The Pedagogies and Perceptions of English-Language Teachers in China

Teaching Resources and Strategies to Facilitate the Usage of the English Language

By: Aline M. Nguyen

University of Windsor

**Background**

My love for learning and teaching, combined with my desire to experience other cultures, has propelled me to look for opportunities to further my growth as a global educator and a lifelong learner. When I was introduced to the Reciprocal Learning Program in September 2016 during my first semester at the University of Windsor’s Faculty of Education, I was intrigued at the prospect of spending three months in China conducting a research project on the practises of English-language teachers and learning more about the country’s education system. I felt that my participation in the program is not only a step in such an early stage of my career, but it is also a means for growing as a leader, as an educator, and as an individual.

Over the course of preparing for the three-month experience abroad, I was introduced to the Mitacs Globalink Research Award, a five thousand dollar grant that, if awarded to me, would help to fund the costs required to pursue my research endeavours such as travel, accommodation, and food. I knew that such a grant would really help to reduce the costs of going abroad to conduct my research. I spent about two months writing my research proposal and completing the Mitacs application with some guidance from my professor’s graduate assistants and Reciprocal Learning Program alumni. A week prior to leaving for China, I received an e-mail confirming that my research proposal and Mitacs application was accepted and that Mitacs was in the process of transferring the award to me. It felt good knowing that I could pursue my research endeavours without the financial burden resting heavily on my shoulders.

 When it came to deciding on my research topic, I was interested in engaging in research that would allow me to develop a better understanding about how students from different cultures learn, specifically how students in China acquire English as an additional language. The acquisition of English as a second language is becoming an area of great interest in Chinese education as a result of globalization (Zuo, 2006). In fact, there are more than 300 million English language students in China (Yan, 2015). Teaching French as an additional language in Canada is parallel to teaching English as a second language in China. Observing firsthand English-language teachers in primary school (grades 1 to 6), middle school (grades 7 to 9), and high school (grades 10 to 12) classroom settings in China over a period of three months would be beneficial to me as a French-language educator in a multicultural society. By conducting these classroom observations, I would be able to learn about new teaching strategies and resources for learning a second language that I can bring not only to my classroom, but also to my pedagogy in order to become both a better educator and a lifelong learner.

Although my mother’s native language is Tagalog and my father’s native language is Vietnamese, I can only speak English and French, having gradually lost the ability to speak my parents’ native languages. This is a situation faced by many Canadian students with immigrant parents. Personally, I did not enjoy learning Tagalog and Vietnamese as a child and I’m curious to find out whether or not a pedagogical issue is the reason behind it. This has sparked my interest in learning about how other Asian languages are taught in Asian countries. I firmly believed that the experience will permit me to develop a better understanding of pedagogy in Asian countries. More specifically, the research would allow me to better comprehend language and culture as resources for our development as second language educators. The best resources combine the strengths of teaching English in China and the strengths of teaching French in Canada. Ultimately, these resources would help to make Canadian classrooms both multicultural and multilingual with the intent of shaping the students of future generations to become multilingual.

**Research Topic**

The purpose of my research project is to observe how the pedagogies and perceptions of English-language teachers in China are shaped by their teaching strategies, their teaching resources, and their interactions with students.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Main Question:** | What are the pedagogies and perceptions of English-language teachers in China? |
| **Sub Questions:** | 1. What are the teaching strategies used by English-language teachers in China?
2. What are the teaching resources used by English-language teachers in China?
3. How does teacher-student interaction facilitate the usage of the English language in English-language classrooms in China?
 |

**Research Locations and Methods**

 The primary research method used for this project was in-class observation; however, information was also obtained through conversations with English-language teachers in China. Research was conducted primarily at Zeng Jia Yan Primary School and at the High School Affiliated with Southwest University, both located in Chongqing, China.

**Major Findings**

**What Are the Teaching Resources Used by English-Language Teachers in China?**

**Animations.**

***Grade 7.***A component of a lesson about restaurants consists of students looking at funny animations and recalling food vocabulary as well as practising the pluralization of each food. There is an emphasis of syllables in some words (i.e. dumplings) and I noted that this component covers both Chinese and Western foods (i.e. burgers, pizza, etc.). I also noted that they call the meat of lamb ‘mutton’ rather than ‘lamb’. An animated quiz via a PowerPoint involves the students matching the words with the pictures of food; the teacher would give the Chinese word and the student would stand up to give the English equivalent.

**Images.**

***Grade 5.***The Grade 5 English teacher would use photos of days on calendars with words to reinforce knowledge. Students could reply when the date of a given holiday is.

 **Listening activities.**

***Grade 5.***Listening activities serve as formative assessments. For example, students can listen to a conversation between two students and answer questions orally based on it.

**Textbooks.**

 ***Grade 2.*** In China, students begin taking English classes in Grade 1. Since the English-language content in the Grades 1 and 2 curriculums is very basic, both grades share a textbook and learn the same content: greetings, self-introductions, farewells, school supplies, colours, body parts, animals, food, and stating one’s age. Rather than distribute copies of the textbook to the students, the teacher simply consults the book on the topics needed to be taught and creates lessons based on them.

***Grade 5.*** The Grade 5 students each have their own textbook to follow during lessons, each containing a variety of listening activities, vocabulary lists, and questions to answer. It is important for the English teacher to teach exactly what is in the textbook because the material will be covered on the final exam in June that the students need to earn at least sixty percent on in order to move on to the next grade.

***Grade 7.***At the beginning of every class, the teacher would have a student volunteer read a passage from the textbook to practise speaking English. Later on, in the lesson about restaurants, the students read a short comic strip in their textbooks of two characters at a Chinese restaurant with pictures of food. The students have to match the letters next to the food to the word on the list given. The next component of the lesson features images of specials (i.e. noodles with beef and tomatoes). The teacher makes sure to differentiate between the word ‘special’ as an adjective and the word ‘special’ as a noun by using them in example sentences and gave the students time to practise the conversation, ‘What would you like?’ and ‘I’d like some…”. The lesson concludes with the teacher giving the students one minute to practise ordering noodles with two different toppings (chicken, beef, mutton, cabbage, potatoes, and tomatoes).

***Grade 10.***During a lesson about Chinese philosophers, the teacher presents statements about Confucius, which students have to indicate are true or false and to correct the false statements to make them true. Afterwards, the teacher has students translate the teachings of various Chinese philosophers (i.e. “Man is born good”, “All human beings are equal”, “People are more important than rulers”, etc.) and then has them guess whether each teaching is associated with Mencius or Mozi. Students have to search the passage in the textbook about Mencius and Mozi to find evidence to support their guesses and are instructed to check their answers with a partner. The whole class then regroups to revisit answers together and share evidence from the text. For another component of the lesson, the teacher gives students two minutes to read the second part of the textbook and use keywords to help them retell the life experiences of Mencius on paper. Afterwards, they would share their writing with partners and then some share their writing with the class. The teacher makes sure to explain at the end of the activity that keywords can help them remember the life experiences of Mencius. After reading the third part about Mozi of their textbook, the students fill out a table in the workbook about his life experiences (i.e. “He came from a family which…”). Then, the teacher instructs students to define vocabulary within a work bank in the textbook and use some of them, altering some if necessary (i.e. changing ‘philosophy’ to ‘philosophies’), to fill in the blanks within a given passage in three minutes. As a class, they discuss the pronunciations of vocabulary words and the answers to the passage blanks. To conclude the lesson, the teacher has the students review the words ‘who’, ‘which’, ‘where’, ‘when’, and ‘whose’ after which the students complete seven blanks within given sentences with the correct words and then discuss the answers as a class.

**What Are the Teaching Strategies Used by English-Language Teachers in China?**

 **Discussions with the students.**

***Grade 10.*** The Grade 10 English teacher appears to be very fond of using classroom discussions to not only engage students in the lesson, but also to encourage their usage of the English language in conversations. For example, she starts a lesson about Chinese philosophers by asking students to define, in their own words, what a philosopher is. Answers include someone who is quiet, someone who is a thinker, someone who can describe how the world works, and someone who is mad or crazy or insane; he always follows his own ideas without listening to others. She then defines a philosopher as someone who is smart; a person who studies or writes about philosophy; a person whose ideas are very influential. Afterwards, she asks students who they thought was the most influential philosopher of ancient China and most say Confucius. She sees this as an opportunity for group discussions in English and encourages group discussions about content related to Confucius. In addition, the teacher uses classroom discussions to determine if students understand the passage about Mencius that they read in the textbook; she instructs students to pair up to retell the full story of Mencius, using his life experiences, to make him sound like a great philosopher. She even encourages the students to talk with their partners about how Confucius’s ideas were similar to and different from Mencius’s and Mozi’s.

**Emphasis on pronunciation of vocabulary.**

***Grade 5.***From observation, I learned that taking the time to work with students on the pronunciation of English words reinforces their understanding of it. When the Grade 5 students learn how to state the dates of a month, they would say ‘fiveteen’ instead of ‘fifteen’ and ‘twenty-five’ instead of ‘twenty-fifth’. The teacher takes the time to circulate the classroom and work with students individually, despite it being a class of thirty-five students, to teach them how to pronounce them correctly.

***Grade 10.*** One of the Grade 10 English lessons that I observed was taught by a teacher candidate from Southwest University and she not only reinforces proper pronunciation of words from the school newspaper that they read as a class, but she also differentiates between words of similar spelling and pronunciation by writing them on the board (i.e. ‘accompany’somebody, ‘company’ (noun), and keep somebody ‘company’).

**Repetition.**

 ***Grade 5.***The teacher uses repetition to reinforce the proper pronunciation of syllables of words, especially those found it textbook dialogues between two characters. I can understand how the students tend to struggle with such a task. The differences between Chinese and English can pose challenges for Chinese students learning English as a second language. Phonetically, for example, there is less emphasis placed on the syllables when reading a sentence written in English than reading a sentence written in Chinese (Zhang & Yin, 2009). For example, the teacher notes during a lesson that the students have trouble pronouncing the words ‘little’ and ‘bamboo’; they tend to slur the syllables together rather than pronounce them individually. She makes sure to revisit the lines of the dialogue with those words and have the students repeat the words after her until they are able to properly pronounce them by their syllables.

***Grade 7.*** The teacher uses repetition to reinforce the proper pronunciation of key words and phrases. For example, the first component of the lesson about restaurants that I observed involves students reciting some common phrases associated with ordering food such as ‘What would you like?’, ‘Yes, please’, and ‘No, thanks’ for a few minutes.

**Usage of Mandarin.**

***Grade 5.***In Grade 5, the English teacher conducts her lessons primarily in English, using Mandarin only to clarify the definitions of words and phrases.

***Grade 7.*** The teacher has two different classrooms of Grade 7 students. One classroom, he claims, is very strong in their English skills and he appears to conduct their lessons primarily in English, using only Mandarin to clarify any concepts that are confusing the students. His other classroom of students are not as strong in their English skills and this is reflected in the manner in which he teaches them; he conducts their lessons half in English and half in Mandarin.

***Grade 10.*** The English teacher conducts her lessons primarily in English. She rarely uses Mandarin; she only uses it when most of the students do not understand a concept and she needs to clarify what it is. In contrast, during a lesson taught by a teacher candidate from Southwest University, the teacher candidate speaks mostly in Mandarin when taking up homework, explaining concepts, or giving out directions.

**How Does Teacher-Student Interaction Facilitate the Usage of the English Language in English-Language Classrooms in China?**

***Grade 5.*** Since most of the lessons conducted by the teacher are teacher-centred and lecture-based, there is not a lot of teacher-student interaction that takes place in the classroom. The only times when students speak English is when they have to recite a dialogue or answer questions. There are little to no opportunities for group discussions.

***Grade 7.*** The teacher conducts his lessons with enthusiasm and a good sense of humour, so it is not surprising when many of the students have told me that they love having him for a teacher. The fact that the students address him as ‘brother’ is a sign of how strong the bond is between the teacher and the students. As a result, they want to speak English when he is around, even if they feel that they speak it poorly, because they want to make him proud.

***Grade 10.***The teacher finds any opportunity to interact with her students, which seems to encourage them to speak English more often during her classes. When she sits with pairs of students to ask about their thoughts about Mencius, I watch them speak with her animatedly. She even circulates the classroom to not only make sure that the students are on task, but also to join discussions that catch her interest. Since she smiles and speaks kindly, the students are comfortable speaking English with her. Furthermore, she tries to tailor learning activities to suit the interests of her students, even if they take place outside of class. Every Thursday, for example, the students get to spend ten minutes before the start of their first afternoon class, regardless of what it is, singing an English song of their choice. During a classroom observation, I was able to witness an impressive performance of Lukas Graham’s ‘7 Years’.

**Reflection of Findings**

As a French as an additional language teacher, I understand how daunting learning another language can be, so I was very keen in observing how English-language teachers in China make learning English as an additional language less scary for the students. My thoughts on their resources, strategies, and efforts at teacher-student interaction varied between grades and teachers.

**Teaching Resources Used by English-Language Teachers in China**

**Animations.**

***Grade 7.***Based on my observations in a Grade 7 classroom, I find that the students appear more engaged when animations are incorporated into the lesson because the colours and sounds of the animations serve as visual and musical aids; thus, providing students with more than one manner of learning. In the case with the restaurant lesson, the students can make connections between the vocabulary that they are learning with their corresponding images. In addition, I was pleased that the lesson has an international focus as it features images of food found on both Chinese and Western menus.

**Images.**

***Grade 5.***I find that the photos of days on calendars with words used by the Grade 5 English teacher reinforces knowledge in students by propelling them to visualize what they are learning and make connections between vocabulary and images. Whenever I taught them and they struggle with understanding a word, I would make sure to provide them with an image of the word in order to clear up the confusion. For example, one student did not understand what ‘bamboo’ was at first, but he finally understood what it was when I pointed to an image of it in on the whiteboard.

 **Listening activities.**

***Grade 5.***Listening activities are good tools to use to formatively assess students on their listening skills and their comprehension of the content covered in the activities. For example, students who are able to answer questions orally based on a recording of a conversation between two students tells me that they do not only understand what is discussed during the conversation, but that they are also able to construct their answers and express them orally in English. When I taught them a lesson about time and daily activities, I knew that I was successful in my task when they could listen to a given time (i.e. ten o’clock) and an activity (i.e. doing morning exercises) and construct a sentence out of them (i.e. “It’s ten o’clock; she is doing morning exercises.”).

**Textbooks.**

***Grade 2.*** The Grade 2 English textbook’s content is very basic and makes introducing the English language to students less daunting. Furthermore, since Grade 2 students are learning the basics of the English language, the textbook’s simplicity encourages English-language teachers to unleash their creativity in making lesson plans to teach the content. Implementing learning activities such as games, music, and videos into lesson plans is encouraged as long as they teach the textbook content to the students. When I had the opportunity to teach the students about head, shoulders, knees, and toes, I incorporated a competition at the end of the lesson; students had to touch the body parts that I called out without messing up and the last student standing would receive a Canada pencil and a candy as a reward.

***Grade 5.***I admire that the Grade 5 English textbook includes a range of activities to teach students the content such as listening activities, opportunities for role-playing, and videos. Furthermore, it includes exercises that require students to read comic strips and to respond to questions based on it. Although such a range of learning activities makes teaching the textbook content more fun, the fact that teachers have to use those activities in their lessons discourages teachers from coming up with other strategies to convey the content. Whenever I taught these students, I refrained from being creative with my lesson plans because I did not want their teacher to scold me for not using the activities and exercises provided in the textbook.

***Grade 7.***The Grade 7 English textbook serves as simply reading material for students to read aloud and practise the pronunciation of words; however, its inclusion of graphics such as comic strips and menu items also provides students with opportunities to learn visually.

***Grade 10.***I was thoroughly impressed by how the Grade 10 English textbook allows the teacher to determine student understanding of its content using a variety of activities. During a lesson about Chinese philosophers, the teacher uses a variety of exercises to determine if students understand the passages that they read about Mencius and Mozi such as the students’ responses to the passages’ true and false exercises and their translations of Mencius’ and Mozi’s teachings found in the passage. The teacher takes it a step further by having the students use keywords found in the passages to retell the life experiences of Mencius in mostly their own words. Furthermore, the textbook includes vocabulary lists that the teacher reviews with the students to reinforce their knowledge of them, including how to properly pronounce the words. Fill-in-the-blank exercises associated with the vocabulary list propels students to modify some of the words in order for the sentences to flow and make sense. Morphologically, the formation of new English words involve creating new morphemes whereas new Chinese words are formed through the combination of existing morphemes (Wang & Chen, 2013). To see the students be able to easily modify English words to make new ones that make the sentences flow better is impressive. When I taught the students a lesson about the Industrial Revolution, I knew that they understood the textbook passage about it because they were able to construct a mind map about it that included what they felt were the most important facts of the passage.

**Teaching Strategies Used by English-Language Teachers in China**

 **Discussions with the students.**

***Grade 10.*** From having her students define vocabulary in their own words to retelling someone’s life story in their own words, I admire the many ways which the teacher uses classroom discussions to facilitate the usage of the English language during conversations. Even when students paired up to retell the full story of Mencius, using his life experiences, to make him sound like a great philosopher, she made the effort to circulate the classroom to not only make sure that the discussions were in English, but also to smile whenever they speak to encourage them to keep it up, even if they struggle to express themselves sometimes. Furthermore, I admire how the teacher leads by example; by conducting her lessons primarily in English, she is communicating to her students that they, too, should use English as the language of communication during her lessons.

**Emphasis on pronunciation of vocabulary.**

***Grade 5.***I admire how the teacher takes the time to circulate the classroom to ensure that all thirty-five of her students were pronouncing number correctly. When the Grade 5 students say ‘fiveteen’ instead of ‘fifteen’ and ‘twenty-five’ instead of ‘twenty-fifth’, she did not use the large class size as an excuse not to make sure that the students are properly pronouncing vocabulary.

***Grade 10.*** What I liked about the Southwest University teacher candidate is that she not only reinforces proper pronunciation of words from the school newspaper that they were reading as a class, but she also differentiates between words of similar spelling and pronunciation by writing them on the board (i.e. ‘accompany’somebody, ‘company’ (noun), and keep somebody ‘company’).

**Repetition.**

***Grade 5.***It is important to use repetition to reinforce the proper pronunciation of words, especially those found it textbook dialogues between two characters, and I was pleased to see the teacher do that during her lessons.

***Grade 7.*** Like during Grade 5 lessons, the teacher uses repetition, which helps students practise how to pronounce phrases properly. The more often they practise saying common phrases associated with ordering food such as ‘What would you like?’, ‘Yes, please’, and ‘No, thanks’ for a few minutes, the more likely they will remember them for when they find themselves in a situation in which they would have to place an order in English.

**Usage of Mandarin.**

***Grade 5.***The English teacher conducts her lessons primarily in English, using Mandarin only to clarify the definitions of words and phrases, which I feel is a good balance considering the high level of English at which the students are. In doing so, she is allowing the students to get used to a learning environment in which English is the main language of communication, an environment that they may find themselves in as they continue their English classes in middle school and high school.

***Grade 7.*** What I admire about the Grade 7 English teacher is his awareness for differentiated learning. He understands that the students in both of his classes are not at the same level in terms of their English-language abilities; therefore, he does not conduct his lessons in the same manner. He uses more English than Mandarin with his class of students with stronger English skills while he uses half English and half Mandarin with the second class. Although I appreciate his awareness of differentiated learning, I would recommend that he try to use a little more English with his second class of students to try and challenge them a bit and to propel them to improve their English-language skills.

***Grade 10.*** I like that the English teacher conducts her lessons primarily in English and only uses Mandarin when she absolutely needs to, whereas her student teacher from Southwest University speaks mostly in Mandarin throughout her lessons. I noted that the students tend to speak more English when being instructed by their regular English teacher because she encourages it. When the student teacher is teaching them, they speak a lot in Mandarin because she does. I feel that it is important for teachers to lead by example; English teachers should use English as the primary language of communication during English lessons to motivate students to use it as well. If the teacher primarily speaks Mandarin, that sends a message to the students that they do not have to use English in their English class, which defeats the purpose of the class.

**How Teacher-Student Interaction Facilitates the Usage of the English Language in English-Language Classrooms in China**

***Grade 5.*** I do not really admire how teacher-centred and lecture-based the teacher’s lessons are. Although I understand that those kinds of lessons are easier to conduct for a classroom of thirty-five students in forty minutes, I feel that there should still be more of an effort from the teacher to interact with the students more and, thus, provide them with additional opportunities to speak English. When I taught them once and they were practising a dialogue in pairs, I made sure to circulate the classroom and listen to pairs practise rather than just stand at the front and watch them. Whenever they struggled to pronounce a word or speak with expression, I would show them how to with a smile. In doing so, I was not only making myself approachable, but I was also getting to know the students better. I knew that if they had a good relationship with me, they would want to learn.

***Grade 7.*** I admire the teacher of this grade because his enthusiasm demonstrates his love for teaching. His willingness to make his lessons humourous is a sign of his determination to forge a strong bond between him and his students, a bond that already exists given that the students address him as ‘brother’, yet still respect him as a teacher. He even interacts with his students outside of the classroom by taking them on field trips. Most recently, he took them for a barbecue and potluck by the Jialing River on a Saturday to spend time with them and to give them an opportunity to practise their English with native English speakers: my colleagues and me. As a result, the students wish to speak English more, even if they feel that they speak it poorly.

***Grade 10.***The fact that the teacher finds any opportunity to have discussions with her students seems to encourage students to speak English more often during class. Whether she is sitting with a pair of students to ask about their thoughts about Mencius or simply circulating the classroom to engage with various groups of students, she comes across as warm and approachable. She obviously cares about the students because she encourages activities, such as singing, that suit their interests and promote the usage of the English language. It is evident that the students are aware that she cares about them and how they learn, which motivates them to practise their English as often as they can.

**Conclusion and Implications of Findings**

 My findings from my research project on the pedagogies and perceptions of English-language teachers in China will contribute to the construction of the framework of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council’s (SSHRC) Participant Grant Project for understanding and appreciating educational similarities and differences between Canada and China. Observing firsthand how English-language teachers educate students in primary, middle, and high school classrooms in China using a variety of teaching resources, strategies, and efforts in teacher-student interaction will allow me to combine the strengths of teaching English in China with the strengths of teaching French in Canada and incorporate them both into my teaching pedagogy that I will bring to my classroom practicums in the pre-service education program at the University of Windsor. In addition, the combination of teaching strengths from both cultures, combined with the foundation of my teaching pedagogy, will facilitate my development as a global educator. Furthermore, the project will allow me to bring a global perspective to Canadian classrooms over the course of my educational career and benefit the academic community by increasing multiculturalism within Canadian classrooms and, in turn, helping to make the classrooms and its students multilingual.

References

Wang, Y., & Chen, J. (2013). Differences of English and Chinese as Written Languages and Strategies in English Writing Teaching. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 3(4), pp. 647-652. Retrieved October 14, 2016, from http://www.academypublication.com/issues/past/tpls/vol03/04/13.pdf

Yan, X. (2015, April 17). English: The ticket to prosperity for China. *Journal Sentinel*. Retrieved October 13, 2016, from http://archive.jsonline.com/news/opinion/english-the-ticket-tor -prosperity-for-china-b99480740z1-300344391.html

Zhang, F., & Yin, P. (2009). A Study of Pronunciation Problems of English Learners in China. *Asian Social Science*, 5(6). Retrieved October 16,, 2016, from http://www.ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/ass/article/viewFile/2490/2336

Zuo, L. (2008). A Recent History of Teaching EFL in China. *Compleat Links*, 5(2). Retrieved October 14, 2016, from https://www.tesol.org/read-and-publish/journals/other-serial -publications/compleat-links/compleat-links-volume-5-issue-2-(june-2008)/a-recent -history-of-teaching-efl-in-china