

# CHINA EFL: What Does Reform Mean?

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2009 China expects 10 million<sup>1</sup> new college students to attend its +2,236<sup>2</sup> public colleges and more than 1,300 private colleges.<sup>3</sup>

“The Ministry of Education launched a new campaign to reform EFL education at the turn of the 21st century. The reform aims to modernize EFL teaching on campuses, pushing it out of its traditional track and equipping it with better technology.”<sup>4</sup>

From a western perspective the mandate from the Ministry of Education evokes visions of full scale implementation of current 2<sup>nd</sup> language acquisition pedagogy and methodology, multi-media classrooms, computer labs and sound labs, English acquisition libraries and the creation of English speaking environments.

A 2009 survey of Chinese colleges and universities failed to yield evidence of the mandated reforms.

## MULTI-MEDIA CLASSROOMS

**DEFINITION:** A theater style tiered seating classroom with audio-visual equipment programmed in English, sound equipment, projection screen and blackout curtains.

**COLLEGE SURVEY:** In the rich coastal cities of Dalian, Shanghai, Qingdao, and Xiamen, the 1<sup>st</sup> tier, 2<sup>nd</sup> tier 3<sup>rd</sup> tier and even 4<sup>th</sup> tier colleges and universities visited had the requisite facilities for English teaching. All of the multi-media equipment had Chinese programming as opposed to English programming. 50% of the multi-media classrooms had flat floors instead of tiered floors. One Shanghai 2<sup>nd</sup> tier Joint Venture University actively discouraged actual use of the multi-media equipment because of the high cost of electricity and the 3,000 rmb cost to replace the projector bulb.

In Central China and Western China a completely different situation was observed. 2<sup>nd</sup> tier universities, 3<sup>rd</sup> tier and 4<sup>th</sup> tier colleges claim to have numerous multi-media classrooms for English instruction. But the observed reality is that only 1 in 10 has operable equipment, some inoperable for as long as 5 years, (all with Chinese

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<sup>1</sup> China expects drop in number seeking college degree, [http://en.ce.cn/National/Education/200905/31/t20090531\\_19211543.shtml](http://en.ce.cn/National/Education/200905/31/t20090531_19211543.shtml) (accessed July 1, 2009)

<sup>2</sup> List of universities in the People's Republic of China, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_universities\\_in\\_the\\_People's\\_Republic\\_of\\_China](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_universities_in_the_People's_Republic_of_China) (accessed July 5, 2009)

<sup>3</sup> Non-government Colleges Seek Help, [http://service.china.org.cn/link/wcm/Show\\_Text?info\\_id=100414&p\\_qry=university%20and%20enrollment](http://service.china.org.cn/link/wcm/Show_Text?info_id=100414&p_qry=university%20and%20enrollment) (accessed July 1, 2009)

<sup>4</sup> A Recent History of Teaching EFL in China, [http://www.tesol.org/s\\_tesol/sec\\_document.asp?CID=1901&DID=11103](http://www.tesol.org/s_tesol/sec_document.asp?CID=1901&DID=11103) (accessed July 16, 2009)

programming), most lacking blackout curtains and most with flat floors. No 1st tier university was visited.

In Southern China 1<sup>st</sup> tier and 2<sup>nd</sup> tier universities were observed to have an ample number of operable multi-media classrooms for English instruction. The equipment was programmed in Chinese and the floors were primarily flat, although a few exceptions for tiered floors were noted.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> tier colleges appeared to suffer from the same deficiencies as were observed in Central and Western China.

## **COMPUTER LABS AND SOUND LABS**

### **DEFINITIONS:**

A computer lab for English instruction should be a room with English programmed and networked computers with at least one printer, sufficient in quantity to meet the needs of the number of students, and available not only for class assignments but also for research and free choice reading, which requires access to the World Wide Web.

A sound lab for English instruction should be a room with English programmed equipment designed for English audio and visual input in individual stations in sufficient quantity as to meet the needs of the number of students.

**COLLEGE SURVEY:** Throughout Eastern and Southern China it was observed that an adequate number of computer labs and sound labs exist with an adequate number of computers or stations to meet the students' needs. Maintenance programs kept the equipment in proper operable condition. None of the labs were programmed in English. None of the computer labs had access to the World Wide Web. Only one computer lab had a printer. Two of the 1<sup>st</sup> tier universities visited provided a computer in every student dormitory room with access to the school intranet. For an extra fee, the students can obtain access to the World Wide Web but filtered through the school intranet firewall.

In Central and Western China there was a paucity of both computer labs and sound labs. The labs that did exist were programmed in Chinese, could not meet student needs and were in various states of inoperability. Some labs had as high as a 65% inoperability factor. At one college the computer science majors learned the computer via a PPT lecture. They never received any hands on instruction or experience.

At one school all 8 sound labs were 100% inoperable for an entire semester.

At another school there was a computer lab with 40 computers for 10,000 students. 18 of the computers were inoperable and too old to repair.

## **ENGLISH ACQUISITION LIBRARIES**

**DEFINITION:** A collection of English books and magazines covering a multitude of subjects and interests, written at varying degrees of difficulty, that can be freely accessed by all students wishing to engage in free choice reading.

**COLLEGE SURVEY:** A random selection of 3 - 1<sup>st</sup> tier, 3 - 2<sup>nd</sup> tier and 2 - 3<sup>rd</sup> tier colleges and universities in Shanghai revealed that no such 2<sup>nd</sup> language acquisition English library existed even though each school boasted a School of Foreign Languages with an English Department. A 2<sup>nd</sup> tier university had an English research library but students were not allowed entry because they would “wear out the books.” A 1<sup>st</sup> tier university had an English research library but students had to pay an entrance fee each time they entered.

In Central China, a visit to 2 - 2<sup>nd</sup> tier, 2 - 3<sup>rd</sup> tier and 2 - 4<sup>th</sup> tier colleges and universities revealed that no such 2<sup>nd</sup> language acquisition English library existed even though each school boasted a School of Foreign Languages with an English Department. A 3<sup>rd</sup> tier college recently constructed a US\$5 mil. library for its 10,000 students. The college has 1,100 English majors but not one single English book in its 4 year old library.

In Beijing, a visit to 4 randomly selected 1<sup>st</sup> tier universities revealed that no such 2<sup>nd</sup> language acquisition English library existed even though each school boasted a School of Foreign Languages with an English Department. English research libraries were the norm.

In western China a visit to 4 randomly selected 2<sup>nd</sup> tier universities revealed that no such 2<sup>nd</sup> language acquisition English library existed even though each school boasted a School of Foreign Languages with an English Department.

In Southern China a visit to 2 – 1<sup>st</sup> tier, 2 – 2<sup>nd</sup> tier and 3 – 3<sup>rd</sup> tier randomly selected colleges and universities revealed that no such 2<sup>nd</sup> language acquisition English language library existed even though each school boasted a School of Foreign Languages with an English Department. 1 - 1<sup>st</sup> tier university had a freely accessible English research library. And 1 - 1<sup>st</sup> tier university had a small English acquisition library within the School of Foreign Languages.

A visit to 5 Joint Venture universities; 1 in Beijing, 1 in Dalian, 1 in Guangzhou, 1 in Shanghai, and 1 in Shenyang, revealed that each school had a 2<sup>nd</sup> language English acquisition library. These libraries are primarily used for assigned reading and only available for free choice reading one hour each day. Books may not be checked out.

The survey results are not surprising since China teaches English learning for test taking to the exclusion of English acquisition. The communicative approach to English learning concentrates on memorizing set phrases and parroting them back in oral English class.

There are also monetary policy impediments to the acquisition of English books from abroad. When the strict policy hurdles can be overcome, it is usually for the acquisition of science and technology books.

## **ENGLISH SPEAKING ENVIRONMENT**

**DEFINITION:** There are two required elements to a proper ESE. A proper ESE is one where the students are inundated with comprehensible English input and where it is easier to communicate in English rather than in the native Putonghua. An English

speaking environment is defined as: “*An environment where English is the dominant language.*” Or, “*an environment where people are compelled to speak English*”.<sup>5</sup>

**COLLEGE SURVEY:** Speak with any Chinese university foreign language department administrator and they will extol the virtues of creating an English-speaking environment (ESE) for the English majors. But take a close look and you will quickly discover that there is no ESE on campus.

The hiring of some foreign native English speakers and holding weekly English Corners is the total extent of efforts to create an English speaking environment. These English speaking opportunities contribute little or nothing to the creation of an ESE.

An ESE is all about comprehensible input, i.e. immersion. Almost all of China’s colleges and universities hire foreign English speakers and hold weekly English Corner. But finding a single university with an ESE was impossible.

### **CONCLUSION**

Very clearly there is a complete failure of the western “vision” of the Ministry of Education’s mandate to “modernize” the teaching of English as a foreign language in China. Possibly something is lost in translation.

It was noted that the Administration of each college and university surveyed possessed numerous late model luxury sedans while student facilities languished in an inoperable state of disrepair or nonexistence.

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<sup>5</sup> Creating Authentic Dialog: ESL Students as Recipients of Service Learning, Stephanie Marlow, Boise State University (Boise, Idaho, USA) “An environment where authentic dialog with native English speakers occurs on a regular basis presents ESL students with the possibility to grow both linguistically and socially” . <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Marlow-ServiceLearning.html>