



China's English Language Environment

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Abstract

Chinese students and teachers often say that the major challenge they face in acquiring English is that “China does not have a good English language environment” (*zhong guo de ying yu huan jing bu tai hao*) by which they mean there are insufficient opportunities to use English in real life situations and a lack of exposure to authentic English language material. Based on a review of the use of English in China and the author's own experiences living and teaching there, this paper will show that China's English language environment is actually much richer than is commonly believed. It argues that the two main issues which need to be addressed are raising awareness of the amount and type of English language material and opportunities to use the language available and developing ways for students and teachers to use such material and opportunities, both in and outside of the classroom.

Keywords: China, English language environment, Authentic materials, Teaching and learning English

1. Introduction

As China continues to modernise and open to the world, demand for English language skills has intensified and enthusiasm for learning English is also at an all time high. As Jiang (2003) says, “governments are encouraging their citizens to learn English, parents are persuading, even forcing, their children to speak it and college students are doing English at the expense of their majors” (p. 6).

Although the importance of English is widely acknowledged, Chinese students and teachers frequently comment that the major challenge they face in acquiring the language is that “China does not have a good English language environment” (*zhong guo de ying yu huan jing bu tai hao*) by which they mean there are insufficient opportunities to use English in real life situations and a lack of exposure to authentic English language material. Although at first this appears to be a reasonable assumption, a closer look at the use of English in China reveals that China's English language environment is actually much richer than is commonly believed. This paper will show the types of English language material and opportunities to use the language readily available to Chinese students and teachers and suggest ways to raise awareness of them and ways in which they could be used, both in and outside the classroom.

2. English in China

Brown (2000, p. 193) points out that the line between English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts has become blurred and it is no longer easy to distinguish between the two. This is certainly the case with China, usually classified as either an EFL or expanding circle country where English is used primarily as a means for international communication, yet exhibits a high degree of the use of English within the country. English is used fairly extensively in the domains of science and technology, the media, tourism and international connections and business, which means there is a large amount of authentic material, and even opportunities to use the language in real life situations, available for use by students and teachers.

2.1 Newspapers, Magazines, Books and Other Printed Material

There are 19 English language newspapers and magazines in China (Jiang, 2003, p. 7). Some of the better known newspapers are: *China Daily*, *Shanghai Star*, *Shanghai Daily*, *Beijing Weekend* and *21st Century*. As for magazines, *China Today* and *Beijing Review*, both of which focus on politics and current affairs, are probably the most well-known, with others such as *China Pictorial*, *Women of China*, *China's Foreign Trade*, *China's Sports*, *China Screen*, *Chinese Medical Journal*, *Science Bulletin*, *Social Sciences in China* and *Shanghai Pictorial* providing English language material on a diverse range of other topics (Pan, 2005, pp. 185-6). In Shanghai, one can also find free English magazines in hotels, bars and restaurants, which contain information about local events and entertainment options (*People's Daily Online*, 23/08/2006).

A large number of English language books are also available in China. Most bookstores sell classic Western literary works and novels such as *Tess of the Durbivilles*, *Jane Eyre* and *The Scarlett Letter*. Academic texts are also

increasingly common, including, perhaps not surprisingly, many books on linguistics and language teaching. One of the main bookstores in Changchun for example, stocked the Oxford Introductions to Language Study (a nine book series), Oxford Applied Linguistics (a 29 book series), the Cambridge Books for Language Teachers (a series of 20 books) and Cambridge Applied Linguistics (a 10 book series). In addition to these, the Xinhua Bookstore and Foreign Language Bookstore in Chengdu had the 10 book Applied Linguistics in Action series and the Thomson English Language Teachers' Books series, consisting of 19 books. As well as these foreign works, some Chinese scholars also write in English. Examples of book length works are: *Language contact and lexical borrowing of English and Chinese: A comprehensive study* (Hu, 2001), *Applied linguistics: Language learning and teaching* (Yi, 2004) and *Linguistic and cultural identities in Chinese varieties of English* (Pan, 2005).

Another source of English language material is translated works. Figures from the China Bibliographic Library indicate 28 500 translated works were published between 1978 and 1990, and another 94 400 such works were published from 1995-2003 (*People's Daily Online*, 10/11/2004). No figures for translations into English were given but much Chinese literature and the works of important political leaders are certainly available in English. According to Hung (2002, p. 331), although much of China's translation efforts are aimed at foreign audiences, there is also a growing trend for English translations of Chinese texts being aimed at Chinese audiences who use them as an aid to learn English.

2.2 Television, Radio and the Internet

In addition to printed material, there are also English language television programs. Many of these are of the language teaching variety but English language television is by no means confined to this genre (Pride & Liu, 1988, pp. 49-55; Zhao & Campbell, 1995, pp. 385-8). Non-teaching programs are mainly on China Central Television 9 (CCTV 9), China's first all English television channel. CCTV 9 began broadcasting on 25th September 2000 and has a number of programs including documentaries, entertainment and news (CCTV 9 website). Here is an example of a day's programming:

12:00am	CCTV News
12:30am	Dialogue
01:00am	China Today
01:30am	New Frontiers
02:00am	Biz China
02:30am	Culture Express
03:00am	CCTV News
03:15am	Learning Chinese
03:30am	Nature & Science
03:55am	Chinese Civilisation
04:00am	Asia Today
04:30am	Around China
05:00am	News Updates
05:15am	Sports Scene
05:30am	Rediscovering China
06:00am	Biz China
06:30am	Documentary
07:00am	China Today
07:30am	Dialogue
08:00am	World Wide Watch
08:30am	Culture Express
09:00am	CCTV News
09:15am	Learning Chinese
09:30am	Nature & Science
09:55am	Chinese Civilisation
10:00am	News Updates

10:15am	Sports Scene
10:30am	New Frontiers
11:00am	Biz China
11:30am	Around China
12:00pm	News Hour
1:00pm	Dialogue
01:30pm	Rediscovering China
02:00pm	Biz China
02:30pm	Culture Express
03:00pm	News Updates
03:15pm	Learning Chinese
03:30pm	Nature & Science
03:55pm	Chinese Civilisation
04:00pm	News Updates
04:15pm	Sports Scene
04:30pm	New Frontiers
05:00 pm	CCTV News
05:30pm	Documentary
06:00pm	Biz China
06:30pm	Around China
07:00pm	World Wide Watch
07:30pm	Dialogue
08:00pm	Asia Today
08:30pm	Culture Express
09:00pm	Biz China
09:30pm	Rediscovering China
10:00pm	China Today
10:30pm	New Frontiers
11:00pm	News Updates
11:15pm	Sports Scene
11:30pm	Documentary (CCTV 9 website, schedule for Monday programming)

China's other all-English channel, Guangzhou English Language Channel, broadcasts six hours of programs, repeated twice, for a total of 18 hours of English programming per day, throughout southern China. These programs consist of news, business reports, culture and entertainment, all with a focus on Guangzhou's local conditions and culture (Guangzhou English Language Channel website).

English language programs can also be found on other non-all English channels. For example, *Lu You Wei Shi* (Travel Satellite TV) played *Lonely Planet Pilot Guides* (a travel program) each afternoon and again at night for a period of time in 2003. English movies, usually accompanied by Chinese subtitles, also appear from time to time on local channels and some have their own English news (Pan, 2005, p. 186).

China Radio International, which broadcasts to several Chinese cities and a number of foreign countries, has "290 hours of programming each day to all over the world in 43 languages" (China Radio International website). The English Service broadcasts 145 hours of programs per day, including music (*Easy Morning*, *Music Memories*, *The Pulse* and *All That Jazz*), news (*News and Reports*) and documentary style programs such as *Frontline*, *Voices From Other Lands*, *Biz China*, *China Horizons* and *Life in China* (CRI English website, a and b). Some local radio stations also have bilingual programs (Pan, 2005, p. 186).

Internet cafés, or *wang ba*, are relatively easy to find in China, at least in urban areas, and more and more Chinese are going online. As Jones (2006) points out, although most internet café patrons "play computer games, send and receive

emails, and chat online” (p. 162), the internet could also be used to learn English, and it does indeed provide access to vast amounts of English language material, far too much to list here. It is worth mentioning however that there is some locally produced English language content. Both the *China Daily* and *People’s Daily* newspapers have online English versions and CCTV 9 and China Radio International maintain English websites offering news and other material in multimedia formats. *Shanghai Town* (<http://shanghaitown.online.sh.cn/>), an all English website full of information about the city such as housing, transportation and entertainment, was launched in September 2006 (*People’s Daily Online*, 23/08/06). One can also make use of the Shanghai Yellow Pages online (<http://en.yellowpage.com.cn/index.php>). Although these sites are primarily aimed at foreigners, there is no reason why Chinese learners of English cannot use them.

2.3 Public Places

English is clearly visible in public places, appearing on a variety of signs and notices. Many businesses for example have English names, the most notable examples being fast food restaurants such as *McDonalds*, *KFC* and *Pizza Hut*. Other businesses using English names include *China Telecom* and *China Mobile* while banks such as *Bank of China*, *Agricultural Bank of China* and *Commercial and Industrial Bank of China* also have English names displayed along with the Chinese.

English is common in places associated with tourism such as museums, parks and train stations, as well as the commercial districts of big cities. The following is an example of the many English signs at the Giant Panda Breeding Research Base in Chengdu:

PLEASE PROCEED QUIETLY
AND STAY ON TRAILS
ANIMALS FRIGHTEN EASILY

Here is a selection of the English that appears on signs, shops and buildings in and around Chunxi Road, Chengdu’s main shopping street:

GOOD WOOD COFFEE
T.K.K. FRIED CHIKEN
CKC ICE CREAM
SYDNEY STYLISTIC COFFEE
SELF SERVICE BANKING
FOOT ZONE
HONGQI CHAIN STORE
CHENGDU DENTAL HOSTIPAL
CHENGDU CITY INFORMATION STATION

2.4 Public Transport

Using public transport is an extremely common activity for most Chinese and English can be found here as well. On some buses in Changchun next stop announcements are made first in Chinese then in English:

The next stop is coming. Guilin Road is coming.

The light train also has this feature, the announcement given first in Chinese then in English as follows:

Hello passengers. The next stop is Jiefang Bridge. Please be ready to get off.

In 2006, an event called Poems on the Underground took place in Shanghai. For the duration of this event, famous English poems, along with Chinese translations, were displayed on the city’s metro for commuters to read during their journey (*People’s Daily Online*, 14/04/06).

2.5 Interactions in English

One option for those who want to speak English in real life situations is to participate in an English corner. English corners are places such as parks and squares where one can go to practice speaking English with other learners and are common in cities across China (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996, pp. 63-4; Zhao & Campbell, 1995, p. 387). Chen & Hird (2006) describe the English corner at one Chinese university as a place “where students and people from outside the university gather every Friday evening in front of the teaching building to have informal ‘chats’ in English in order to improve their English” (p. 78).

Recent efforts to correct English in public places, such as on signs and buildings, also present students and teachers with opportunities to use their English in a real world task. As part of Beijing’s campaign to ensure all English appearing in

the public domain is correct before the 2008 Olympics, the public has been asked to find and send examples of incorrect or faulty English to the campaign's organisers (China Culture website, 25/08/06). One Beijing resident who participated in this campaign said that it "encouraged us to learn more and raise our English level" (quoted in China Culture website, 25/08/06). The Office of the Volunteer Work Coordination Group for Beijing Olympic Games has also requested students, teachers and others able to speak a range of foreign languages, including English, to act as volunteers to help visitors during the Games (*People's Daily Online*, 20/11/07).

A campaign similar to Beijing's took place in Xi'an in 2007, in which students, teachers and others searched for and corrected mistakes on shop signs, street signs, buildings etc. in their local area (*People's Daily Online*, 07/03/07).

3. Using China's English Language Environment

It is therefore possible for Chinese students and teachers to see, hear, and, to a lesser extent, speak English in a variety of situations outside of the classroom. Of course, what is actually available will depend on the area of China in which one resides and the individual's circumstances, but it should still be possible to find some authentic material and perhaps even opportunities to use the language. The two main issues that then need to be addressed are: raising awareness of the amount and type of English language material and opportunities to use the language available and developing ways for students and teachers to use them, both in and outside of the classroom.

3.1 Raising Awareness

Some ideas for things teachers can do to raise their students' awareness of China's English language environment are:

- tell students about the type of material and opportunities available and show them examples
- ask students to brainstorm places and situations where English is used in China
- ask students to collect examples of English from their local community and bring them to class

Before doing such activities with their class, teachers should of course do them themselves, either individually or together with their colleagues.

3.2 Developing Ways of Using English Language Material in and Outside of the Classroom

Knowing about China's English language environment is, however, only part of the equation. As Nunan (1999) points out, students must be taught how to approach and use authentic material and opportunities to use the language available outside of the classroom. This is essentially a question of learning strategies and would entail, for example:

- teaching students about different types of listening and reading, such as listening and reading for gist, for specific information etc.
- teaching strategies for coping with unfamiliar language such as guessing meaning from context
- teaching strategies for organising and managing one's own learning

A discussion of how to implement strategy training is beyond the scope of this paper but a useful summary and example of strategy training in China can be found in Wen (2006) while Ruan (2006) discusses the issue of learner autonomy. Once learners have received appropriate training, they can make use of China's English language environment either independently or as a complement to their current course of study.

Turning our attention to classrooms, some ways in which authentic English language materials could be used in class are:

- use authentic material to show examples of the grammar and vocabulary currently being taught
- build activities around a particular piece of authentic material, for example learning letter writing through examining letters to the editor in *China Daily*
- discuss the materials students bring to class

Such activities would have the benefits of further preparing students for language use outside of class and increasing their motivation by showing how what they are learning is relevant to the outside world (Nunan, 1999).

However, just as the amount and type of English language material and opportunities to use the language available will vary according to different regions of China and individual circumstances, so too will the extent to which students and teachers are able to incorporate them into their learning and teaching. English language teaching in China is, despite some important new developments, still treated as an academic subject, determined by strict, top down education policies, largely based on grammar, reading and translation, teacher centred, product oriented and lacking in resources (Liu, 1998, p. 5). This may well make it difficult to implement some of the suggestions made here but none of them should be completely impossible.

4. Conclusion

Although there is not the same amount of authentic material and opportunities to use English as there would be in say, Australia or England, China nevertheless has a rich and varied English language environment. The authentic materials available range from simple signs to academic texts and exist in print, audio and visual forms. There are also some opportunities to use English to communicate with other learners and in the context of real world tasks. While there may indeed be some difficulties associated with incorporating such material and opportunities into the teaching and learning experience, efforts should be made to do this so that Chinese students and teachers can benefit from the English language environment around them.

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