

Review

Conference Review of 2019 Global English Education China Assembly

Xuemei Wang*

Shanghai International Studies University, China

Xia Jiang

Shanghai International Studies University, China

1 Introduction

The 2019 Global English Education China Assembly was held in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, from July 25 to 28, 2019. Nearly 3,000 English education practitioners from 20 countries attended. The conference was organized by China Daily in partnership with Hangzhou Municipal Government, Shanghai International Studies University, the National Association of Foreign Language Education, the Chinese Society of Education and the TESOL International Association. It aimed to promote scholarship and cross-cultural understanding among English educators in China and to enhance dialogue between China's ELT professionals with their peers worldwide. The assembly had nine keynote speeches, 41 featured speeches, panels, workshops, demonstrations and 23 paper presentations. Through face-to-face interaction with experts and opportunities for peer-to-peer networking and knowledge sharing, the assembly provided participants with practical, research-based ideas, strategies and tools to facilitate improvement in their ELT work. This paper summarizes what went on at the conference, analyzes its characteristics and explores its implications and provides suggestions on foreign language education in China.

2 Contents

The theme of the conference was “English education in China: a new era, a shared vision”. The conference was divided into core literacy education and intelligent education, and these were broken down into 12 strands:

- (1) key competencies education;
- (2) teacher professional development in the age of intelligent education;
- (3) artificial intelligence and foreign language teaching;
- (4) reading and literacy;
- (5) content and language-integrated learning;
- (6) task-based language teaching;

***Corresponding Author.**

Address: Room 501, Administrative Building, 550 Dalian Road (W), Shanghai 200083, China
E-mail: wxm97@126.com

- (7) testing and assessment;
- (8) English-language teaching of young learners;
- (9) college English education;
- (10) English education in rural areas;
- (11) public speaking; and
- (12) oral English teaching.

About 300 experts from China and elsewhere talked of research findings from different perspectives and discussed the concept and mode of English education.

In the opening speech of the conference, Shuchun Zhou, editor-in-chief of China Daily, said: “As China enters a new era, new requirements are poised to improve English education, make education more open and promote mutual learning between different civilizations.” English educators were expected to learn more English teaching models and make new contributions to the construction of a community with a shared future for mankind. Feng Jiang, chair of Shanghai International Studies University Council, said English was the main medium for the exchange of global technology and social knowledge. English education in China faces new opportunities for growth and change, he said. We should fully consider local educational settings, embrace the world and achieve greater things. Professor Debrah Short, president (2019-20) of the TESOL International Association said that as one of the organizers of the conference, the association would continue to help English educators and learners achieve their goals. She hoped attendees could get new ideas on English teaching and apply them to classroom instruction.

Nine keynote speeches were delivered, covering topics such as teaching philosophy, teaching methods, teachers’ core competence and language assessment literacy. On teaching philosophy, Professor Short presented six principles for the exemplary teaching of English learners and the application of their application in settings in which English was taught as a foreign language. These principles were:

- (1) Know your learners, including their English levels and learning objectives;
- (2) Create conditions for language learning, promoting a positive and orderly classroom environment, and strengthening students’ learning motivation;
- (3) Design high-quality lessons for language development, enabling students to improve their skills through real language learning;
- (4) Adapt lesson delivery as needed, taking into account differences between students;
- (5) Monitor and assess student language development, tracing language mistakes and providing timely feedback; and
- (6) Engage and collaborate within a community of practice.

In terms of teaching methods, task-based language teaching, content and language integrated learning, the Xu argument and metacognitive scaffolding, among others were the subject of passionate discussion. Three reports on task-based language teaching were presented. Professor Rod Ellis of Curtin University, Western Australia, used cases from Asian primary schools to explain the definition, principles and implementation process of task-based language teaching, and emphasized “doing things with the language”. He said, improving English learning efficiency required not only more external contact with English, but also lively and interesting classroom instruction. Professor Peter Skehan of the University of London said teachers should prepare appropriate learning tasks based on learners’ needs in task-based teaching. It was not the tasks themselves but rather their implementation that could be the problem, he said. In particular, he stressed the need for flexible design of different tasks and the importance of post-task activities. Yafu Gong, president of the National Association of Foreign Language Education (2001-17), advocated third-generation tasks in a Chinese context. Such tasks with wider educational goals were closely linked to students’ immediate environment and experience. These multi-dimensional tasks were believed to be more appropriate for achieving the goal of whole-person education for students with critical thinking skills.

In addition to task-based language teaching, Professor JoAnn Crandall of the University of Maryland focused on content-based instruction. She discussed the rationale for its use, described a variety of program models, identified characteristics of effective content-based instruction and presented some guidelines for choosing content-centered texts and materials. She also provided examples of activities that English teachers use for learners of all ages and proficiency levels in a variety of contexts worldwide. Professor Chuming Wang of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies presented the Xu argument, which contended that language was efficiently and successfully learned through Xu, a Chinese word with a composite meaning of completion, extension and creation. Professor Lawrence Jun Zhang of the University of Auckland analyzed the importance of metacognition in English teaching and explained how the metacognitive scaffolding strategy in language classroom teaching helped in understanding learners, learning tasks and learning strategy.

In terms of teachers' core competence, Professor Donald Freeman of the University of Michigan explained the notion of "professional confidence", which he said was key to effective classroom teaching, and discussed what teachers could do to develop and sustain it in their teaching.

On language assessment literacy, Professor Shen Zou of Shanghai International Studies University presented definitions, concepts and models of language assessment literacy from literature. She then analyzed the basis of the definition and core elements of language evaluation in China and elsewhere. More specifically, she reflected on her 25 years as a language tester working for Test for English Majors and proposed some core qualities that a language tester should possess, including language proficiency, skills in evaluating professional knowledge, social and cultural background knowledge, dedication and team spirit.

Among 41 featured speeches of the conference, experts and scholars analyzed the frontier topics of English education from different perspectives. For example, Professor Deming Mei of Shanghai International Studies University presented OECD Learning Framework 2030 and proposed integrating subject competence with global competence as a minimal curriculum requirement for English education in China at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Chinese experts were designing a new learning framework, aiming at developing learners' competence in linguistic knowledge, cognitive and communicative skills, attitudes and values. Professor Guowen Huang of South China Agricultural University focused on identifying the main purposes of teaching and learning in rural areas. There were still some problems concerning English teaching in these areas, he said, such as poor teaching conditions, insufficient attention from parents and students' lack of motivation. Suggestions such as understanding students' learning needs, providing financial and other support and strengthening teacher training were made. Professor Jigang Cai of Fudan University elaborated on the transformation of college English teaching from English for General Purposes to English for Academic Purposes. Professor Jianda Liu of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies talked of the connection of China's standards of English language ability with various tests and their application in China and elsewhere. Professor Luxin Yang of Beijing Foreign Studies University explained how one could get out of the comfort zone with a case study of two experienced English teachers.

There was animated discussion among experts on 12 topics in the panel session. Fundamental problems and future challenges of task-based language teaching stimulated teachers' thinking.

Issues such as how artificial intelligence came into teaching from macro and micro perspectives, promoted the integration of "teacher+AI" and improved teachers' information literacy aroused great interest. Once academic English writing teaching principles were set, research on how to integrate online and offline teaching had its practical value. With deep understanding of learning needs and characteristics of young learners, it was helpful to improve the effects of teaching once teachers focused on the discussion of teaching objectives and processes.

The research on and discussion of rural primary and secondary school teaching in western China was most enlightening. In paper presentation session, teachers and researchers at primary, secondary

and tertiary levels presented their research findings with rich data and in-depth analyses based on their teaching experiences. In workshop and demonstration sessions, teachers and researchers analyzed teaching methods, objectives and processes by way of mind maps and in other ways. The demonstration courses were full of rich content and vivid explanations.

The Hangzhou Declaration issued at the closing ceremony declared that the current age not only offered new opportunities to English-language education professionals, but also posed the challenge of viewing English education from a historical and international perspective, and understanding that it needed to develop with improved quality, efficiency, equality and sustainability. It called on educators to develop personal development by paying close attention to ethics, language skills, cultural awareness, critical thinking and learning ability through English education. English education in China must come with a strong awareness that it is deeply rooted in China and a vision of the future.

3 Implications and Suggestions

At the closing ceremony, Christopher Powers, executive director of the TESOL International Association, said: “This conference is not only the platform for sharing information, spreading knowledge and improving ability, but also a stage for English educators all over the world to speak out their opinions.” The authors of this article share this view. Taking full account of China’s educational, economic and social development setting, we suggest the following relating to English education in China:

First, it should be internationalized. The conference was a wonderful platform for promoting the internationalization of English education in China. We cherish the hope that people from more countries will attend such conferences. They can enhance international cooperation, resulting in not only exchanges of academic findings but creating an atmosphere of academic research and teaching cooperation, and build a long-term communication mechanism, thus strengthening academic collaboration between English teachers in China and teachers and research institutions overseas.

Second, the integration of English education should be expanded at different levels in China. Professor Weidong Dai (2019) proposed that a uniform talent cultivation system should be built up in primary, middle and tertiary levels to ensure orderly growth at different stages. In the future, research on cultivating listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation skills could be conducted. The construction of different knowledge systems such as language, culture, country and region should be further explored. Research results should be discussed and exchanged at such conferences and of course be put into practice.

Third, AI+ interdisciplinary integration needs to be promoted. Both concepts of education equity and sharing are closely related to artificial intelligence. For example, the development of massive open online courses and high-quality courses will contribute to the sharing of excellent teaching resources and promote education equity between eastern and western areas of China as well as between cities and rural areas. The attempts that iTutor group has made in real-time synchronous learning and personalized virtual teaching have offered a new perspective for English education. Tencent English has effectively improved teaching efficiency through speech recognition, phoneme testing technology, etc. The integration of academia and industry is worth advocating since the creation, output and application of knowledge require interdisciplinary thinking. Thus, language information analysis, language technology promotion, and the functions of English need to be further expanded in the field of language services. Such conferences help to advance the integration of production, learning, research and application, and effectively use artificial intelligence to enhance foreign-language education.

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Xuemei Wang, Professor and PhD supervisor of Applied Linguistics at the School of English Studies, Shanghai International Studies University. She was awarded as “New Century Excellent Talents” by the Ministry of Education of China in 2011. Her research areas include second language education, teacher development, foreign language education policy, etc. She has presided many national and provincial academic research projects, such as *A Comparative Study of the Academic Competence Development of PhD Candidates of Foreign Language and Literature Discipline* (Ministry of Education, 2010-15). She has authored and co-authored more than 10 books, and published more than 100 papers in academic journals. She has won many prizes on researches and teaching reform, including National Teaching Achievement Award (2018) and Shanghai Municipal Educational Achievement Award (2015).

Xia Jiang got her Ph.D. degree in English Language and Literature from Shanghai International Studies University(SISU) in 2019. She is now a lecturer at School of Education, SISU. She has now published over ten articles, four textbooks and translated one book. Her research interests include Foreign Language Teaching and Learning, Teacher Development, and Language Education.