

Making Native-English-Speaking Teachers Aware of Challenges and Adapt Themselves to EFL Teaching in China

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Recent research on Native-English-Speaking (NES) professionals in TESOL reveals that NES teachers' classroom performance has been challenged by different socio-economic conditions, educational ideologies and systems in host countries (e.g., Brutt-Griffler & Samimy, 1999; Canagarajah, 1999; Nemtchinova, 2005). This article attempts to explore how NES teachers' EFL teaching is challenged in the Chinese educational context. It first gives a brief description of Chinese cultural and educational background so as to provide some contextual information for discussing some of the problems. After that, it summarizes the problems Chinese students encounter in NES teachers' classroom and then analyzes how Chinese EFL students' English learning is adversely affected by these problems. Finally, it offers some suggestions for helping NES teachers adapt themselves to EFL teaching in China. These suggestions have been split for three different, yet interconnected, groups of individuals: teaching colleagues, teacher educators, and NES teachers planning to work overseas. The article concludes that only when NES teachers understand and recognize the roots of their problems in EFL teaching will they be better prepared to develop instructional alternatives to accommodate their EFL students' practical needs.

■ Introduction

Each year a significant number of NES teachers are employed to teach English in non-English speaking countries. At the initial stage of their EFL teaching, these teachers are full of enthusiasm in their work, hoping to change traditional patterns of EFL teaching in host countries by bringing whatever they regard as efficient in their countries into EFL classroom. However, their teaching methods, materials, and programs often face resistance or even rejection in some of these countries, as shown by Govardhan, Nayar, & Sheorey (1999) and Rao (2002a). Confronted with various EFL teaching contexts which are completely out of their expectations, these NES teachers' classroom performance has been greatly challenged by different socio-economic conditions and educational ideologies and systems in host countries. They are constantly perplexed by such questions as "Why doesn't a particular piece of authentic material work in the classroom?", "Why doesn't the functional syllabus function?" and "Why does communicative methodology fail to produce much communication?"

The above problems are not uncommon in NES teachers' EFL teaching in China, making it difficult for Chinese students to learn English efficiently (Rao, 2002b). In an EFL class like this, students tend to be bored and inattentive, perform poorly on test, become discouraged about the course, and possibly conclude that they are not good at the subject and give up. NES teachers, confronted by low test scores, may become overtly critical

of their students or begin to question their competence as teachers and find themselves insufficiently prepared for the job they have been contracted to do. Some may even return home without fulfilling their contracts rather than compromise their "pedagogical integrity" (Cahill, 1996:5).

To understand why there is such a phenomenon in NES teachers' classroom teaching, we will first give a brief description of Chinese cultural and educational background so as to provide some contextual information for discussing some of the problems. Then, we will attempt to explore the obstacles that inhibit NES teachers' classroom performance and analyze how EFL students' classroom learning is adversely affected by these problems. Finally, we offer some suggestions for helping NES teachers adapt themselves to EFL teaching environments. Although our concern is primarily with NES teachers' work in China, the problems listed in this paper and suggestions for helping NES teachers improve their EFL teaching may apply to those who are engaged in or preparing to be engaged in EFL teaching in similar contexts, especially in Southeast Asian countries.

■ Cultural and educational background in China

Three aspects of Chinese culture and education are often claimed to have an important effect on attitudes and behaviors of Chinese learners (Brislin, 1993), namely, (1) cultural value in Chinese context; (2) traditional

Chinese educational pattern; and (3) EFL setting. By examining these factors, we hope to find some clues to explain the general tendencies in Chinese students' EFL learning.

Cultural value in Chinese context

Several cultural factors are often recognized as the sources leading to the development of Chinese students' habitual ways of learning. The first one is collectivism and interdependent self in Chinese culture. Chinese society is marked by a strong tradition of filial piety and familism which encompass a non-individual collectivistic orientation among the Chinese (Brislin, 1993). Such a strong collective orientation has resulted in socialization for achievement. In the Chinese cultural context, achievement orientation is based firmly on collectivist rather than individual values. This can have a highly motivating effect on Chinese students because success and failure in a collectivist culture affect not just oneself but the whole family or group. Most Chinese students would exert themselves in obtaining a high score in each examination.

The final well-recognized source of influence on attitudes and behaviors of Chinese learners originates from people's attitudes to power and authority. In China, people in lower positions are expected to obey those who are in high positions and humble people should show respect to those who are superior in society. When this is applied to language learning, it is apparent that teachers are authorities and students are passive learners. Teachers tell students what to do and students listen and obey.

Traditional pattern of education in China

For a long time, Chinese education is dominated by a teacher-centered, book-centered, and an emphasis on repetition, reviewing and rote-memory (Rao, 2002b). Several distinctive features emerge from this description. First, the teacher is considered as the "fount of knowledge", and it is the teacher who decides which knowledge is to be taught. The students simply accept and learn that knowledge. In order for teachers to run each course well, a selection of good textbooks is especially important. Teachers devote almost all their effort in class to the study of individual texts, employing methods such as explaining, analyzing, paraphrasing, asking questions, practicing patterns, reading aloud, and retelling until the students very nearly, if not literally, learn every word of the texts by heart.

Such a teacher-dominated and text-focused classroom teaching results in a great emphasis on linguistic details and accuracy. For most Chinese students, there is a keen interest in the exact understanding of every word, a low tolerance of ambiguity and a focus on discrete points and specific syntactic constructions (Rao, 2002b). To facilitate the process of gaining linguistic knowledge and a thorough understanding, Chinese students employ repetition as a route to understanding and make a constant review of what they have learnt (Biggs, 1996).

EFL setting

Unlike ESL teaching in English-speaking countries, English teaching in China has a number of distinctive features. One such feature is that English is taught, whether at elementary or secondary or tertiary level, as an instrument (Rao, 2002b). Instead of learning English as a tool for survival in business and every-day life, students at all levels study English as a required academic subject which is a part of state education program shaped by rigid and mandatory top-down educational policies and by teaching practices sanctioned by tradition (Liu, 1998). Teachers at all levels in China are expected to cover the curriculum developed by the government. Based on this centralized curriculum, almost all English textbooks are designed to teach grammar, reading, and writing, with little emphasis on listening and speaking.

Another feature in EFL teaching is that much of EFL teaching takes place in classroom, with little exposure to the language outside class. In general, the class time per week for English instruction in most schools in China is limited to about 2-4 hours, much less than that of a similar intensive ESL teaching program. While such limited class time may be just enough to help students understand how the language works, it does not allow them to practice using it.

■ Problems in NES teachers' classroom performance

In this section, we present some problems that Chinese students encounter in NES teachers' class. We obtained these data from several sources, including descriptions in books and published articles, responses to a recent questionnaire we sent to selected Chinese EFL students (for details, please see Rao, 2005), and our own teaching experiences in China. NES teachers' problems in Chinese EFL teaching are classified into the following three categories: insensitivity to students' linguistic problems, mismatch in the teaching and learning styles, and unfamiliarity with local cultural and educational system.

Insensitivity to students' linguistic problems

Most Chinese EFL students regarded NES teachers' insensitivity to their linguistic problems as the most serious obstacle to their efficient learning in class. Two factors were reported as sources of such insensitivity, with their absence of learning English as a second or foreign language being the most obvious. First, NES teachers were reported to have little awareness of typical problems that Chinese students might encounter in the process of English learning and were unable to anticipate Chinese students' language difficulties because they had not gone through the complex process of learning the language as a foreign language. They further complained that NES teachers did not know exactly what Chinese students needed in English class, thus very often failing to use an appropriate and efficient teaching method. Another source of NES teachers' insensitivity to students' linguistic problems was their ignorance of the students' mother tongue. Most Chinese students reported that NES teachers

were unaware of how the students' mother tongue and the target language differed. In teaching some vocabulary with abstract meaning, for example, NES teachers could not help students understand these words by comparing the words to those in students' first language, nor could they use the equivalents from students' first language.

Mismatch in the teaching and learning styles

A mismatch between the teaching and learning styles is another problem for students to learn English well in NES teachers' classes. Some students stated that they felt uncomfortable with NES teacher's broad stroke style in the teaching of English reading and listening. In most reading or listening classes, NES teachers only laid emphasis on the overall meaning of a text. They often asked students to use holistic strategies such as guessing and inferencing to search for the main idea, but seldom paid attention to the analysis of linguistic details. As mentioned above, most Chinese students are keen on the understanding of every word, phrase and syntactic construction. That perhaps explains why the students felt they could not learn English efficiently if NES teachers would not explain the entire text sentence by sentence and analyze difficult language structures, rhetoric, and styles.

Another NES teachers' style identified by the Chinese students as inconsistent with their ways of learning is the open-ended style. They reported that they had been expecting an accurate answer to each question ever since they started education. However, this was not what they could always expect from an NES teacher. They reported that they would always get multiple correct answers whenever they asked an NES teacher a question. Some students argued that everything in their course studies was determined by their examination results and that if a teacher did not tell them accurate answers they could not expect to get a high score in an examination.

Closely related to open-ended style is the intuitive-random style that NES teachers adopted in their classroom teaching. Many students held that NES teachers' intuitive-random style in class was helpful in creating a friendly and relaxed atmosphere in classroom, but such a style was in conflict with their traditional way of learning. They insisted that a teacher should behave like an authority and conduct his or her teaching in a well-sequenced manner.

The final teaching style that the students felt uneasy with was the hands-on style. Some students mentioned that NES teachers liked to organize various types of games, role-plays and debates. Although students felt pleasant and relaxed when involved in these communicative activities, they also felt that NES teachers sometimes went to such an extent in organizing such activities as to neglect many core curriculum tasks. Students further pointed out they would prefer to do more reading and other more tangible learning tasks.

Unfamiliarity with local cultural and educational system

The final problem in attending NES teachers' classes was that these teachers were unfamiliar with Chinese culture

and education. Many students complained that NES teachers behaved in such a casual manner in class that it was hard for them to focus their attention on learning. As mentioned earlier, a teacher in China is a highly respected person who should behave solemnly and seriously towards his or her students, especially in class. In addition, unfamiliarity with local culture made it impossible for NES teachers to use local examples in their elucidation of concepts. A common complaint of students was the difficulty they often encountered when NES teachers based their examples on their experiences outside China. The students were sometimes puzzled by NES teachers' explanations, because they could not see any point implied in these examples. Actually there are many local examples in China which can be used to facilitate students' learning process.

A further concern was lack of familiarity with the Chinese education system. Many students commented that some NES teachers failed to match their instruction with the school's expectation or with the students' needs by not following the school syllabus. Such a failure to follow closely the curriculum made the students particularly worry about their coming examinations. Although the examinations are locally set, there are strong expectations on the part of the students and the school administration that the content and the form of the tasks in the examinations should be similar to those in the textbooks. Some students commented that they could not expect to pass the examination if they had not learnt what they were supposed to learn.

■ Suggestions for helping NES teachers adapt themselves to EFL teaching in China

As we can see from above, English teaching in China is deeply rooted in Chinese culture, educational system and EFL setting. Teaching English in China without understanding these factors would lead to failure (Rao, 2002a). Here we offer some suggestions for helping NES teachers to be aware of these students' cultural and educational backgrounds and adapt themselves to EFL teaching. We have made these suggestions for three different, yet interconnected, groups of individuals: teaching colleagues, teacher educators, and NES teachers planning to work overseas.

Suggestions for teaching colleagues

First of all, helping NES teachers adapt themselves to EFL teaching needs assistance from local teaching colleagues. Once NES teachers have started working, host teachers should involve NES teachers in an orientation program, which should include (a) a description of the curriculum and where the NES teachers' courses fit in, (b) the types and schedules of English examinations that students are required to take, (c) the role of the textbooks in the curriculum (e.g., Is it necessary to cover everything in the textbooks? Are exams based on textbook contents?), and (d) the types of methodology students are used to. Obviously, a direct way for NES teachers to see how

classes are taught is to sit in classes conducted by their local colleagues. In fact, there are many perspectives in which NES teachers and host teachers can complement each other. While NES teachers possess native language authenticity, familiarity and new methodological insights (Govardhan, Nayar, & Sheorey, 1999), host teachers have advantages, according to Medgyes (1994: 55-65), in “providing a good model”, “teaching language learning strategies”, “supplying information about English language”, “anticipating and preventing language difficulties”, “showing empathy”, and “benefiting from the mother tongue”. Medgyes (1994) further pointed out that, given a favorable mix, various forms of collaboration are possible both in and outside the classroom—using each other as language consultants, for example, or teaching in tandem.

In addition, host teachers should offer NES teachers some language lessons and help them get some useful ideas about the differences between the Chinese language and the English language. The more NES teachers learn about the host language, the better they will be able to teach (i.e., to predict students’ difficulties), to move about independently in the country, and to fit into the culture.

Suggestions for teacher educators

In Western-based TESOL programs, the main focus is usually on ESL teaching in Western public schools and colleges (Carrier, 2003), and there exists strong ethnocentrism in TESOL teacher education (Liu, 1998). As some NES teachers are trained to teach English as a foreign language, the TESOL programs for this group of trainees should focus on EFL teaching in non-Western settings. Liu (1998) suggests that teacher educators involve trainees in ways which would ensure that the program has as close a bearing as possible on their teaching concerns and contexts.

Several approaches could be taken to ensure such a close bearing on practical EFL teaching. The first one is to give teacher trainees an opportunity to explore “why students in a particular country want to learn English; what the policy of the government of the country regarding English is; what constraints on the teacher’s innovativeness might exist; and what social, cultural, and academic adjustments the prospective teachers will have to fit into the existing setup” (Govardhan, Nayar, & Sheorey, 1999: 124). Second, teacher educators must provide courses that help enhance teacher trainees’ geographical and anthropological literacy about other countries. EFL teaching is nowadays carried out worldwide. Each country has its own particular social and working condition. To help local students learn English effectively, the teacher trainees should learn to respect students’ communities, their culture, their educational systems, and their conditions and ethics of work. Third, an introductory course should be offered to provide teacher trainees with “the ability to assess the propriety, feasibility, applicability, and practicality of any one or all of the methods against a certain set of political, sociocultural, and pedagogic situations that they are going to be working in” (Govardhan, Nayar, & Sheorey,

1999: 123). Finally, prospective EFL teachers should also be trained in areas ancillary but essential to classroom teaching, like the differences between EFL and ESL teaching, curriculum and material development, testing and evaluation, EFL administration, management of various resources and learning support, and use of information technology.

Suggestions for NES teachers

As linguistic and cultural ambassadors, NES teachers play a unique and important role in helping EFL students master the English language. However, the problems listed above have demonstrated that NES teachers’ classroom teaching often faces resistance or even rejection.

To avoid such a resistance, NES teachers should, first of all, be very sensitive to the local customs and habits of host countries. They should never be made to feel that they are there to change and uplift the lives of students in host countries. Patterns of behavior are so fixed by the time a person reaches the age of 16 or 17 that a teacher cannot hope to influence these patterns in two or three hours a week when the other six or seven hours a day in class and the ten hours out of class are spent on reinforcing them. Secondly, NES teachers should be open and receptive to the academic culture of their host institution; they cannot assume that their methodology is better than that of their host colleagues, that their training is more advanced, and that they are more privileged because they are native speakers. Finally, NES teachers may need to think of ways to narrow the gap between their teaching and their students’ learning styles. As discussed earlier (see also Rao, 2002a), there exists an identifiable teaching-learning conflict between NES teachers and Chinese students. Bridging the gap between teaching and learning styles has, therefore, become a crucial step for NES teachers to improve their classroom teaching. Here are some recommendations for NES teachers to deal with EFL students’ learning styles and strategies in the English classroom.

- Diagnosing learning styles and developing self-aware EFL learners;
- Adapting the teaching style so that there is a close match between teacher and student styles;
- Fostering guided style-stretching and encouraging changes in students’ behaviors;
- Providing activities with different groupings; and
- Including different learning styles in lesson plan (for more details, see Rao, 2002a).

■ Conclusion

In this article we have argued that NES teachers working in non-English-speaking countries should take into consideration EFL students’ learning styles and actual needs in EFL learning. To help NES teachers understand why Chinese students want to learn English and what constraints there exist for their classroom teaching, we have traced the Chinese cultural and educational background. After this, we have presented the problems

that Chinese EFL students encounter in NES teachers' classes and have provided some evidence that there are some conflicts between NES teachers' teaching style and Chinese students' learning style. In fact, only when NES teachers understand and recognize the roots of their problems in EFL teaching will they be better prepared to develop instructional alternatives to accommodate their EFL students' practical needs. In these aspects, we have offered some suggestions for teaching colleagues, teacher educators and NES teachers themselves, which would hopefully facilitate their adaptation to EFL teaching environments in non-English-speaking countries.

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