



Teaching English In China: Lessons from Teaching at the Chongqing University of Posts and Telecommunications

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In the school year 1997–98, I was asked to teach English at the University of Posts and Telecommunications (CUPT) in Chongqing. We lived in a small village in the mountains up outside Chongqing, which was beautiful and above the smog, and historical besides. This was where the nationalist government had had its headquarters during World War II, and one could visit Chiang Kai-shek's and Stilwell's homes as well as numerous foreign embassies. It was a lovely area with resorts for rich Chinese, much easy hiking in beautiful countryside and many sightseeing areas. There were two monasteries in our town, one Buddhist with the best vegetarian food I've ever had, and one Taoist, with the cave where reputedly Lao Tsu had retired to write his poetry.

Two foreign languages, Russian and English, competed a long time for a prime position in China. The traces of this competition are evident in the not very distant past and can be seen even now. Sun Yat-sen, China's great revolutionary leader, was educated mainly in American schools in Hawaii and in an English medical college in Hong Kong. In 1911, he decreed that English be taught to Chinese students. His successor, Chiang Kai-shek, was educated in Moscow, but Mao Tse-tung shunned most contact with the non-Chinese world. Indeed, even today, foreign experts are invited to make their short contributions and leave.

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In the 50s Russian was taught, but in the 60s the native Russian teachers were expelled and the Chinese Russian teachers were retrained. Now Russian is understood mostly by people of the older generations. Nowadays all Chinese learn Mandarin in school though its only one of the four main languages. There are at least 100 regional dialects. Today's computer generation needs and learns English. Little kids would be pushed forward by beaming parents to say hello or wave goodbye, school kids would shyly practice, "Hello" and "How are you? Fine, thank you."—usually one long sentence. Everyone could say, "OK," and "Bye!" but this seemed to be the bulk of what is spoken by the general population. There were English lessons on TV as well as a daily news broadcast in English, which had a very high level of proficiency; only occasional mispronunciations or substitutions of, for instance, "lie" for "lay." The English language newspaper, *China Daily*, was in impeccable English—I never even caught a proofing error—but English ads, directions, tourist notes, university's home pages on the Internet, even Chinese texts for teaching English could be improved.

Starting in middle school (7th grade), all students have English as a major subject through 12th grade, when they graduate. They must take it all four years of college and two difficult proficiency exams are required for graduation. They receive a thorough grounding in the structure and grammar of the language and can read fairly difficult passages. However, until college they have neither heard it spoken in any systematic way nor have attempted speaking it themselves behind the school lessons.

Although colleges are attempting to provide language-learning tapes, native English speakers are much preferred and are invited to come and teach. They are respected by students, Chinese English teachers, and teachers of other departments (for example, computers and medicine). All must use English in their work to read the latest technical journals and converse with overseas colleagues—all of whom use English as a *lingua franca*. Of course the World Wide Web requires English. Every college (and the really prestigious middle schools) attempts to have at least one foreign instructor and CUPT has a goal of two or three native English speakers on staff. A university degree is the main requirement for foreign instructor.

Soon I learned that the Chinese students didn't want me teaching literature (my university specialty) but rather just to do conversations with them, to give opportunities for discussion, and to correct pronunciation. The students' skills ranged from fluent speech to the absolute inability to speak or understand. When I asked my faculty classes how best I could help them, they requested conversations about using the telephone, shopping, meeting on the street, and

ordering in restaurants. Actually, I found soon that I need not to be worried, as the Chinese teachers (and the English department secretary) were extremely helpful. Indeed, kindness and care of strangers seems to be a Chinese cultural trait.

In addition to teaching six two-hour weekly classes (this was actually a reduced load as I was willing to teach night classes, and because of widely divergent ability levels, had only two similar instructors), participating in English Corner—an hour weekly of unstructured conversation—as well as clubs, parties, and English special events; we were expected to give each week an individual one-hour speech in auditorium. It was very useful to share the lecture with another English instructor. Though each of us would be responsible for a single topic, the other would be there too, to add anecdotes, ask questions, or otherwise support the speaker. We determined to have only one topic per week with an ordinary lecture on Tuesday, followed the next day by the same thing in a much slower, simpler, easier to understand format with available Chinese translation if necessary. The students seemed to prefer this mode and we were able to attract them and faculty from several proficiency levels. Some enjoyed coming twice to polish their listening ability. Hundreds came and, because of our newly relaxed style, and all had a good time.

In one of lectures I compared and contrasted table manners that are very, very different. I said that Americans are taught to clean their plates, whereas Chinese consider it unmannerly not to leave something on the plate to indicate one has had enough. If you finish what is on a serving plate a Chinese host will rush to the kitchen and start cooking more or in a restaurant will lose face for appearing not to have ordered enough. Manners are different (and correct) in different countries and as our world gets smaller and smaller, it behooves us to learn what is right and proper wherever we go.

I daresay they learned more about Americans and our culture watching us be silly wearing Halloween masks, or teaching Christmas carols than they would have if I'd stuck to my earlier line-up of subjects: American Values, The Rule of Law, Community Based Long Term Care, etc. I did talk about what happens to the paycheck—taxes and services—and how Americans pay for what they get. We devoted an hour to Princess Di and Mother Teresa, compared growing up as a city slicker with being a country boy, talked about our pets, discussed “Home Sweet Home” by diagramming floor plans and city maps, and talked about age and rites of passage in modern life. Again, being an “expert” meant knowing how to speak English and doing so rather than demonstrating any breadth of knowledge.

English Corner, which happened for a minimum of one hour a week, was also very popular and the venue had to be changed to accommodate the growing hordes. Kids always surrounded us. They seemed to prefer asking us questions than having conversations in English among themselves, which is the real purpose of these “corners.” They exist in all schools and in many parks in cities around China. We learned how to gauge the success of an evening by how many new speakers had dared to ask us if we liked Chinese food or how long we’d been in Chongqing. Five of each meant we’d done a good job. There were occasional substantive discussions, which were our reward. Students (and teachers) liked also to visit and telephone us, which seemed somehow safer for them to practice.

Chinese students are great fun to work with. Unfailingly polite—they’d stand and say, “Good morning, Dr. Wendy,” when I’d walk in a room. They were also extremely well-behaved and quite shy and reserved in class but as noisy as anyone else during the breaks. When the bell rang they’d already be in their seats with all eyes toward the front. If someone dared to be late, he’d stand at the door, bow, and ask my permission to come in. Indeed, I felt part of my job was to shake them up somewhat, as learning to speak a foreign language involves the willingness to be foolish and to take risks. So I’d often make them get up, move all the chairs and do something like teach them the Hokey-Pokey or other songs and dances. The Chinese love to sing, are very fast to pick up tunes, and have incredible memories for lyrics.

Until the Communist reforms of 1992, all children were able to attend school, but now their parents have to pay to send them. Low-income college students might get sponsored by their whole villages. When China became the People’s Republic in 1949, 80% of the population was illiterate. Now that figure has reversed itself, but the papers are full of stories about rural youngsters who must drop out (even of primary school) because of poverty. This was the only worrisome condition I met in modern China and I used to exhort my students to do something about access to education for all when they came to their majority. Half of the students at CUPT are on scholarship and they shared my strong feeling about the rural students in remote provinces. Many people donate to a “Project Hope,” which helps send deserving children back to school. Whenever I had ask the kids to imagine winning a lottery, a significant proportion planned to give away their windfalls to rural schools. The way the Chinese economy is growing, it appears that many of today’s students will be tomorrow’s successful businessmen and I asked them to remember what they’d vowed in class. In one of my classes we read about a millionaire philanthropist Mr. Percy Ross of Minnesota. We made a class project of writing to ask him to help these rural kids.

I will enjoy hearing whether anything happens—if there is a positive result, I will feel my visit in China was really worth the efforts of the government to get me there.

Chinese students study all the time. Classrooms, though not the library, are left open and lighted on nights and weekends to provide a quiet place, as the dorms are so crowded. The usual class load is nine subjects, twice as many as in the USA; so college life is pretty circumscribed. Students declare their majors prior to acceptance and take all their classes, all four years, with this same group. They do not have jobs; so there is some time for sports (only intramural in China) and variety shows and parties within departments.

There were several special events sponsored by the English Club (a creation of the English teachers). About two hundred, mostly freshmen, students attended these hilarious events, which featured quizzes, “Where is the Statue of Liberty?”, with prizes; the enactment of short plays, singing, and musical performances, and recitals of poems. Even I got into the act with my ever-popular nursery school songs and finger plays. My singing is a treat not to be missed, but you haven’t lived until you’ve seen Chinese first year English speakers act out and very creatively pronounce the words of the justice scene from “The Merchant of Venice...”

In class, which ranged in size from 30–40 students, I usually came up with themes like “shopping” or “friendship” and did a lot of speaking and reading aloud. I had let the students follow me and then correct their pronunciation. Though there were some British texts, I had most success with Addison–Wesley workbooks of real newspaper stories from around the world, which were interesting and easy to read. Conversations worked best when I had questions written out, “What qualities do you look for in a friend, a spouse? Tell about your favorite book. Would you rather spend your money on entertainment or things?”, and I had them do a lot of partner work. The week Chairman Jiang Semin visited President Clinton I had them role-play this famous summit. In groups we planned what to take for survival on a desert island, had spelling bees, and designed fantasy vacations. Songs like “Jingle Bells” and “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” and games like “Simon Says” were always successful. In my early career I had taught both college English and English as a second language. Flexibility and the willingness to laugh at myself were my most important teaching skills. My goal was really just to help my students feel comfortable in their efforts to speak, as one semester is barely a beginning. The students had a harder time understanding each other than they did me and I now realize why “native” speakers are desired. At the end of the term, I was quite worried about grading. Chinese marks are based on a 100 point system with 60 as a passing grade. I had told all my students

that their grades would be based on a combination of three items, which would each weigh equally: attendance, participation, along with skill and learning, which included an oral exam and one or two written exercises based on their understanding of spoken English. Fortunately I did not have to grade my two faculty classes. The freshmen all had perfect attendance, tried hard and were wonderful to teach. My graduate students were fine. The only difficulty I had was with my one class of juniors who had been especially selected from out of all departments to participate in an elite honors English program. Most of these students were fluent in speaking and understanding English prior to their meeting with me and usually had experienced several foreign teachers in their careers. The thrill was gone and about 10% of their attitudes reflected this. Some did not bother to come to class or turn in papers, and only showed up for the final. Except for giving myself a failing grade for the few students I could not reach, teaching was a totally rewarding, confidence building, and happy experience. The night before we left, about forty student ambassadors came over to thank me, and present cards and gifts they'd all chipped into buy. One term is way too short to spend in China, and I will really miss all these wonderful students.

China was once likened to a sleeping giant. I doubt whether that was ever true, but the giant has decided to come out and play and I'm very grateful for the opportunity I had to play along.