another problem concerns Chinese students' English learning abilities and learning patterns in Chinese education and culture context. Lu (2007) posited that "the alien culture in the original version of English materials hinders the students' reading comprehension and increases their confusion about the practical use of linguistic rules" (p. 10). Chinese students tend to be quite passive learners influenced by didactic, product-oriented and teacher-centered ELT in Chinese universities, in contrast to Western approaches to language teaching, which emphasize individual orientations, personal needs, verbal interaction, and self-expression (Hu, 2002). Rao (1996) stated that "the Chinese tend to associate games and communicative activities

in class with entertainment exclusively and are skeptical of their use as learning tools” (p. 467). Guo and Li (2004) concluded that the overuse of communicative language teaching in China may achieve little success for Chinese undergraduate non-English majors.

### **The Primary Language’s Influences on Second language Acquisition**

At present, more and more Chinese learn English. However, in the English learning process, it is inevitable that Chinese-English usage in speaking and writing often prevents Chinese language learners from expressing their intended meaning concisely. The way that a Chinese learner speaks and writes in English is usually in a typical Chinese English pattern—namely, English words spoken and written in Chinese syntax (Fu, 2003). A reason for this is that knowledge of language learners’ first language plays an important role in the process of acquiring and learning a second language. Corson (1999) also suggested that early brain development of young children is shaped by the signs and symbols involved in first language acquisition. Cummins (1996) maintained that we learn “by integrating new input into our existing cognitive structure or schemata” (p. 85). Consequently, a student’s prior experience is the foundation for acquiring and interpreting new knowledge. In a study of second language acquisition, Hakuta, Balystok, and Wiley (2003) concluded that in addition to age and socioeconomic factors, the amount of formal education in learners’ mother tongue is an important predictor in how well they master English.

### **A Proposed Teaching Model in Teaching English for Chinese English Learners**

In order to help non-English major Chinese students cope with the problems mentioned above, college EFL teachers in China need to understand the causes of those frequently made “errors” in Chinese students’ English writing and speaking. Based on this principle, Lu (2007) proposed the China English (CE) teaching model in Chinese ELT. China English (also called Chinglish) has become a dominating mixed language among most Chinese English learners. Li (1993) defined Chinese English as “a variety with normative English as its core, but with Chinese characteristics at the levels of lexis, syntax and discourse” (p. 19). He further explained that Chinese English addresses issues regarding Chinese culture by means of “translation, borrowing, and semantic transfer” (Li, 1993, p. 19).

Lu (2007) argued that Chinese students learn English with a symbolic order encoded in Chinese. From his perspective, cognitive differentiation occurs in the process of “decoding the message encoded in the English language with a Chinese signifying system (Lu, 2007, p. 8). The CE model not only retains the integrity of Standard English, but also caters to the special Chinese cultural context.

Much of the literature supports the idea that a teaching model must be designed to cultivate students’ comparative ability within two languages and help students make constructive use of their local culture (Fu, 2003; Goldenberg, 2010; Helman, 2009, Lu, 2007). If teachers incorporate their primary language in their language teaching, Chinese learners could be aware of the contrast between the two languages in context (Fu, 2003). Fu (2003) argued that EFL teachers should use the primary language as a bridge or scaffold to learn the content in English.

By explaining the logic behind the structure of the two languages, students could have a better understanding of English and then improve their speaking and writing in Standard English. Helman (2009) suggested that English teachers should make use of the primary language for clarification and explanation, introduce new concepts in the primary language prior to the lesson in English, review the new content again in the primary language, and then focus on the similarities/differences between the two languages. In addition, English teachers should have an understanding of the background knowledge behind the English language, and EFL learners' current levels of oral and written English (Dutro & Helman, 2009). This requires that English teachers must identify students' language skills and then structure appropriate learning opportunities through an instructional blueprint.

### **Implications**

As a result of language difference between Chinese and English as well as the cultural effect of learning a second language, a more practical improvement of the TEFL pedagogy is to emphasize the two language comparison during the learning process. Specifically, the following approaches could be used to facilitate English learners' language learning: (a) consider the Chinese ELT context for Chinese college non-English majors; (b) consider the influences of second language acquisition from the primary language and the culture, and apply contrastive linguistics in the teaching practice to give students a better understanding of the differences between the source language and the target language; (c) activate students' language competence; and (d) use cross-cultural communication skills in language teaching to help students overcome barriers in language learning.

In sum, it is essential to build a systematic EFL pedagogy focusing on the unique situation of Chinese college non-English major ELLs in a non-native English speaking environment. The curriculum and instruction in China should help students learn the difference between Chinese and English by examining Chinese CUNEM's colloquial and written English using typical Chinese language characteristics. Most importantly, it should be designed for the purpose of assisting Chinese English language learners to overcome the influences from their native languages.

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