
China EFL: Why Chinese Universities Do Not Provide an English Speaking Environment

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ABSTRACT

There is a new expression in vogue on Chinese university campuses. “We must create an English speaking environment.” This statement is usually uttered by a Chinese administrator using Putonghua. Chinese administrators are under the false impression that the creation of an English speaking environment simply requires providing an opportunity for oral English output.

THE PROBLEM

Speak with any Chinese university Foreign Language Department administrator and they will extol the virtues of creating an English speaking environment (ESE) for the English majors. But take a close look and you will quickly discover that there is no ESE on campus.

First and foremost, Chinese university administrators do not have a clear and proper understanding of what constitutes an ESE. When most of them undertook their university education 20+ years ago, 2nd language acquisition research was in its infancy and comprised no more than one chapter in their textbooks and no continuing education is provided. There is a complete lack of knowledge about immersion or comprehensible input in a friendly environment.

There are two required elements to a proper ESE. A proper ESE is one where the students are inundated with comprehensible English input and where it is easier to communicate in English rather than in the native Putonghua. An English speaking environment is defined as: *"An environment where English is the dominant language."* Or, *"an environment where people are compelled to speak English."*

Far too many Chinese Foreign Language Department administrators are under the false impression that an ESE is simply where the students are given an opportunity for English output. As a result they decry the lack of an ESE and immediately turn to speak to an English major in Putonghua; or they place all English majors in the same dormitory with Chinese speaking staff; or, they hold weekly English corners; or, they hire foreign teachers to “chat” with the Chinese students. Even at a school that does all of these things simultaneously, no ESE is created.

The administrators do not require the English majors to speak to them in English nor do they respond to them in English. There is a very simple explanation for this. The administrators are either unable to speak in English or their English is so poor that they do not want to "lose face" with the students.. The administrators do not contribute to the creation of an ESE and they rarely do anything to improve their own English capability.

The administrators set a very bad example for the students.

When the Party Secretary assigned to the Foreign Language Department cannot speak or understand any English, all department business must be conducted in Putonghua, including all staff meetings and written communications. This militates against creation of an ESE.

The joint venture universities set up by foreign universities, in partnership with Chinese universities, are not exempt from this criticism. The foreign university brings its foreign curriculum and administration that usually requires that all courses be conducted in English. However, according to Chinese law, these joint ventures are required to have Chinese deans. The Chinese deans rarely speak English and hire their own Chinese speaking staff. Students find it much easier to communicate with the Chinese speaking staff in Putonghua so they bypass the English speaking staff. Eventually this leads to the Chineesing of the entire joint venture program.

The Chinese administrators who profess the need for creation of an ESE are often the primary impediment to its creation.

Thirty-eight out of forty Chinese university English teachers, who are supposed to teach in English, are incapable due to their own poor English, so they teach English in Putonghua. They are, for the most part, ignorant of the need to teach in the target language and many have inquired, "What does "target" mean?"

English majors ask their Chinese English teachers questions in Chinese and are answered in Chinese, both in the classroom and outside the classroom. Telephone text messages between teachers and students are also conducted in Putonghua.

The classrooms are littered with Chinese proverbs and political propaganda, all in Putonghua.

Modern five story libraries at universities with a 10% or higher English major population have absolutely no English books, or the English reading room is reserved for faculty only. There are no English speaking staffs in the library.

The multi-media libraries offer English movies with Chinese subtitles.

The computer labs and sound labs are programmed in Chinese rather than English. The lab support staffs and computer teachers do not speak English.

The campuses have no bi-lingual signage Even the sign welcoming the new freshmen English majors is all in Putonghua and the freshmen orientation is all in Putonghua.

There are no English speaking staffs in the canteen, post office, logistics department, dormitories, or any other service office of which the students must avail themselves.

There is no extra-curricular access to English newspapers, TV or films.

In short, there isn't even a token attempt to create a proper ESE within the pervasive native Chinese environment.

EXCUSES

When foreign teachers complain about the lack of an ESE or make constructive suggestions for the creation of an ESE, they are met with a set of rehearsed excuses that include:

This is China.

It is my habit to speak in Chinese.

You will be gone in one year or less.

Laughter

SOLUTIONS:

The first step to creating a proper ESE on Chinese university campuses is to provide continuing education in 2nd language acquisition to all Chinese Foreign Language Department administrators and staffs. Unless and until the administrators and staffs understand modern 2nd language acquisition theory, all other efforts at creating a proper ESE are futile.

Second, it is imperative that all Foreign Language Department administrators and staffs be required to participate in continuing English language education programs. It is both impractical and hypocritical for Chinese teachers to demand that their students improve their English while the teachers refuse to improve their own.

Third, there must be an incentive or punishment scheme so that administrators and staffs make an honest effort to understand 2nd language acquisition theory and to improve their English competency.

Fourth, schools must transform their Foreign Language Departments into little English enclaves, or at least bi-lingual ones.

Fifth, English competency must become an employment prerequisite for all English teachers.

Sixth, libraries must provide a diversified selection of English reading materials and English movies with English subtitles.

Without a fundamental attitude adjustment, the concept of creating an ESE is just an impossible dream.