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## CHINA'S EFL/ESL GOALS AND OBJECTIVES:

Are they being met?

By: Niu Qiang. and Martin Wolff

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### **ABSTRACT/INTRODUCTION**

"The incompetence of many graduates from high schools or even colleges and universities to communicate effectively in spoken and written English is related to the teaching methods in China. Students are usually spoon-fed, listening and taking notes with teachers standing at the front and doing most of the talking." (He Mei, (9/28/00) "English Teaching Method Faces Challenge," ChinaDaily) "Most of us begin studying English at 12 or even younger. By the time we graduate from the university, we have studied English for over 10 years. However, the result is awful. Many students can say nothing but some simple phrases. Even for some English majors, writing an article in English also means nothing other than making countless mistakes." (Deng Di, (6/9/00)

Were the above but an isolated comment or two, they would not be worthy of our time to address. Unfortunately, it is all too often spoken by frustrated university graduates and repeatedly heard by us, in one form or another, during our travels throughout China.

It is with the above quotes resonating in our minds that we have embarked up writing this paper in an attempt to share an experiment aimed at remedying the situation of which the above authors are heard to complain.

### **GRADUATION GOALS FOR ENGLISH MAJORS**

The proficiency level required of English majors in Chinese Universities and Colleges is best summarized by Professor He Qixin (He Qixin, (7/00,):

**Listening Comprehension:** Students should be able to understand radio or television programs of English-speaking countries (for instance, CNN) concerning political, economic, cultural, educational and scientific issues, special reports or lectures on similar subjects.

**Speaking Ability:** Students are required to exchange ideas with people from English-speaking countries on major international or

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domestic issues, to be engaged in lengthy and in-depth discussions on similar subjects, and to express themselves clearly, assertively and coherently.

**Reading Comprehension:** Students must be able to read editorials and critical essays on political issues from British and American major newspapers and magazines (for instance, *Times*, *New York Times*), to understand literature published in English-speaking countries, and to be able to analyze the thesis, the structure, the language and the style of the above writings.

**Writing Ability:** Students are required to write descriptive, narrative, expository and argumentative essays, expressing themselves effectively, smoothly and correctly. The required writing speed is 300 to 400 words within half an hour. A thesis is part of the requirement for a bachelor's degree, 3,000 to 5,000 words in length (12–20 double-spaced pages).

If these goals are indeed being met, why the perception expressed by He Mei, Deng Di, and so many others?

### **DOES THE RIGHT HAND KNOW ABOUT THE LEFT HAND?**

We agree with Professor He with respect to utilization of the New York Times and Washington Post newspapers for teaching English in China, particularly when it is remembered that the controversial but innovative Webster's 3<sup>rd</sup> International Dictionary relied so heavily on the New York Times and the Washington Post as its primary source for common standardized English usage and form. (Bergen Evans, (1971) We are also in agreement with Dr. He with respect to utilization of CNN TV or other major international news networks that may not have been in existence when Dr. He wrote his article, such as Fox News.

Although Dr. He recommends utilization of certain western news media resources for teaching materials, at the time of writing this article CNN TV is not available in China due to transmission interference at the receiving end. Western newspapers are accessible through the Internet but at the present time the New York Times, Washington Post, BBC and Reuters are not available in China due to transmission interference at the receiving end.

We mention this issue because there are unconfirmed reports that the Chinese Government has 30,000 censors working 24/7 to block web sites they feel are inappropriate for Chinese access. (<http://news.com.com/2100-1023-957237.html>) We would note that many web sites

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discussing this issue were blocked during our research efforts. If this is true, then the Ministry of Education and the censors are at odds with each other or the one does not even know about the policy of the other.

It should also be noted that most Chinese university students must rely upon the classroom for TV access as their dormitories are not so equipped. However, all too often the television signal is not available during class time so the CNN resource is not available to the teacher for instructional purposes. Could it be that university administrators are also unaware of the policy of the Ministry of Education?

## **AN EXPERIMENT AT XINYANG AGRICULTURAL COLLEGE, HENAN PROVINCE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Upon the advice and under the continuing review of an Associate Professor of English and Psycholinguistics at Shanghai's Tong ji University; on December 1, 2002 Xinyang Agricultural College (in the southern part of Henan Province) welcomed its first Foreign Expert to assist the college with its newly formed (April 2002) English Department with an enrollment of more than 400 students. The Foreign Expert was recruited through the professional talents of the Director of the Foreign Affairs Office. Together, in an unparalleled cooperative approach, the authors have forged a new strategy for teaching English conversation at Xinyang Agricultural College. While the jury is still out on the final results of this experiment, the interim results are striking and worthy of examination by others in this field.

CAVEAT: The experiment is not without its detractors. Some of the tradition oriented leadership and some English department staff are not enthralled with the new methodology, either fearing its failure or perceiving it as a threat to their established ways of doing things which have provided their personal comfort zone.

### **CHANGE IN TEXTS**

In December 2002, when Xinyang Agricultural College retained its first "Foreign Expert", the 400 English majors at Xinyang Agricultural College were using textbooks for oral English including "CHALLENGE TO SPEAK" and "INTERACTIVE SPEAKING." The Foreign Expert advised the college administration that the current texts were inadequate or inappropriate.

It should also be noted that these two texts are completely devoid of materials concerning "political, economic, cultural, educational and scientific issues, special reports or lectures on similar subjects, major international or domestic issues editorials and critical essays on political issues." In other words, "useless" in preparing the students to meet the proficiency of the

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graduation level goals and objectives. In point of fact, it is universal that texts normally utilized throughout China's Universities are devoid of such materials due primarily to what we perceive to be a previous philosophy of education which was perhaps more restrictive than the current "open" philosophy.

The Foreign Expert abandoned use of the texts for English conversation in favor of English language newspaper articles obtained from the on-line news services of Xinhua, China Daily, People's Daily, Shanghai Star and 21<sup>st</sup> Century, all Chinese English newspapers. When access was available, articles were also utilized from the Associated Press, ABC News and the Washington Post. See Appendix "A" for a sampling of the types of articles utilized.

The articles were selected weekly and were based upon their relevance and potential interest to college students 19 to 20 years of age. There was an attempt to follow the advice of Kirkpatrick that teaching materials should "reflect the lives, cultures and values of the learners." (Kirkpatrick, (11/23/00) The articles were generally well received by the students but there were some complaints about not using the texts the students had been required to purchase. The complaints appeared to be more of an economic issue than anything else.

### **CHANGE IN CLASSROOMS**

Oral conversation classes were routinely held in the listening comprehension laboratory rooms with their individualized cubicles arranged in theater type seating rows that tended to isolate each student from the other and had students talking to the back of each other's head.

After much discussion and arduous schedule alteration, oral English classes were relocated to classrooms with movable desks. The new classrooms were then arranged in a "U" configuration so that all students were facing each other and the lectern was removed so that there was no further barrier between teacher and students. Students were no longer conversing with the back of each other's head and the teacher could move freely within the "U" to reach every student individually. This eliminated the idea that any particular student could hide anonymously in the back of the class and just drift through until the final examination.

Although class size (25 to 40 students per class) still posed serious problems (optimum class size would be no more than 15 students for oral English), the atmosphere was certainly more friendly and conducive to students producing and practicing their oral English with each other under the supervision of a native English speaker. The teacher's role was also transformed from one of "lecturer" to one of "facilitator."

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## **CHANGE IN TEACHING ORAL ENGLISH METHODOLOGY**

The western lecture format was abandoned - the teacher became a facilitator as implicitly suggested by Ming-Sheng Li. (Ming-Sheng Li, (1999) The students were provided copies of the newspaper articles to take to their dormitories and read, look up new vocabulary words with which they had no prior familiarity, and to prepare a classroom presentation. At the next class session the students were required to take over the historical teacher's role of lecturer. Each student was required to explain the content of their article to the class, give their personal opinion as to the moral of the article, and then entertain questions from their classmates regarding the content of the presentation. If no questions were forthcoming, the presenter "teacher" was required to ask questions of the students. The object was to create student discussion of the article topic.

It was quickly discovered that not a single student had ever previously been required to "stand and deliver" an oral expository during their primary, middle or high school education. Each student exhibited their personal degree of fear, nervousness, skepticism and some were petrified to the point of speechlessness. The first round of presentations could only be properly described as disastrous in terms of English speech production. However, as the cohesiveness and friendliness of the class burgeoned, each subsequent round of presentations produced more English speech production and less nervousness. Subsequent to the round of student presentations, a poll was taken requiring each student to voice their personal moral conviction regarding the point of the various articles.

As the students adjusted to their personal responsibility for speech production their presentations became longer, more detailed, and led to greater class participation in the ensuing discussions. During the first round of presentations one male student was unable to produce a single English word other than "sorry." In the third round this same student transcended his personal fear to such a phenomenal extent that the entire class showed their approval with sustained applause at the end of his term as "teacher." This student is now the "role model" for the others in his class.

The major obstacle for the students to overcome was "loss of face." They were afraid to make a mistake and to be laughed at by their peers. It was essential for the Foreign Expert to engage in self-deprecating antics which brought forth laughter from the students, showing that laughing with and at was acceptable as an integral part of the learning process. It was also essential to remind the students that the reason they are students is that they are there to learn. If they were already perfect, they would not be students. The students were constantly reminded to leave their "face" in their dormitory and then they had nothing to lose in class. It took a while for this concept to sink in but when it did – the personal growth exhibited by each student was heartwarming to the point of tears of joy for the Foreign Expert.

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## **CHANGE IN ORAL ENGLISH FINAL EXAMINATION**

The final examination for oral English was reduced to a five minute personal interview where the Chinese English teachers asked all students the same two questions and graded the answers on a standardized evaluation form. Ten Chinese English teachers simultaneously, but separately, examined ten students at a time. The evaluation sheet was filled out by the teacher during and immediately subsequent to each individual examination so that no memory lapse occurred between the testing and the evaluation. The evaluations were then given to the Foreign Expert for interpretation and final grade assignment. The Foreign Expert also utilized the evaluations to subsequently refer needy students to the phonetics or listening comprehension teachers for specialized tutoring.

The students were segregated prior to the examination and those students having completed the examination were not allowed further access to their classmates who had not yet taken the exam. This process assured that there was no contamination of the untested group with advance knowledge of the questions.

This testing approach reduced bias emanating from the Foreign Expert who had such close classroom involvement with the students. It also provided an eye opening experience to the Chinese English teachers who rarely hear the English majors produce oral English since their classes are usually lecture format with little oral English production required by the students. The Foreign Expert also encouraged the Chinese English teachers to refrain from answering the mandarin questions of the English majors until they produced them in English and to only answer the questions in English and not mandarin.

## **CHANGE IN COMPREHENSIVE READING TEST**

The Spring 2003 reading comprehension test was modified to utilize a new format that required a higher degree of reading comprehension to understand the text itself and also required development of a personal moral application of the text.

Normal English literature was replaced with three news articles obtained from English newspapers on the Internet. The normal essay questions were replaced with “Using no more than one sentence, state the moral of the article and how it may apply to you now or in the future.”

This approach tested not only reading comprehension but also required the students to organize their thoughts, make a simple and concise statement and engage in creative thinking while developing a personal moral philosophy. It should be noted that this approach was diametrically opposed to the normal requirement that students write a 500 or 1,000 word essay which, more often than not, produces rambling answers that miss the mark but tend to exhibit a students quantitative vocabulary, however limited that may be.

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It should come as no surprise that 45% of the students failed to comprehend the test instructions and wrote the standard rambling essay answers. Likewise, it should surprise no one that 20% of the students failed to identify the moral of the articles or to formulate their own personal moral philosophy. A significant number of students were afforded a re-examination opportunity where only the specific articles were changed. The test question format remained the same. On the second attempt, all of the students passed the examination, but of course the surprise element was by then gone.

### **CHANGE IN DISCIPLINE**

A more intellectually honest title to this section would be "Adoption of Disciplinary Standard." As the alternative title suggests, there is a marked absence of disciplinary rules other than "no smoking on campus" or "no eating in classrooms." At the commencement of teaching, the Foreign Expert provided each student with a copy of the rules for the oral English class and also posted a copy on the wall to avoid the well worn excuse that the original was lost. Surprisingly the students did not find the rules onerous and there have been a scant eight major violations since their implementation.

The violators were excluded from further participation in the class ( as was stated in the rules) until they reported to the Foreign Affairs Office where they received a word of encouragement. Each of the encouraged students has returned to the class and become an exemplary student. This method of enforcement removes the Foreign Expert from the disciplinary process after the referral. The matter is resolved between Chinese on their own cultural terms. This eliminates animosity between the student and the Foreign Expert. The rules are well defined in writing, provided to all students, violations are dealt with immediately and taken seriously, with discipline converted from punitive to encouragement, administered by a Chinese authority figure. IT WORKS!

### **CLASSROOM TELEVISION ACCESS**

Each classroom at Xinyang Agricultural College is equipped with a television set and a cable connection that receives CTTV Channel 9, the English language channel. This is an acceptable alternative to CNN or any broadcast originating in the west. However, during instructional class time there is no signal transmitted to the classrooms for many administrative reasons. To fully implement the proficiency goals for English majors it will be necessary to modify the television access for oral English classes. This may require a separate cable transmission system for the English classrooms so that the other classrooms may remain dark.

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## **ENGLISH COMPUTER LAB**

There is presently no English computer lab at Xinyang Agricultural College. A plethora of the Chinese English teachers are English language computer illiterate as are 98% of the English students. Students who wish to access the internet must go off campus and pay 2 rmb per hour. It should be remembered that these students are primarily from peasant and farm families and have a daily food budget of 3 rmb. To spend two-thirds of their daily food budget on one hour of internet access creates an unacceptable economic hardship on these students.

We are indisputably in the Computer Age of Information Technology but the students of Xinyang Agricultural College are excluded from participating on an equal footing with the students in the richer coastal schools which have computer labs. By far, this is the single most area of disappointment for the current Foreign Experts at Xinyang Agricultural College. This is an unacceptable disparity which must be rectified.

The Internet has numerous sites dedicated to augmenting ESL, providing free supplemental teaching materials for teachers and supplemental exercises for students. It is unfortunate that these free resources can not be accessed. (Commencing with the February 2004 semester a new Business English computer lab had been set up at the authors' request but Internet access was yet to be arranged.)

## **CONCLUSION**

While we are cognizant of the fact that there is no one teaching methodology that is best suited for all ESL students; we are confident that we have discovered a methodology that has produced improvement for our college students and we consistently search for further improvement.

We share our approach with others, through this article, in the hope that it will encourage further experimentation that will lead to even better improvements in the performance level of university English major graduates throughout China.

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## APPENDIX "A"

12-12-02, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Shanghai "The email was right but the answers weren't"  
 1-9-03, Associated Press "Lawyers Appeal Death Sentence"  
 1-1-03, AP News Service "Texas Man Sentenced to 30 years for Killing and Cannibalizing his Mom"  
 2-2-03, ABC News "A Childhood of Lies"  
 12-26-02, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Shanghai " Strange Case of Missing Students"  
 1-3-03 ,ABC News "Wife Wanted"  
 1-1-03, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Shanghai "Oh! Pity the Poor Young Rich Things"  
 12-26-02, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Shanghai "Keeping a Low Profile in Class"  
 12-31-02, Xinhua News Agency "More College Students Put Strain on Job Market"  
 12/26/02, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Shanghai "Restricting Campus Smoking"

**Niu Qiang,PhD** was born and raised in Shenyang, Liaoning Province, PRC. She obtained her Bachelor of Arts degree (1991) in English from Jilin University; her Master of Arts degree (1996) in English Linguistics from Jilin University; and her PhD (1999) in English Linguistics from Shanghai International Studies University. She is currently an Associate Professor at the School of Foreign Languages, Tong ji University, Shanghai, China, where she teaches Psycholinguistics, Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Testing of English as a Second Language. <donna\_niu@yahoo.com>

**Martin Wolff, J.D.** was born in Rochester, New York, USA. He obtained his Juris Doctor degree (1976) from Loyola University, Los Angeles, Ca. He has taught Legal English, Business English, Business Management, Marketing, Human Relations and English Conversation. He is currently a Foreign Expert at the Xinyang Agricultural College, Henan Province. <teachbesl@yahoo.co.uk>