Teaching Spoken English in China: Divergence and Washback

By Terry Greatrex & Shu Deng

Introduction

The formal teaching of English in China has historically focussed more on the receptive skills of reading and listening than on the productive ones of writing and, particularly, speaking (Feng, 2009; Wang, 2006). This paper takes a brief look at the current situation with respect to teaching spoken English in China. It touches on the policy background, then reviews some published discussion on the divergence between theory and practice, and how teaching for examinations is impacting on how Chinese students learn to speak in English.

Policy

Current national policy on English education in China makes explicit mention of the need to improve the spoken English ability of students. In 2004, the Ministry of Education issued and trialled the *College English Curriculum Requirements*, extending them nationally in 2007 (Ministry of Education, 2007). In this document, broad requirements, usually expressed in two to four sentences, are listed for listening, speaking, reading, writing, translation and recommended vocabulary at basic, intermediate and advanced levels. Descriptors at the basic level include guidelines that students "should be able to communicate

in English in the course of learning, to conduct discussions on a given theme, and to talk about everyday topics in English" along with giving short talks and using basic conversational strategies. At the intermediate level, these expand to an ability "to hold conversations in fairly fluent English" with "basically correct pronunciation and intonation". At the advanced level, a "certain degree of fluency and accuracy" in speaking is specified, to be produced using "fairly difficult language" with an expectation that learners should be able to "deliver papers at academic conferences and participate in discussions".

These requirements reinforced an existing policy trend toward a greater emphasis on enabling students to speak in English (Du, 2012, p. 1). The term Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which aims to enable students to "use the language for meaningful communication" (Richards, 2006, p. 3), has become more frequent in discussions among both proponents of the Western model of CLT (e.g. Liao, 2004) and those who think the model needs adaptation to the Chinese situation (e.g. Hu, 2005). Stanley (2013, p.24) identifies three "constraints" that are preventing the adoption of the Western CLT model in China. These are firstly, the resistance to and misunderstanding of language as systemic, meaning-based discourse and

language learning as acquisition through communicative use, secondly, Chinese teachers' lack of communicative competence in English, and thirdly, washback from examinations. This review will touch on the first and third of these.

Before doing so, it should be recalled that China is a vast country, and there is almost certainly no generalisation that covers all situations. Feng (2009) for example, categorised English education policy-practice divergences into three categories, and there are likely others. He identified regional and urban-rural differences, socioeconomic status differences, and ethnicity differences that affect accessibility to English education in China. The 2007 Ministry of Education *College English Curriculum Requirements* also recognised this situation in stating that:

> "As China is a large country with conditions that vary from region to region and from college to college, the teaching of College English should follow the principle of providing different guidance for different groups of students" (p. 25).

This seems to indicate that the degree of implementation of policy will be stronger or weaker as they map onto underlying differences associated with location, wealth or ethnicity.

Divergence between the theory and practice of language acquisition

The first of the constraints listed by Stanley refers to how language and language learning is conceptualised. There have been a number of recent attempts to understand language acquisition as a non-linear, socially and historically situated process, and language as the (usually verbal) patterns of meaning-bearing symbols that emerge as people communicate. Examples include the application of *Sociocultural Theory* (Johnson, 2004), *Language Ecology* (Kramsch, 2008), *Dynamic Systems Theory* (Larsen-Freeman, 1997), and *Language as a Local Practice* (Pennycook, 2010). This contrasts with more traditional methods that view language as a collection of discrete grammatical and lexical items, and language acquisition as the learning

of (or perhaps about) these items.

In the traditional approach, reading, writing and listening are 'learnt' first and are then used to produce correct speech in the new language. Oral English, as Stanley (2013) puts it, is a "capstone course designed to 'activate' students' English" (p. 21). In the newer approaches to language learning, language is understood to be socially constructed by users as they negotiate meaning among themselves. It is not a linear process whereby input is converted into predictable output but an iterative process. Repetition and feedback work in the user to develop alternate periods of stability and instability in macro-skills such as conversational speech or extensive listening. In this approach, the teaching and learning of speaking occurs early and continuously in the development of interactional competence.

Stanley (2013, p. 137) claims that the misunderstanding of what language is and how it is acquired is accompanied by resistance from Chinese teachers to these theories and their implementation in practice. It is not clear however, that Chinese teachers uniformly misunderstand the purpose of CLT. Yan (2012) for example, in a study of the response to curriculum reform of three secondary school teachers in Hubei Province, found a high-level of endorsement of the new approach designed to promote "a blend of constructivist and communicative task-based teaching to cultivate students' communicative competence" (p. 435). Despite this endorsement however, it was observed that lessons by the teachers were not communicative. They were "lock-step" with "minimal use of pair/group work" with the teacher talking to the whole class and covering a "large quantity of contents" with listening and speaking "gone through briefly and quickly, or omitted" (p. 437-8). This divergence between accepted theory and practice has also been observed at tertiary level. Wette and Barkhuizen (2009) found that a group of 200 Chinese teachers of English for Academic Purposes in a range of universities in China reported a tension between "teaching the book" (subject-centred or traditional approaches) and "educating the person" (learner-centred or communicative approaches). Three specific sources of tension were identified. One was between the need to teach to the exam and to develop

communicative skills. Another source of tension was between teaching the subject, English, and helping students achieve personal goals through English, and a third between the teachers and their students whom they perceived as only wanting to study English in order to pass exams.

To summarise, there appears to be some degree of willingness on the part of teachers in China to accept the teaching of English with communicative methods, however this acceptance does not always translate into actual communicative lessons at high schools and universities.

The effects of examination washback

Washback (or backwash) refers to the impact examinations have on the teaching and learning of a subject. The concept is frequently mentioned in China with reference to the nationally administered College English Test (CET) (Cheng, 2008; Hua, 2006; Li, Zhong, & Suen, 2012; Zhan, 2009). All university majors in China require at least two years of English study and, in order to graduate, students often need to take the CET (Cheng, 2008, p. 17). Typically, second-year university students take the CET-4 test and third-year students take the CET-6 test. CET includes sections for writing (15% of the total score), listening (35%), reading (35%), and translation (15%) with no testing of speech. A CET-Spoken English Test (CET-SET) can be taken by those who have achieved relatively high scores in the other CET tests (550 out of 710 for CET-4, and 520 for CET -6). There is a particular interest in the washback of the CET tests in the context of national policy statements encouraging a greater emphasis on the teaching of spoken English.

An investigation conducted in 2003 by Gu (2005, in Li et al., 2012) into CET washback found that the perceived impact by a range of stakeholders was generally more positive than negative but that there was a greater influence on content, pace and teachers' attitudes than on teaching methods. The report did not mention specific effects on the learning of spoken English, but this result appears to dovetail with the divergence noted in the previous section between attitudes and practice. A follow-up study by Yang, Gu and Liu (2013) reported that, despite some changes in

teaching methods, the traditional "teacher-centered" (p. 322) mode of instruction persisted in 2009. It was even noted that, possibly for reasons to do with the content of other English classes, the emphasis on speaking in the CET classes actually decreased over the period. The lack of apparent impact of test washback is supported by Zhao (2004) who focused specifically on the CET Spoken English Test and asked whether CET-SET had a washback effect on teachers' and learners' attitudes and actions. Teachers and learners for the CET-SET have the requirements of a spoken English language test in mind, but while this produced a strong washback on teachers' and learners' attitudes towards College English teaching and learning, it did not result in significant changes in their actions, that is, in what they learnt and how they learnt it (Zhao, 2004, p. 50).

In other studies of washback from CET preparation classes, the findings are mixed. In one, the impact on the teaching of spoken English was reported to be positive. Hua (2006) looked at the impact of CET-4 preparation classes at three teachers colleges and compared them to regular English classes. Despite the fact that speaking was not taught in the preparation classes, it was claimed that both courses seemed able to cultivate students' "comprehensive language abilities" (p. 59), including speaking. This may have been because the preparation course was quite short – lasting only for the second half of the second semester in the second year (four to six weeks) before the test – and the momentum gained in previous semesters in confidence and ability in spoken English may still have been evident while students focused on the tested skills in the CET preparation classes. This contrasts with a study that focused on the affective impact of CET-4 preparation classes on learners. Li, Zhong and Suen (2012) surveyed 150 undergraduate students at a high-ranking university in Beijing. Around 63 per cent were not confident that preparing for the CET helped them to speak or write English better, and 58 per cent did not think they were more able to use English in real situations. These were higher than the percentages for reading (46.7), listening (50) and overall proficiency (52.7). The authors concluded that students appear to be "sensitive to what is assessed in the CET and

the weight it gives to different language skills" (2012, p. 89) and as a result, work more on improving their listening and reading than their writing and speaking.

The general finding in these CET studies that examination washback does not have a clear impact on teaching and learning is supported by a parallel study on washback from the International English Language Teaching System (IELTS) in China. IELTS tests Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking skills in a high-stakes examination used by many universities and immigration offices as an application pre-requisite for non-native English speakers. Badger and Yan (2012) undertook a study involving "approximately 70" Chinese teachers of IELTS preparation classes in China. They used questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, observation schedules, field notes of classes, and stimulated recall interviews to gather data to address their research question "To What Extent is Communicative Language Teaching a Feature of IELTS Classes in China?" They found that although the teaching aims or pedagogic orientation of IELTS teachers to some degree reflected the speaking requirements of the test, IELTS preparation lessons in the observed classes remained generally more teacher-centred than is usual in communicative language classes, with widespread use of L1. They attribute this in part to the lack of English language ability of Chinese teachers and to insufficient teacher development in delivering IELTS preparation classes.

Conclusion

This survey has touched on some recent research into two aspects of the teaching of spoken English in China; the divergence of practice from policy and theory, and the effects of examination washback. While there appears to be some support from secondary and tertiary educators for the trend in policy toward more communicative language teaching, this may not have resulted yet in significant changes in teaching behaviour. A number of reasons have been suggested for this, including a lack of training and English ability among teachers, and the retention of a traditional understanding of the process of language acquisition. Other factors, such as class size and work pressure on teachers have also been proposed, but it is not possible to cover them in this brief review.

The impact of washback has received some attention by researchers but without definitive results. Upon reflection, this should perhaps not be surprising. As Wall (2000) notes, test impact is a complex phenomenon and "it should not be assumed that a 'good' test will automatically produce good effects in the classroom, or that a 'bad' test will necessarily produce negative ones" (p. 505). However, a link between teaching practice and examination washback can be asserted, as Wall (2000) does, in that "a positive impact from test design can only be expected if the materials and practices they are based on are effective" (p. 507). If sound pedagogical theory on language acquisition is used to develop effective teaching practices in supportive conditions, a well-designed test has a better chance of positively impacting learning.

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