

Foreign Teachers, Chinese Students, and “English for Different Purposes”

By Joel Heng Hartse

Introduction

Why do Chinese university students study English? Two reasons students often mentioned when I asked my classes this question several years ago were China’s entry into the World Trade Organization and the 2008 Beijing Olympics. These “global” reasons for learning English are related to the perception that, because it is a world language, “learning English will enable Chinese citizens to access international research and development, to use advanced methods in industry and business, and to learn from foreign countries” (Cheng, 2011, p. 134). Such abstract, overarching purposes, however, are divorced from the immediate concerns of particular students. At the beginning of our careers in China, many foreign teachers are aware of China’s general strategy of embracing English for modernization and development, but we tend not to know as much about the goals, desires, and needs of our students; in fact, foreign teachers often enter their classrooms knowing little about how students will need to use English in their studies and future lives. In my time teaching in Chinese universities, I found that understanding what students want and need from English writing instruction can be especially difficult for those not familiar with the Chinese education system.

While there are individual variations in students’ abilities and needs in any context, I noticed one striking difference between groups of students at two universities where I taught English writing recently: they were anxious to improve their writing, but for two very different reasons. Learning more about these differences has, I hope, made me more sensitive to students’ needs in China and elsewhere.

English Majors at a Small College: Writing to Pass the TEM

During my first year in China, I worked at a small college where most of my students were English majors. The college could be considered a “third-tier” institution, a college under the supervision of the local municipal government, as opposed to second and first-tier colleges, which are under provincial and national supervision, respectively (Niu & Wolff, 2004). Tuition is over three times that of the local second-tier university with which it shares a campus, and the college admits students who perform relatively less well on (or even “fail,” as I sometimes heard students say) China’s National College Entrance Exam (NCEE), or *gaokao*. The college’s foreign language department is responsible for teaching English to thousands of students, and many courses focus on standardized English exams, such as

the CET-4 (College English Test, Band 4) which all non-English major college students in China take, and the TEM-4 (Test for English Majors, Band 4), which English majors take.

The college's English writing course, which I taught to four classes of 45 English majors each, was considered preparation for the writing section of the TEM-4, although the assigned textbook was not exam-focused. The TEM, along with other standardized tests, was a frequent source of anxiety for English majors at the college, as was the CET for non-English majors who perceived it as very important for their chances of graduating and obtaining employment, since exam scores are often considered by employers in China (Zhao & Campbell, 1995). As You (2004) points out, the importance of English examinations in China places a great deal of pressure on teachers and students alike; the efficacy of English teaching is "evaluated almost exclusively by the results of students' scores on the CET" and "students' individual needs for English are hardly acknowledged" (p. 108).

Like many beginning foreign teachers, I was unfamiliar with the TEM and CET, but assumed that my training in teaching English writing would be satisfactory; I had students write journals, led them through the traditional "writing process", introduced peer review, and so on. It was not until halfway through the first term that I found the students had been given a booklet of essay templates by the department, which they were encouraged to memorize for the exams¹. At first, I was shocked; I had not known this was a common and accepted strategy for exam preparation. Ultimately, I felt unable to teach the template, but the experience showed me that simply "teaching good writing" the way I had been trained to in the U.S. would not be satisfactory in China. I tried to learn more about the prompts used on the TEM, introduced more practice timed writing tests, and adjusted my teaching to be less process-oriented.

Elite University Students: Writing for Study Abroad

After learning of the importance of standardized English exams, I thought I had

figured out how best to teach college writing in China. I was surprised, therefore, to find that students in my courses the following academic year, when I taught at one of the top-ranked universities in the country, did not seem to share the same preoccupation with the CET and TEM as their counterparts at the smaller college. In fact, I do not recall a student mentioning either exam to me in class or private conference. Some contextual factors may account for this; my courses at the university were electives in "advanced" writing (in contrast to my course at the college which was required for English majors), and the university is nationally recognized as an elite institution welcoming students with high previous academic achievement. Nevertheless, the difference was not one I had anticipated. Instead of asking about strategies for writing the Chinese standardized exams, students frequently came to me with questions about writing for international exams like the TOEFL, IELTS, or GRE, how to write personal statements for North American university applications, and the expectations of western professors. Many of them also took additional courses related to English for studying abroad through schools like New Oriental, a popular private training institution. In short, the university writing students seemed, generally, focused on the development of their writing abilities in service of the goal of future graduate studies in English-speaking countries, whereas most of the students at the college seemed more interested in developing their writing to avail themselves of the social and economic opportunities it might allow in China.

Though the two groups of students were in the same country, their needs and goals were quite different. Since Zhao and Campbell (1995) suggest that the primary function of English in China is not, in fact, its use in international communication, but for the "practical benefits of being in college and consequently finding a job, which may or may not require the use of English" (p. 384), I became curious about the students at the elite university, since it appeared that their goals for English writing differed from those of what might be called the "average" Chinese student. As a result, I informally interviewed some of

¹These are similar to those described by Ma (2012).

them to learn more about their hopes for writing courses². Many talked about wanting to learn more about writing for their own majors, rather than improving their general writing abilities, and also about the perceived cultural differences between academic writing practices in China and abroad.

The idea of learning about English writing “culture” might suggest that students would respond positively to writing courses taught by foreign teachers (several students explained that they took my course specifically because I am not Chinese), but Rui (a pseudonym), a third-year student, expressed disappointment with a class he took from an American teacher:

The teacher of that class taught us to write outline before writing. Then he tried to let us write fictional and non-fictional article. I think it is too difficult for us. He required that the articles should be more than 4 pages. Actually, I [was] more interested in how to write the letters or applications, but not interesting stories.

Rui hoped to learn about genres like graduate school applications, research proposals, and resumes, but said that in most of his English classes, teachers “told us to write things that are not ‘necessary’ for us. I would not put a lot time on them”. Rui also mentioned enjoying a course he referred to as “English for major”, in which he learned about writing “different kinds of academic paper”. His negative experience with the foreign teacher and positive experience in an EAP class may have contributed to his desire for instruction better tailored to his goals:

I think teacher should know what the students really need. Then help them to write that things and judge. For example, many students want to learn how to write resume ... I think people will be interested in what they need. Many useful English writings are not difficult, but western people have different way to write it ... Teachers should let students know it.

Rui did not suggest that a western teacher would be better at teaching the “different way” of English writing outside China, but his answer shows a perceptive awareness of the difference in function and/or features of academic writing in different contexts. Rui’s statement that “western people have different way to write it” was striking to me: it implies that there is a Chinese way of writing English, and this, I realized, was what many of my students at the smaller college had needed to master in order to do well in their undergraduate courses, to pass the CET, TEM, and other exams, and to satisfy the gatekeeping requirements of English in China (Gil & Anderson, 2011). What Rui and many of his peers in the elite institution seemed to want, however, was more instruction in navigating the differences between academic English writing in China and overseas.

Conclusion

There have been a number of studies published about the experiences of foreign teachers of writing in China since the early 1980s, from Matalene in 1985 to Shi in 2009; the teacher’s dearth of knowledge about the local context is a common theme. For many foreign teachers, this lack of explicit knowledge may lead to pessimism and frustration, but it can also be seen as an opportunity to take responsibility for learning more about the local educational context(s) from students’ perspectives. Spack (1997) criticizes the way in which “Chinese students” are constructed by western scholars through (mis)readings of research and unreflexive accounts of culture and writing practices, and calls for language teaching professionals to “examine our own identities, to own up to the position of power from which we name students, and to find room in our pedagogy and scholarship for students to name themselves and thus define and construct their own identities” (p. 773). Indeed, rather than speaking generally about “Chinese students” or making generalizations about “teaching English in China”, we should recognize that there are many types of higher education institutions – and students – in

²Interviews with six students via instant messaging and email are described in Heng Hartse (2009).

China. Understanding these differences, more than generalizations about how and why “Chinese students” learn English, should prove useful for new foreign teachers in China; perhaps we should adopt the acronym “EDP” – English for Different Purposes – as a reminder that Chinese university students have different goals and imagined futures.

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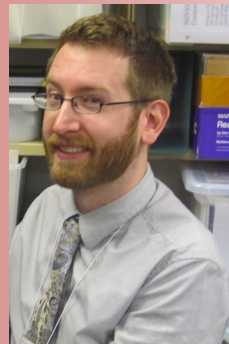
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