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ENGLISH OR CHINGLISH?

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ABSTRACT:

A great deal has been written and said about various approaches to the successful methodology for teaching English as a foreign/second language in China. Entire professional Journals are devoted to the subject, such as Teaching English In China, and Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, to name a couple. But no matter how much is written, and no matter what teaching method is employed; the bottom line is that the average Chinese student learns to orally communicate in Chinglish i.e. Mandarin sprinkled with English or English with Mandarin induced syntax.

The teaching of English as a Foreign/Second Language (EFL/ESL) in China has become a nationwide endeavor pursued at all academic levels, from the kindergarten to the University. In the past ten years there has been an explosion in the development of public school English programs and private English language schools throughout China. EFL/ESL has become very big business in China (China Daily, HK Edition, October 9, 2002.) Reports show that EFL/ESL has become a 10-billion yuan business in China. Of the 37 billion yuan annual book sales, EFL/ESL takes up as much as 25% of the market share. And a few EFL/ESL teachers in Shanghai command an hourly rate of 1,000 yuan (US\$120). Even on average, a student pays 10-20 yuan (US\$1.2-2.4) for one hour of EFL/ESL training). Many of the private ESL schools are in some type of partnership relationship with one or more public schools (Delter Wuhan International Business Institute is partnered with the Wuhan Railroad Vocational Technical College; Telfort Business Institute is partnered with the Shanghai Metallurgy College; the Sino-Canadian Joint Program is partnered with the Shanghai Television University; Delter Jinan is partnered with Jinan Railroad Polytechnic Institute; Delter Tianjin is partnered with the Xinhua shi gong da xue University; Jilin Telfort International Business Institute is partnered with the Jilin Railway School of Economics; Mount Royal; Business Institute is partnered with the Chengdu Hydro Electric Power College; and Delter Beijing is partnered with the Beijing Electric Power College).

There appear to be certain implied or tacit assumptions underlying the nationwide EFL/ESL program in China (**A.** Everyone in China needs to learn EFL/ESL; **B.** There is one EFL/ESL teaching method suitable on a nationwide basis; **C.** All native

English speakers with a college degree are qualified to be EFL/ESL teachers; **D.** Chinese EFL/ESL teachers without western cultural experience are capable of teaching EFL/ESL; **E.** Chinese should “master” English; **F.** Chinglish is unacceptable or bad language). These assumptions, when superimposed upon the EFL/ESL teaching curriculum, may themselves doom the EFL/ESL student to becoming a mere technician of grammatical rules without any appreciable ability to effectively communicate in any form of oral English, other than “Chinglish.”

Each underlying implied or tacit assumption may be seriously flawed and should be thoroughly scrutinized by linguistic and other scholars throughout China. The instant cursory examination of each of the underlying assumptions causes concern that the assumptions have dubious origins, are not supported by any empirical study or other evidence, and are inappropriate foundations for a national EFL/ESL program.

ASSUMPTION “A”: Everyone in China needs to learn EFL/ESL

Beijing wants its 13 million residents to speak English to enhance its image as a cosmopolitan metropolis (China Daily, (10-05-02). China’s Ministry of Education wants all young people of China to learn English due to China’s WTO membership and China’s hosting the 2008 Olympics (China Daily, (10-05-02). Certain municipal governments in China require all of their civil servants to learn some English (China Daily, (10-05-02)

This goals or objectives beg the question, **WHY?**

Market studies, market analysis and affirmative recommendations from experts in the fields of business, math and linguistics should support each of the forgoing propositions, but not appear to have been conducted.

What is the mathematical probability that each of Beijing’s residents will need to be able to speak English for an intended or even accidental encounter with a single English speaking foreigner during the 2008 Olympics? Not very high.

Does a market study support the proposition that Beijing’s image will be enhanced in the eyes of foreigners if all the residents of Beijing can speak English? Further, would such image enhancement translate into increased economic benefit for Beijing? If so, how much economic benefit will accrue to Beijing and does it offset the social, cultural and political costs that must be paid along the way by the people of Beijing? These questions do not appear to have been addressed by any formal study.

How many bilingual (Chinese-English) jobs will actually be created in China due to China’s World Trade Organization (WTO) membership and hosting the 2008 Olympics? Does the number of new jobs requiring English support the need for all

of China's young people to learn English? Answers to these questions are not readily available. Why should anyone spend three or four years in a University EFL/ESL program for an Olympics job that will last only a matter of weeks? What happens after the Olympics?

What is the mathematical probability that all municipal government civil servants, in any particular Chinese municipality, will need to use English in their daily work? Very slim.

Is there any empirical study or evidence to support the current ESL revolution in China, which revolution may in fact have significant adverse social, cultural and political effects? (Qiang/Wolff, (4/03) It does not appear that the Chinese Central Government has issued any formal Resolution or Position Paper authorizing, condoning or supporting the current ESL revolution in China. Rather, it has been allowed and even encouraged to just evolve. Other than standardized testing for College entrance, the Central Government seems to have no set educational policy or curriculum for EFL/ESL. There is no single Ministry of Education document stating the Government policy on EFL/ESL in China. (He Qixin, (8/01)

This rush to educate has spawned an industry run amuck, without appreciable government control or regulation. (Qiang/Wolff, 9/03)

Why the concerted effort to require 1.3 billion Mandarin speakers, 25% of the world's population, to learn English as a second language? Since Mandarin is one of the six working languages of the United Nations, does the world at large have a greater appreciation for the importance of Mandarin than China itself?

Is the current EFL/ESL revolution in China a misguided, self-inflicted English colonialization, brought about tacitly, if not officially, by adopting EFL/ESL teaching as a national program? Will the West conquer China from within, without a single shot ever being fired?

ASSUMPTION "B": There is one ESL teaching method suitable on a nationwide basis.

With 1.3 billion potential EFL/ESL students, it is sheer folly to strive to develop one universal methodology for EFL/ESL teaching throughout China. In English there is a popular saying, "different strokes for different folks." The concept of a single EFL/ESL teaching methodology has been floated as a serious ideology in a recent poll undertaken by TEFL, although implicitly rejected by a majority of the respondents.

(TEFL is found at www.tefl.com and it polled ESL teachers on the following question: Do you believe a 'fit-all' teaching method exists?

Yes, I've found it 6.93 %; *Yes, but I haven't found it* 4.95 %; *No* 88.12 %).

There may be some methodologies that will have a higher success rate than others, with any given group, but no methodology can be successful if the program itself is fatally flawed.

In China L2 acquisition is expected to occur within a two to six hour per week oral English class. For example, consider an ESL conversation class designed for three consecutive 45-minute periods, twice a week (Sino-Canadian Joint Program at Shanghai University of International Exchange). The actual class time is effectively 135 minutes each day 270 minutes per week. Or, consider an ESL conversation class designed for two consecutive 45-minute periods, once a week (Xinyang Agricultural College, Henan Province), for a total of 90 minutes per week. Now further consider that this is the class where all of the learned grammatical rules, vocabulary and intensive reading are to be applied through oral practice where correction may be applied to inappropriate pronunciation, phraseology, word choice or syntax.

In the public Universities these conversation classes have an enrollment of up to 60 students. Now let us do the math. At Xinyang Agriculture College, assuming that each student needs absolutely no correction from the teacher, each student can pick-up and continue the conversation from the prior student without any lapse of time in between; then each student has exactly 1.50 minutes during each class day to practice what he has learned and to become proficient in the oral use of English as a second language. IMPOSSIBLE! 1.50 minutes per day is not enough time to practice anything to a point of accomplishment or proficiency.

That is the totality of the acquisition effort throughout China's public education system. "Immersion" is one foreign word not found in the Chinese teaching of English as a second language. EFL/ESL is generally taught in a hostile environment¹, concentration upon vocabulary and grammatical rule memorization in preparation for various national proficiency tests in reading, writing and listening. Although Krashen's theory of second language acquisition is taught in the top tier universities, it is not put into practice in China. (Krashen, 1981.)

Even students who score very high on the national English proficiency tests are unable to orally communicate in little more than Chinglish. Or, they orally communicate in "DD" English (English taught from a dictionary, which may be technically correct, but is without any sensitivity to the cultural or environmental context of actual use by a native speaker), which cannot be as easily understood by native English speakers as can the use of Chinglish.

The quest to find the one EFL/ESL teaching methodology universally suitable for all students is not a worthy expenditure of effort or resources, particularly when the English curriculum needs so much corrective attention and Chinglish will still be the

inevitable result.

ASSUMPTION "C": All native English speakers with a college degree are qualified to teach EFL/ESL.

China recruits approximately 100,000 native English teachers each year (source: <http://www.chinatefl.com>) "According to a certain statistics about 100 thousand teachers will be needed every year in China."). English teachers from Australia, Great Britain, Canada, and the United States of America are heavily recruited through the Internet

(<http://www.chinatefl.com>; <http://www.tefl.com>; <http://www.eslcafe.com/jobinfo>).

Generally speaking, in America, a University Bachelors, Masters or Doctorate Degree, in any discipline, merely qualifies a native speaker to enroll in a teacher training program where they will then receive a teaching certificate or Masters Degree, which amounts to a license to teach.

Unfortunately, there is no universal recruitment standard for EFL/ESL teachers in China other than the requirement that they are native speakers and have a college degree, in some recognized discipline. There is no teacher-training requirement or even any teaching experience requirement to become an English teacher in China.

xinpai@china.com Xin Pai Foreign Language School Date: Monday, 20 January 2003, at 10:08 a.m. More Job Vacancies Four more teaching positions are now available at Xin Pai Foreign Language School ... but even those with no experience, who would like to try their hand at teaching, are welcome, as we can provide on-the-job training and assistance.

<http://www.chinatefl.com/abroad.html>; Frequently Asked Questions: 1. What qualifications should one have in teaching in China? The basic qualifications are: being a native speaker of English, having a minimum BA degree and commitment to teaching, loving China and its people. Clear, well-spoken English and a good knowledge of the fundamentals of English grammar. Teaching experience/certificate is preferred but not a must.

Most ESL teachers are recruited to China with very attractive bait (Travel/Teach English:

"The Global TESOL Institute, <http://www.eslcafe.com/jobinfo/asia/sefer.cgi?China>; **Looking for a well-paid job to explore China?** Come to TDM! Posted By: TDM Language College woody@tdmlanguage.com Date: Thursday, 16 January 2003, at 10:04 a.m. But you are very well paid. Your salary will be more than enough for you to live comfortably, **to explore the exciting China, its history, its nature, its people, its culture, its language and its food.**"

The recruit is usually very young with no prior teaching experience, away from home for the first time, in their first cross-cultural experience, and under the belief that they are about to embark upon a China vacation, which of necessity, must be interrupted occasionally for a little work.

There is little or no advance training, preparation or indoctrination for teaching ESL in China. Far too many recruits never finish their one-year contract, some leaving within the first week, month or first several months. The reasons for disillusionment are almost as many and varied as the number of disillusioned (www.eslcafe.com). In a two year period 113 FE's published over 400 complaints, mostly about Chinese owned and operated primary schools. (Qiang/Wolff, 9/03)

“Too many people with no real interest in the job come here (China) for a good time (very easy to do) and leave the real teachers trying to clean up the mess and repair their image. A white face and a degree, even a fake one, land a job.” (Tamblyn, Andrew, 1/15/03,

“The tragedy is that some folks come here not to teach, but to travel, so they get all romantic and misty eyed. They can't teach, don't want to teach, and want to party like in the good old USA. This devil-may-care, happy camper attitude unfortunately leads them to make immature decisions and to be placed in schools that cannot wait to capitalize on these “Rage Against the Machine” look-a-likes. They also give serious teachers a bad reputation.” (H. Jones, 2/25/01)

There is no evidence that the native English teacher produces students any better equipped to speak English than their Chinese English teacher counterparts. This is partly due to poorly designed curriculum and partly due to the fact that too many native English speaking teachers are simply not trained to teach anything, let alone EFL/ESL. (Qiang/Wolff, 2004, “Can You Obtain A First Class Education In A Third Tier College In China” Progress in Education, in press; <http://www.esl-lounge.com/qiang-wolff-index.html>)

Middle school and high school students of Chinese English teachers are subject to objective evaluation through the college entrance examination process. University students of Chinese English teachers are subject to objective evaluation through the Band 4 and Band 6 testing program. However, private college or business institute students taught by native English speakers are not subject to any objective evaluation testing process. The effectiveness of these private educational programs is an

unknown factor and hence their contribution to the Chinese society is also an unknown factor. The only thing really known for certain about these private English schools is that they are draining an appreciable amount of yuan from the local economy (China Daily, HK Edition, 10/9/02).

This situation cries out for and demands an empirical study of the real benefit of private English colleges and business institutes in relation to their economic profiteering. The 16th Communist Party Congress discussed the advisability and merits of allowing private educational institutions to begin engaging in business for profit, as if it was not a current reality. Acknowledgement that private educational enterprises are making a financial killing in China already is a prerequisite to developing appropriate Governmental regulation and quality control standards for the private educational sector.

ASSUMPTION "D": Chinese EFL/ESL speakers without western cultural experience are capable of teaching ESL

Language and culture are inseparable; on this there is no apparent disagreement between linguists. How then can an L2 EFL/ESL speaker, without any actual immersion in, or exposure to, the L2 EFL/ESL culture, possibly expect to be an effective L2 EFL/ESL teacher? They are certainly capable of dissecting the grammatical rules, analyzing English writings, reading extensively, and memorizing vocabulary, but this will enable them to do nothing more than teach a "DD" form of English. Additionally, in far too many cases, (especially the primary school teachers) their own pronunciation is so atrocious that they cannot possibly correct a student's improper pronunciation and they are so steeped in Chinglish that it is impossible for them to recognize it and correct it in their students. (Yanping Dong, (2003)

The L2 students of L2 teachers will not have any appreciation for the cultural or environmental context in which the native speaker actually uses the language. The student will speak, if at all, in a "DD" form of English that the native speaker will find very strange, bookish, stiff or formal, and unintelligible; or, the Chinese student will use a form of Chinglish which is universally understandable by other EFL/ESL speakers and L1 English speakers alike.

Chinese English teachers at the middle school and high school levels are themselves so unaccomplished in proper English pronunciation that they discourage and even intimidate their students from attempting to speak in English (He Mei, 9/28/00) When these students reach the university level they have little or no practical speaking ability and have very poor pronunciation, making the university oral English teachers job almost an impossibility. This situation has also been fostered by an English curriculum that is test result driven rather than driven by practical conversational ability. Middle school and high school students focus on learning only that which is required to pass the college entrance examination, which does not include oral

English.

A flawed L2 curriculum, taught by L2 speakers who themselves are deficient in their L2 language understanding and production ability, constitutes an educational program doomed to less than stellar results. In fact, the results are so poor as to require a very lenient grading standard to avoid failing more than half of the Chinese English students in each class.

The following are examples of a dictionary definition (DD) conversation and a culturally insensitive textbook:

EXAMPLE #1: (Dictionary Definition, Chinese English Teacher talking to Foreign Expert, Feb. 24, 2003)

CET – “Tomorrow you will “fetch” your Temporary Residence Permit from the Public Security Bureau.”

FE – “Why do you talk to me like that? I am not a dog!”

CET – “What do you mean?”

FE – “In America we command our dogs to “fetch” when we want them to retrieve something for us.”

CET – “But the dictionary says that “fetch” is used to refer to going someplace and bringing something that is there back.”

FE – “Yes, but in actual daily usage we only tell our dogs to “fetch” when we throw something and have them chase it and bring it back or when we are using dogs while hunting for birds. It is an insult to tell a person to “fetch.” You insinuate that they are a dog.

EXAMPLE #2: (Cultural Ignorance, excerpts of inappropriate conversational English randomly taken from an English textbook published in 2001 and written by a Chinese L2, “Interactive Speakers.”)

It’s time to say our farewells. P55

Could they make me known the exact time the plane takes off? P69

Have I got the go ahead to put out the fire? P119

I wonder if you’d excuse me for a moment. P152

... I’m afraid. P183

I’m afraid P 24, 167, 182

Will it be convenient if I call upon you at seven this evening? P220

To be openhearted, your denial that you had witnessed the accident dumbfounded me. P 249

He chooses to look into the matter till the truth is out. P264

Foreign Experts should be pressed into the service of teaching primary and middle school teachers how and what to teach in their EFL/ESL classes.

ASSUMPTION “E”: Chinese English students should “master”

English

The 6th Edition of the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary identifies no fewer than 7 separately identifiable forms of English language in the world today (American; Australian; British; Irish; Northern; New Zealand; and Scottish). When Chinese ESL teacher or ESL students remark that their goal is to “master” English, the question should be: Which one? If anyone did ever “master” English, it is doubtful that anyone would understand him or her.

Within the separately identifiable English languages there are numerous regional variations. In New York City there are at least four such variations of English. Further, language is a fluid entity that is always in a state of change. That is why most dictionaries are updated and reprinted annually.

So, even if someone “mastered” all English forms at any given moment in time, his or her “mastery” would quickly become outdated. The emphasis should rather be on standardization of Chinglish or regional English.

Being worldly traveled and having communicated with people who speak Chinglish, Singlish, Pidgin, Creole and other English variations, it is clear to us that many English variation speakers are more understandable than many L1 English speakers from Australia, Scotland, Ireland or Wales. The pronunciation of many of these so-called native English speakers is so horrific that it is completely incomprehensible. In the summer of 2002, Chinese English students at a private business institute in Wuhan, China, regularly shunned a native English teacher from Wales, because his pronunciation was so incomprehensible.

If one of our Chinese English students makes a classroom presentation using standard English, including correct word choice, sentence structure and syntax, but we are unable to understand their pronunciation, then their English can only be described as “perfectly incomprehensible” no matter how pedagogically correct. If a cow makes a clucking sound, would it be safe to conclude that it is a chicken, none-the-less? If a word is not pronounced correctly is it the same word conveying the correct meaning? Probably not, as is evidenced by the various tones in mandarin.

We can teach a Standard English but they will learn Chinglish due to cultural differences in thought patterns. This cultural difference in thought process stands as a permanent impediment to all 2nd language acquisition, no matter what the L1 or L2 language may

be.

The quest for “mastery” of English seems a foolish waste of energy, time and resources, which could be better utilized on other, more meaningful pursuits.

ASSUMPTION “E”: Chinglish is unacceptable or bad language

The purpose of all language is effective communication.

“Pidgin” English is understood amongst the native Hawaiian people and it also enables them to effectively communicate with the English-speaking foreigners who are occupying their homeland.

“Singlish” is an effective form of English communication amongst the people of Singapore and their English speaking world trading partners, business associates and tourists.

In fact, almost every nation that has adopted English as a second language has developed a form of English that can be readily used by the lowest common denominator within its own people’s abilities to communicate and to still have effective communications with the native English speaker. Regional Englishes abound worldwide.

There may be some purists who look down upon “Chinglish” or anything less than “perfect English” but of course their definition of what perfect English is will also depend upon which of the 7 standard English forms they consider to be their native form or “pure English.” (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 6th Edition.)

China is a developing Nation and is well within its rights to develop a form of English or regional English that best suits its general population’s need to communicate with each other as well as native English speakers, while insisting on a more refined English proper or standard English, (Jiang Yajun, (1995) only for its official translators and some groups of professionals such as lawyers, accountants, scientists, medical doctors, etc. is only required by certain professional groups in China (Shanghai Star 10-24-02).

Chinglish is not a bad thing! In point of fact, it is inevitable (Jiang Yajun, (1995)

Certain Municipal Governments require all of their civil servants to have a minimum of 1,000 English words in their vocabulary (China Daily, 10-05-02) This official policy forces Chinese speakers of Mandarin to sprinkle a few English words in to give a little English flavor to their Mandarin. This is nothing less than an officially sanctioned and

promulgated form of Chinglish.

CONCLUSION

The plethora of EFL/ESL programs throughout China may be producing a few English PhD scholars, but they are not producing graduates capable of communicating orally in everyday or Standard English (Deng Di, (6/9/00) However, Chinglish is developing as the second National language of China. As long as Chinglish serves as an effective means of internal and external communication with other L2 EFL/ESL peoples and L1 English speakers, why should anyone complain?

ⁱ (Xinyang Agricultural College, Henan Province 2003) You are forced to trudge up three to five flights of cold concrete stairs to reach your assigned concrete cubicle where you are required to sit on a 17” high backless wooden stool with an 8 1/2” x 11” seat, in front of a 30” high wooden bench. The cold concrete floor is swept daily by merely pushing the dirt into a corner where it stacks up. Water is splashed on the floor to keep the dust down. There is no heat to ward off the freezing cold of winter nor air conditioning to provide relief from the sweltering heat of summer. The walls are dingy-yellowed with time, dirty and in disrepair. The lighting is bare fluorescent tubes just like a sweatshop. In the front of the room is a Chinese language sign that roughly translated means [only speak mandarin in this room]. There is a second Chinese language sign on a sidewall that roughly translated says [no talking in this room].

This cold, dank, concrete box is surrounded by construction noises on one side, and from another side the machine gun rapid-fire pops of hundreds of dribbled basketballs on the concrete exercise yard and the sound of popcorn popping as 50 ping pong balls are slapped with bare wooden paddles and bounced on concrete tables located under your windows; and from yet another side the sounds of people noisily clomping up and down the adjacent stairs or people in an adjacent concrete cubicle playing a Chinese movie on the television loud enough for the entire building to participate in the audio bombardment.

Inside the concrete cubicle you sit theater style facing the front of the room for nine hours each day. There are no English signs or notices posted on the walls, no decorations to instill any thoughts about the West, its culture, or its language. There are two Chinese signs on the front wall, one says, “No Talking In Class” and the other says, “When You Speak Use Mandarin Only.” There are no maps or globe of the outside world. You are deprived of any and all English newspapers, magazines or periodicals. There is no western music or television. And worst of all, no one speaks to you in English, not even those sitting next to you, let alone any of the other forty plus occupants of the cubicle. You are forced to watch Chinese movies or be bored completely.

Suddenly, but on cue, an authority figure enters your cubicle and announces that you will

now learn English as a second language and you are snapped into the reality that you are now in an environment where you are required to not only learn but to “master” English as a second language. Your English teacher stands in front of the two Chinese signs that advise against talking in class or when you must, only use Mandarin.

No, this is not punishment, not a prison, not a concentration camp, not a re-education camp or some other type of detention facility. You are a free spirit! Free that is to “master” English and do it within the next three years.

Outside your cubical you are constantly bombarded with Mandarin over the campus-wide loudspeaker system and in the written notices and bulletins posted on the public information boards around the campus, but nothing in English. Even the notice posted advising of an impending English Corner is written in Chinese characters. You note the absence of English reading materials in the College library; the absence of English DVD movies or television programs; the blaring Chinese movies in the cafeteria; the total absence of English signs or decoration anywhere on campus; and the lack of any inducement to speak English. When you go to the English department offices, all of the staff and students are communicating in Mandarin. No staff in the college library, cafeteria or store speak English.

There is nothing special or attractive about being an English major and there is no inducement to acquire English as a foreign/second language, just learn it as it is taught to you by your Mandarin speaking teachers who predominantly speak and teach in their L1 using a “chalk and talk” pedagogy. There is no English-speaking environment within the academic community or anywhere else in China. This hostile environment is found throughout China’s universities and colleges and it violates every principle of second language acquisition through comprehensible input in a friendly environment. (Krashen, 1997).

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