

Interview

English Language Teaching in China: An Interview with Shouren Wang

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There are approximately 400 million people learning English, which is about one-third of the whole population in contemporary China (China Daily, 2010). Effective English learning is therefore a focus of the whole society. As an English language expert, would you please share your experience of successful English language learning?

Effective English learning is a good question. Professor Yang Huizhong of Shanghai Jiaotong University once put forward the idea of effective teaching, effective testing". Learning means assuming the perspective of learners. The problem of "prolonged period of time and inefficiency" in English teaching in China is caused partly by the language-learning environment here. As a foreign language, English is not a language for use but for learning, given that people do not communicate in English as soon as they step out of the classroom. "Prolonged period of time" refers to the fact that the time span of English learning is too long, namely, from the first grade of elementary school to PhD programs. Yet English courses take up a very small proportion of the total class hours in both elementary education and higher education, and there is little time to learn English every semester. Thus my advice for effective English learning is to undertake a short period of intensive training.

I majored in English when I was an undergraduate. In the first two years I followed a rigorous training program that consisted of intensive and extensive reading, listening to the radio every day, reading aloud, writing frequently and writing correct sentences and paragraphs. In all, laying a solid language foundation can benefit one for life. Eighteen years ago I wrote a short article titled "Use All Opportunities to Expose Yourself to English", which was included in the book *How High Is the Threshold of English?* published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, and talked about my experience in learning English. I proposed that one should persevere in one's efforts to learn English instead of working in fits and starts. More specifically, select a high-quality textbook, study it carefully, do all the exercises, and master reading skills such as close reading, skimming, scanning and critical reading.

Anyone seeking to be proficient in English will be doing so for their own particular reasons. When I was studying for my Master of Arts degree and PhD in the UK a lot of reading was required as I had to take part in discussions in classes and, most importantly, write dissertations in English. Working in universities, faculty members are required to write English papers and publish them in foreign journals. It is imperative for them to be proficient in academic writing. Those who work in government or business will use English for different purposes. So use-oriented learning is a strong force in promoting English-language proficiency.

Due to globalization, English has become a lingua franca in the fields of business, education and media. This has led to the phenomenal popularity of English among both students and parents in China. However, some argue that the value of Chinese learning English has been overestimated, and that this may negatively impact Chinese culture and hamper the learning and teaching of Chinese. What do you think of this?

There is a mutually reinforcing relationship between mother tongue and foreign language. It is common for Europeans to speak many languages. By observing how Chinese children learn English, I found that they just pick up a few more utterances during the language acquisition stage, and this pleased them by pronouncing these sounds. For instance, when it comes to talking about the fruit known in English as apple and in Chinese as *pingguo*, both of those words can be expressed naturally with no undue burden by a Chinese native speaker. In fact, many distinguished scholars such as Qian Zhongshu (1910-1998) and Ji Xianlin (1911-2009) had an excellent command of both English and Chinese. So the statement that learning English impedes the learning of one's mother tongue does not stand up to scrutiny.

A few years ago the Beijing Municipal Education Commission issued the Framework Plan for College Entrance Examination Reform and proposed that the proportion of the total score assigned to English be reduced and that the English examination be administered by non-government agencies. This provoked fierce public debate regarding English-language education. For some time English came under attack. In social media, some went so far as to blame English-language learning for a decline in Chinese-language and said that teaching English was a treacherous act that would be calamitous for the country. These emotional and extremely nationalistic remarks confused the public and produced chilling effects on English-language education in China. Fortunately, in September 2014, the central government announced its policy on the National College Entrance Examination, confirming that Chinese, mathematics and a foreign language (English) would remain the examination subjects and that the scores allocated to them would not change. This timely policy stabilized the situation and helped English-language education weather what had been a very rough storm.

Instead of seeking a scapegoat in English-language education, Chinese-language education should look to itself to solve its problems. As a lingua franca, the status of English is set by history and will not be replaced by other languages in the near future. Non-English-speaking countries communicate in English as well. For instance, early this year I attended a seminar on education during the COVID-19 pandemic organized by the Ministry of Education. All the scholars, from Russia, Romania, Tunisia, Morocco and other countries, spoke in English and we exchanged ideas without difficulty. Under the circumstances, if one uses one's mother tongue, people cannot understand each other without the help of interpreting services, which interrupt the flow of communication, and often fail to convey messages adequately and correctly.

There have been tremendous developments in machine translation in the past few years, so is it possible that this will reduce the need to learn English? Artificial intelligence in the field of machine translation is still far from advanced. Machine translation requires the construction of corpuses. In practice, errors are frequent given the vast areas that need to be covered. And if the client of such a

service does not understand the source text, he or she is ill-equipped to judge whether a proposed translation is appropriate or not. However, if one understands English, he or she can communicate with others fluently and naturally, with or without the help of machine.

The goal of learning foreign languages is to help people know more about the world by accessing foreign-language information directly. Translation has the drawbacks of selecting a limited portion of an author's complete works and often lagging behind what a speaker is saying. Being able to communicate in English eliminates these drawbacks. As mentioned earlier, the value of learning languages is to have a mind that better understands the world. Let's be fanciful for a moment and suppose that in the mid-19th century ordinary Chinese people had studied English and were thus well aware of the Industrial Revolution that was underway in Britain and elsewhere in Europe. It can reasonably be assumed that China would have joined the world, which would have greatly changed the country's course. Modern China has undergone a transition in which it no longer sees itself as the center of the Earth "under heaven" (天下) but as a member of the world. This is partly because foreign languages help us know what is happening in the world at large and to keep an open mind. Historically English has helped us to learn from other countries, and it continues to play an important role now as we promote Chinese culture globally in the realization of the Chinese dream. So rather than being seen as a threat, English-language education should be improved and strengthened.

In one of your research papers, you have mentioned that the removal of the language barrier is as important as dismantling of the trade barrier for China's integration into the international community. Could you please give us a full explanation?

President Xi Jinping said in his opening speech at the Belt and Road Forum in 2017: "Friendship, which derives from close contact between the people, holds the key to sound state-to-state relations." Language exchange serves as a bridge and bond to promote people-to-people exchanges. In a greatly changing world China's integration into the international community faces many challenges.

The current push in some quarters for deglobalisation demonstrates that for China high-quality products and advanced technology will not suffice. No matter how good our products are, they will never sell if buyers boycott them because of prejudice, ignorance, misunderstanding or hostility. Since international trade, politics and governance are very complex, affected by many factors, especially ideology, it is of practical significance to master a foreign language. Language exchange needs to surpass the level of mere proficiency and advance to the level of discourse, which can result in effective communication through all-round intertextualisation in history, culture, concepts, values and expression.

China's integration into the international community requires professionals with very good foreign-language skills, no matter whether in explaining China's position, telling China's stories, participating in the formulation of international rules, promoting international power of discourse or upholding national interests. However, we still lack high-end foreign-language professionals. There are few exceptionally talent people on the world stage who could be considered eloquent and good at debating or persuading others, and this is something the country urgently needs. Trade wars are resolved through negotiations, while lawsuits are settled through both the spoken and written word. Those lacking foreign-language skills are likely to be at a severe disadvantage in such settings.

You have been teaching and researching in universities over 30 years. Do you think English language education should be included as a part of general education rather than a compulsory course in Chinese universities? What are the practical and long-term effects of college English language education on student development?

I served as Chairman of the National Foreign Language Teaching Advisory Board under the Ministry of Education for two terms (2006-2017). It is committed to promoting foreign-language education among college students, first of all, English, but not necessarily limited to English. According to needs and teaching situations, languages such as German, French and Russian are also considered. For example, Tongji University in Shanghai has a long history of German-language teaching. My opinion is that college students should learn English and that multilingual teaching in colleges should be developed with a positive attitude, and “post-English” second and third foreign-language courses be offered. On the national level, students at school today will be the new force in the growth of Chinese socialism in the future. In answer to the question “What is language?”, Professor Xu Guozhang (1915-1994) of Beijing Foreign Studies University said he liked the sayings “Language is a social power” and “The power of language is only fully exerted by those professionals in all walks of life”. As China opens up at a wider range and a higher level, we need to improve the English level of “professionals in all walks of life” to meet the challenges of the future. The mission and responsibility of college English teaching is to enable future scientists, engineers, economists, legal experts and humanities specialists and scholars to arm themselves with foreign languages.

On the level of personal development, learning English aims to lay the foundation for the future. With the rapid development of graduate education in our country, it is necessary to learn English for a graduate degree and scientific research. There are also quite a few students who go to the job market to seek jobs after graduating from colleges. With internationalization it is a plus to know English. However, we cannot decide what to learn solely by whether it is useful. There is difference between education and training, and foreign-language education has a profound impact on one’s structure of knowledge, way of thinking and perspective of comparison.

Previously you have mentioned that efforts should be made to develop English as an academic discipline and to facilitate the use of English in the real world. However, you have also argued that English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses should not take the place of general college English courses. Could you please tell us why?

There are two different concepts, namely English program construction and college English education. The former consists of disciplinary construction, and its main task is to improve the quality of talent cultivation as well as the research in the field of English language and literature. In 2017 the Ministry of Education launched the Double First-Class initiative (first-class universities and first-class disciplines). Foreign-language and literature disciplines, including English-language and literature, of Peking University, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Shanghai International Studies University and Nanjing University, were listed in the country’s plan for building first-class disciplines. Building first-class English programs in China should meet the requirements of our country’s higher education: having Chinese characteristics, being at a world level, and fitting in with the trends of the times. Adhering to the principle of being rooted in China while being open to the world, we place equal emphasis on talent cultivation and academic research, on foreign studies and Chinese studies, as well as on internationalization and localisation. Since our foreign-language programs are rooted in China, their most dominant and irreplaceable feature is cross-cultural. Our foreign-language programs, unlike those in the United States and Europe, are aimed at cultivating talented people for the construction of Chinese socialism. Those with first-class foreign-language skills in China should have intercultural competence. With this essential competence they will help to facilitate effective two-way communication between China and the world.

As for the relationship between general English and academic English in college English teaching for non-English major students, some have suggested that the orientation of college English teaching should

be adjusted to English for specific purposes (ESP). In fact, general English is not equal to basic English. Language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating have requirements of different levels. For instance, English courses such as those on public speaking, debating and writing are very challenging. Even for reading, comprehension barriers at both linguistic and cognitive levels may emerge from the content profundity and the syntactic and lexical complexity of the original English text. Meanwhile, most high school graduates have a relatively low level of English proficiency. After entering college, they need to improve their English skills. Thus, for most first-year college students there is much room for improvement in their command of general English.

The purpose of ESP is to enhance students' abilities to conduct professional and academic communications in English, including EAP (EGAP and ESAP) and EOP. From the perspective of developing language competence, general English and ESP are in fact not opposites. In the description of language competence scale in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, and Assessment*, learners who reach the intermediate-advanced levels of B2 to C2 can do professional research with the language; B2 learners can understand "technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation"; C1 learners "can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes". The current college English curriculums are short of both EAP and EOP courses; so colleges should strengthen the building of ESP courses and carry out research on academic English teaching. In the meantime, general English should remain the focus of teaching. For example, in order to cultivate skilled people with a global vision and cross-cultural communication skills, Renmin University of China has developed its own test system of both spoken and written English to further improve the teaching of speaking and writing.

College English education should pay attention to the cultivation of international leadership so as to enable our students with global vision and cross-cultural leadership, the ability to persuade and lead others with language, as well as the ability to tell Chinese stories and get our voices heard in the world. If college English teaching only pursued its instrumental function and were completely oriented to EAP, such as computer English, chemistry English and engineering English, the cultivation of cross-cultural leadership would be neglected, and this cannot meet the strategic needs of national development.

In addition, colleges are supposed to provide students with basic education, and college students may take various paths after graduating. As higher education has been popularized in China, a considerable number of college graduates are doing jobs unrelated to their majors. Under such circumstances, EAP-oriented college English teaching can hardly serve students' future needs. Higher education has both undergraduate and graduate levels, which means college education is not the end. As a required general course, college English is often offered to first- and second-year students, who may not have embarked on study in a specific field. So EAP should be the core component of English education at the graduate level rather than the undergraduate level.

What would you suggest is the primary goal of China's college English education? How can it be achieved?

The primary goal of China's college English education for non-English majors is to enhance their ability to use English. On the one hand it refers to the communicative skills on general social occasions, that is to say, to express thoughts and feelings in English accurately and appropriately. Students are expected to participate in discussions and debates on general issues, tell stories of their own and of our country, and refute prejudices and falsehoods concerning China if necessary, thus making the Chinese voice in English heard in the world. On the other hand, it refers to using English to conduct academic exchange. Students in different disciplines such as natural sciences, social sciences and the humanities can read and write academic papers and present their ideas and findings in English. Regarding college foreign-

language education reform, the Ministry of Education recently launched a project that aims to train college students who are proficient in one foreign language and can communicate in many languages. “One foreign language” here refers to English, which is the most important one of the multiple language competencies. By implementing this project, it is our hope that college students will be excellent in their disciplinary studies and fluent in English.

Over the past two decades we have seen the wide use of new technologies (i.e. computer, mobile apps and AI) in the language classroom. What are your thoughts on the use of technology in ELT? What role do you think technology should play in advancing English learning?

I have long advocated the use of information technology, and in a paper I wrote more than 10 years ago I proposed the idea of “integrating network information technology with foreign-language courses”. Nowadays, with the rapid development of information technology and the internet, “Internet+” has profoundly affected our living habits, ways of thinking and economic modes, as well as prompting changes in the way we learn, acquire and generate knowledge, which in turn brings impacts, challenges and opportunities to higher education.

An important achievement of “Internet+” education is the rapid rise of new types of open online courses around the world, such as massive open online courses (MOOC). The emergence, development, and application of open online courses have exerted a profound impact on teaching reform in higher education, which has begun to break through existing teaching models and promotes the transformation of teaching and learning towards blended teaching methods, open educational resources, personalized learning and socialised learning process. Guided by the policies of the Ministry of Education, English educators in China are exploring ways of improving their awareness of information technology and their ability to use it, and to integrate and properly use it in the process of lesson design and implementation.

Regarding the construction of MOOCs, UMOOCs was founded by Beijing Foreign Studies University and several other foreign studies universities in 2017. College English MOOCs produced by Tsinghua University, Jilin University, Harbin Institute of Technology, National University of Defense Technology, University of Science and Technology Beijing and so on are offered on platforms such as iCourses and xuetangX. Some colleges make full use of high-quality online educational resources and arrange for their students to take courses taught in English as college English learning on international platforms of MOOCs, such as edX and Coursera. The COVID-19 pandemic this year has had a great impact on hundreds of millions of people around the world, as well as global politics and education. Epidemic control and prevention will become the norm in the near future. A significant aspect of the new normal in education is a shift from physical classrooms to cyberspace supported by information technology, which means an expansion of educational space, thereby promoting the transformation of teaching models and spawning a classroom revolution that in turn provides opportunities for online foreign-language teaching. Cyberspace will permanently change our higher education and give English education a new form.

You have been a teacher at Nanjing University and you are renowned for your research. How do you link these two roles: being a good teacher and a great researcher?

I am currently Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning at Nanjing University, the main task of which is to improve teachers’ teaching ability. In terms of faculty development, the classic definition was put forward in the report *Faculty Development in Higher Education* published by the National

Education Association in 1991, in which faculty development in colleges is described as having five dimensions, namely: professional, instructional, personal, curricular and organizational. It is obvious that instructional development is just one dimension of faculty development. Professional development or academic development involves improving scholarship, contributing knowledge to a field and keeping current in a disciplinary area. The unsatisfactory professional development of many foreign-language teachers in universities has affected overall faculty development. I believe that to be a qualified university teacher one should make advances in these five dimensions concurrently. Foreign-language teachers in universities should strengthen their professional development, which is of great significance to both individuals and disciplines. First of all, we should transform our concepts and establish a sense of professional development. Many foreign-language teachers regard themselves as teachers rather than scholars; therefore, they focus mainly on teaching and spend little time on reading scholarly books or papers. In this case it is impossible to keep up with the frontiers of disciplines.

Compared with those in other disciplines who devote themselves to writing books or papers, foreign-language teachers who focus on teaching are busy preparing for lessons and do little or no research. So in the current evaluation system they are at a disadvantage. The essence of academic research is to create new knowledge on the basis of the existing knowledge system, which requires consistently exploring unknown fields, analyzing the needs of national development and social progress, discovering and designing new topics, and selecting new research paradigms and methods.

Foreign-language teachers should shift their emphasis from imparting knowledge to creating it and establish the sense that teaching and research can promote each other, to realize the transformation from teaching-oriented teachers to scholarly teachers. In fact, instructional development and professional development are neither in conflict nor zero-sum. Instead, they support and promote each other. I spent much energy on teaching and won the first prize of National Award for Excellent Teaching Achievements. My courses were selected as National Model Courses, and the MOOC on British novels that I produced was widely praised by learners.

Meanwhile, I value academic research and have achieved fruitful results in the fields of 19th century British literature, contemporary foreign literature, history of foreign literature and realism. I have undertaken several key projects supported by the National Social Science Fund of China, and published English and Chinese monographs and papers both at home and abroad. The achievements of academic research can reward teaching, and therefore research-oriented instruction can be carried out. My personal experience shows that by setting the goal of becoming a good teacher and outstanding scholar, the pathway of faculty development will be broader and broader.

I have noticed that Chinese English teachers have to do a great deal of research and academic writing to get promotion in their professional lives. Is it realistic to expect primary and middle school teachers to conduct research and publish?

What colleges and middle schools have in common is that they impart knowledge to students. However, colleges also have to create knowledge. The content of higher education courses is supported by profound knowledge and oriented by advanced ways of thinking, embodying the nature and characteristics of the discipline, reflecting basic problems and expressing core academic concepts and categories. University teaching not only meets the needs of information transmission and knowledge guidance, but also helps students foster abilities of exploration, research, innovation and creativity. In this process university teachers must conduct academic research, otherwise they will not be qualified in educating professionals and experts in various fields. But primary and middle-school teachers have different teaching objects and tasks. Taking $1+1=2$ as an example, as the most foundational problem in arithmetic, what primary school teachers do in class is to help students learn to calculate in an

effective way rather than explore why $1+1 = 2$. Teachers have to try their best to make students acquire knowledge effectively, organize teaching according to psychological and cognitive characteristics of students, and help them grow up and become mature. Primary and middle-school teachers put their emphasis on the development of students and teaching, so it is unrealistic to expect them to conduct research and publish. Of course, I have no objection to primary and secondary school teachers writing papers and engaging in educational reforms if they have something meaningful to say. But all these have to be teaching-oriented, that is to say, the purpose of educational reforms and writing papers is for teaching, based on teaching and serving teaching.

It has often been said that there is a significant gap between research and practice in the field of English-language teaching. Do you think it is true in China? If so, how can research be made to better inform practice?

Research in the field of English education in China is relatively weak, and there are not many research findings to guide our practice. While China is the largest English educational base, with hundreds of millions of learners, the number of original theories based on practice is limited. Fortunately, this situation has changed in recent years. Our outstanding scholars have solved some real and urgent problems in foreign-language teaching in the China context. Integrating the essence of Chinese and foreign theories, their solutions are innovative and have produced meaningful dialogue with academia abroad.

Professor Wang Chuming of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies and Professor Wen Qiufang of Beijing Foreign Studies University are outstanding representatives in this field. From “write to learn” to “learn by CEC (completion, extension and creation)” and then to the Xu argument, Professor Wang has delved into the essential mechanism of foreign-language learning and has constantly refined his theory. Xu integrates input and output properly and can improve the efficiency of foreign-language learning. Research papers on the Xu argument have been published in international journals one after another and have attracted much attention from foreign scholars.

The “Production-oriented Approach” (POA) proposed by Professor Wen Qiufang consists of three elements relating to teaching: principles, hypotheses and process. The principles consist of those that are “learning-centered”, “learning-using integrated” and “key competencies”. The hypotheses consist of those that are “output-driven”, “input-enabled”, “selective learning” and “assessment being learning”. The process consists of “motivating, enabling and assessing”. The POA aims to solve the shortcomings of the “learning-application separation phenomenon” in foreign-language teaching in China and has had a positive influence through dialogue with international scholars. Based on this approach, a series of *New Generation College English* (iEnglish) textbooks written by Professor Wen Qiufang and I has been used in colleges across the country, and teachers and students alike have praised it highly.

A group of outstanding scholars in English education in China is striving to develop original English-teaching theories with Chinese characteristics that are internationally understandable. I believe that the gap between research and practice will narrow in the near future.

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