

CAN YOU GET A FIRST-CLASS EDUCATION AT A THIRD-TIER COLLEGE IN CHINA?*

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ABSTRACT

Few students in Chinese third-tier colleges are currently receiving a first-class education. Unfortunately, this means that they do not develop their full potential and consequently do not contribute fully to China's society. A paradigm shift in teaching methodologies is needed to ensure that students are taught effectively. More appropriate texts should be adopted. Active participation needs to be emphasized, making students responsible for their own learning. Students need to be introduced to computers, and while at college become fully computer literate. It will be difficult to move away from traditional teaching and assessment methodologies, but change is essential for third-tier college students to receive a first-class education and be competitive in the limited job market¹.

INTRODUCTION

It is our experience in China that second-tier² and third-tier³ public college and university English program administrators and faculty assume a condescending approach to curriculum development, academic standards and school administration. (See Appendix A for comprehensive explanation of the hierarchy of China's colleges and universities.)

Students attend these institutions of higher learning primarily because their aggregate college entrance exam scores were not high enough for them to win one of the prized entrance slots at a top-tier⁴ (National or Provincial comprehensive) university. We believe from our experience that some of

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¹ In the summer of 2003 China will graduate 10 million students who will enter a job market where 700,000 university graduates from the 2002 graduating class are still unemployed (*China Daily*, 4/24/03, "Minister: Tough Year for Job Seekers"; *China Daily, Hong Kong Edition*, 02/12/03, "Millions of People Need to Find Jobs").

² 2nd tier colleges are usually, but not always under the direct administrative management of a provincial government, and are primarily funded at the provincial level. These institutions grant two or three year certificates, four-year diplomas and bachelor degrees, masters and doctorates. Professional training colleges grant three-year certificates. Some second-tier colleges are under the direct administrative management of a Central Government Ministry.

³ Third-tier colleges are usually, but not always, under the direct administrative management authority of a municipal government, and grant three-year special technical certificates or four-year bachelor degrees. These colleges are primarily funded at the municipal level but they also receive some financial support from the provincial government and sometimes from the Central Government. Third-tier universities are recently created under institutions under the direct administrative management authority of a municipal government but are required to have 1,000 mu of land area minimum and 10,000 students minimum.

⁴ Top-tier university refers to those institutions of higher education that are under the direct administrative management of the Central Government Ministry of Education or other Central Government Ministries, and that have the authority to grant master and doctorate degrees and whose entering freshman scored within the top 10% on the national college entrance examinations. Top tier colleges are those colleges with direct administrative management at the provincial level that have the authority to grant doctorates.

these students (possibly the top 10%) would have been quite capable of performing well in a top-tier university, but their lackluster performance during a three-day college entrance examination⁵ denied them that opportunity. These students have simply demonstrated that they are not good at taking tests, but this sole criterion relegates them to a second- or third-tier institution where they have less opportunity to obtain a first-class education. The college English program should support these above-average students in fulfilling their potential.

The vast majority of these second- and third-tier students (possibly the middle 70%) are either disadvantaged in their college preparation or in their personal ability. These students are typically from rural areas, where they have had fewer opportunities to develop their English, compared with the privileged students of wealthier areas who may have had a foreign teacher at their middle school or even received help from university professors to prepare for the college entrance exam.

Then there is the bottom 20% of the second- and third-tier students who should have been diverted to a vocational educational training program rather than directed into even a third-tier theoretically-based higher education institution. These lower-end students just do not belong in a 'theoretical' higher education college setting. Many of these students were admitted to college due to *guanxi*, i.e., parental influence, position or even 'gifts', but are so deficient in their basic knowledge and capabilities that they have the appearance of a fish out of water.

It appears to us that the academic standards of the second-tier university and the third-tier college accommodate or even favor the graduation of the lower 20% of the students, to the detriment of the truly capable students who are necessarily held back from reaching their individual potential. There may be several reasons for this, which we will explore separately. We also outline a proposed curriculum for the recently-approved bachelor of arts degree in Business English at Xinyang Agricultural College, a third-tier public college, which incorporates our ideas about a progressive college education and makes appropriate use of information technology. (See Appendix B.)

STUDENT INFLUENCE ON COLLEGE EDUCATION

Unlike most Western institutions of higher education where students are, by definition, there to learn, in China, college students are treated as "experts" in what makes a good teacher and in what curriculum and teaching methodology will best suit their needs. It has even been suggested that expatriate English teachers "would do well to let themselves be taught by their students...what learners consider most important, or what learners prize—or despise. ...What expatriate teachers consider to be important may not be considered so by Chinese learners" (Ming-sheng Li, 1999). This attitude is not limited to expatriate teachers alone, but threads throughout higher education in China. As yet we have failed to discover how senior middle school graduates become so expert in teaching methodology and style within the mere months between senior middle school graduation and college admission. It is likewise unknown by what process they lose this "expertise" if they embark upon their own teaching careers, which requires a two-year apprenticeship. We ask, how can one judge what they themselves are not able to do?

⁵ "University admission is operated on a centralized enrolment system, in which admissions committees at the provincial level are under the Ministry of Education. Admission is granted on the basis of academic, physical and moral qualifications. Special allowances are made for minority nationality and overseas Chinese candidates. The nationwide examinations are held in the first ten days of July. Candidate can take the examination in either one of the two categories, humanities or sciences/engineering. They apply for the institutions and departments they wish to enter in order of preference. Enrolment is determined by the examination results. Brief investigation into their social behavior and moral character is conducted before students are admitted. In some faculties, specific physical requirements must be met" (www.index-china.com).

Students play a major role in the evaluation of teacher competence and methodology. Students collectively, through the weekly class monitor reports, and individually through teacher evaluations at term end, give their “expert” opinion on how well the teacher taught the material and whether or not the teacher met their expectations. These evaluations are critical in administrative decisions to retain, terminate or promote teachers. The student’s evaluations are also pivotal in administrative decisions whether, or in what amount, to give the teacher a term-end bonus payment.

Quite literally, students may hold a teacher’s professional life or death in their hands, as well as their economic prosperity. This student influence compels teachers to forgo a difficult and challenging curriculum, to reduce academic standards, and to engage in little more than a popularity contest to ensure their very survival as a teacher. Teachers thus forgo discipline, challenging homework, and challenging testing. “According to regulations, students have to score their professor’s performance at the end of the school term. Professors who score poorly may have their bonus withheld. This system not only encourages students who cheat, but professors who are reluctant to offend them” (www.china.org.cn, 6/3/02).

Student influence has also forced teachers to adopt a grading system of “A”, “B” and “C” with only an occasional “D” and almost never an “F.” Situations where administrators have administratively changed an “F” grade to a passing “D” grade, over the opposition of the teacher, are not uncommon. Once admitted to college, a student will receive their graduation diploma, so long as they are still breathing at graduation time (Skolnick, 1966, “Goldfish Out of Water: Teaching Science Writing at a Shanghai University”; ScienceWriters: The Newsletter of the National Association of Science Writers; Qiang/Wolff, 3/03, in peer review, “Chinese University Diploma: Can Its International Image Be Improved?”).

Students may go so far as to choose to boycott a particular class because the teacher gives too much homework, or requires too much class participation, (which from a student perspective may mean loss of face by articulating their answers in poor English), or gave low grades on the mid-term examination. The administration, faced with such a class boycott, may simply replace the teacher in mid-term without even consulting the teacher. The errant students are not disciplined while the teacher is penalized for actually attempting to provide a quality education. Teaching is reduced to a popularity contest. The popular survive while the unpopular may not.

Beijing University, a top-tier university, has adopted new disciplinary rules in recognition that students use their influence to plead with, threaten or even bribe a professor to obtain preferential treatment (*China Daily*, (6/28/02).

However, as these phenomena remain so common in Chinese higher education, it is not a reason why the academic, moral, or administrative standards of a third-tier college should be any lower than those elsewhere. A third-tier college should not use these as reasons for delivering anything less than a first class education to its students.

The current student evaluation system amounts to little less than spying and encourages vindictiveness. Student feedback in China is reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution thinking about checking on educated people⁶. While student evaluations are valuable and constitute a necessary part

⁶The attack on the Three Family Village quickly moved from the papers to the schools. Students were encouraged to pen their own excoriations of the traitors, as one newspaper put it, opening “Fire at the Anti-Party Black Line!” Pupils made posters vilifying the scoundrels’ names and plastered them over every available wall. Thus they carried out their duty to “hold high the great banner of Mao Tse-tung thought!” The banner of Mao’s thought soon wrapped itself around the necks of more than just the Three Family Village. Schoolchildren were encouraged to find other literary works rotting with revisionism and antirevolutionary notions. The children leapt avidly to their homework assignment. But they became even more enthusiastic a few months later when a new directive came from above: ferret out bourgeois tendencies and reactionary revisionism among your teachers. The new task was one to which any youngster could apply himself with gusto. That teacher who gave you a poor mark on your last paper? He’s a bourgeois revisionist! Humiliate him. The pedagogue who bawled you out for being late for class? A capitalist rotter! Make her feel your wrath. Revenge had nothing to do with it. This was simply an issue of ideological purity. Students examined everything their teachers had

of improving teaching quality; there has to be verification of student comments, by an independent faculty member, before students' opinions are used for promotion, retention, or bonuses.

Students have a disproportionate influence and reduction of the emphasis and credibility attached to the student's evaluations would, we believe, benefit all universities and colleges in China by providing an environment conducive to increasing the level of scholarship.

TEACHERS' INFLUENCE ON STUDENTS' SUCCESS AT COLLEGE

The most prevalent problem with teaching English in China is that students are taught exclusively by teachers who have never set foot in an English-speaking country, who were themselves taught by teachers who never set foot in an English-speaking country, and therefore teaching is, at best going to be in a form of Chinglish or dictionary definition English. Top-tier institutions are not exempt from this phenomenon, with their Chinese English majors with Ph.D.s who have neither set foot in an English-speaking country.

An additional problem is that too many teachers at second-tier universities and third-tier colleges seem to approach their teaching responsibilities cavalierly and with the attitude that their students will never amount to very much, so why invest too much effort in teaching them? After all, it is not usually the diploma that secures the post-graduation job, but rather the "guanxi" (influence through relationships) of the student's parents that usually provides the employment opportunity for the new graduate.

Another problem is that the salary disparity between top-tier universities and third-tier colleges in China is tremendous. A top-tier university professor in Shanghai may earn a monthly salary of 3,000 RMB plus bonus, while a professor in a third-tier college earns only a mere 1,600 RMB salary and no bonus. The third-tier college pays a maximum 4,600 RMB per month for a "Foreign Expert" (FE) with a Ph.D., while a provincial top-tier university, like Shenzhen Polytechnic University or Guangxi University, pays an FE with Ph.D. a monthly salary of 9,200 RMB. FEs with only a bachelor of arts degree can earn an average monthly salary of 7,500 RMB in Shanghai (www.chinatefl.com).

Since many second- and third-tier college professors, pay is so low (Hayhoe, 1998), it is no wonder that they are tempted to cash in on their students' desire for a smooth passage through college. "Guanxi is so pervasive in China that corruption is a given" (Matuszak, 9/11/01).

For instance, in Guangzhou 39 students and five teachers were accused of a scheme where the teachers took the test first and then sold the correct answers to students (*People's Daily*, 7/15/00).

Because third-tier college teachers receive such low compensation, particularly in the rural poorer areas of the country, they have a serious disadvantage in recruiting qualified teachers. There is such a paucity of teacher applicants at third-tier colleges that the normal two-year apprenticeship required of recent college graduates is often waived and full teaching assignments commence simultaneously with their employment. In some desperate cases, a high school graduate, with some valuable life experience, may be hired to teach at a third-tier college—the life experience substituting for the lack of any formal higher education. For this and other reasons, China's higher education system suffers from inadequately trained teachers, many of whom have relatively low language proficiency levels themselves.

ever written. In the subtlest turns of innocent phrasing, they uncovered the signs of reactionary villainy. At first, they simply tacked up posters reviling the teachers as monsters and demons. Then all classes were suspended so that pupils could work on sniffing out traitors full-time. Instructors who had fought faithfully with Mao's revolutionary forces were suddenly reviled. Others who considered themselves zealots of Maoist thought were pilloried as loathsome rightists (Howard Bloom, "The Chinese Cultural Revolution", a chapter from *The Lucifer Principle*).

The issue is compounded by the problem of a very traditional teaching methodology, which has been superseded in other countries by more facilitatory methodologies. The current methodology employed is reliant on ‘talk and chalk’, i.e., the teacher stands at the front of the class copying sections from the text onto the board, while the students passively sit absorbing the teacher’s ‘words of wisdom.’ Some students will raise their hand and stand to answer questions, but beyond this, students do not actively participate in the lesson. Students are not responsible for their own learning. The teacher tells them exactly what they should know. Students are only responsible for completing exercises and re-writing words and phrases outside class so that they can pass the next exam. Little emphasis is placed on teaching students how to critically appraise information and situations or to think creatively (outside the box).

This is the very differentiation between western educational philosophy and eastern educational philosophy cultural difference as Ming-shen Li suggests, it is in reality a difference between the modern progressive trends in higher education in the west versus the time honored traditional educational model of the east. Under China’s “modernization” through three represents⁷, it is time to speak out in alluded to by Ming-sheng Li (1999). We suggest that rather than being a favor of modernizing China’s educational philosophy.

In the existing traditional teaching methodology, the teacher is primarily concerned with the performance of the top students answering the questions. Most students are left behind, (but will nonetheless graduate) so they either skip class, entertain themselves in class or simply sleep until the end of the lesson. We are left with the distinct impression that many teachers feel they are not sufficiently well compensated to attempt to engage with these students.

Conscientious Chinese students seem to harbor the belief that by attending all the right classes or completing all the exercises in the ‘perfect’ text, they will speak fluent English. Third-tier college students do not have the luxury that wealthier students in the large cities have, of hopping from one supplementary English program to a rival scheme, or of buying every English text on the market.

Despite these problems, some students seem to thrive in the atmosphere of the typical Chinese college. They are however, in the minority. Many Chinese students are extremely conscientious but they do not fulfill their potential. Chinese students are deemed lifetime failures if they did not obtain a sufficiently high score to enter a top-tier university and consequently not boosting their middle school’s position in the league tables. This is a great source of anguish for the middle school teachers and of course, the students themselves (observation from interviews with middle school teachers). One author gave a freshman class a homework assignment of writing about the worst holiday they had ever experienced, expecting to read tales of travel woes. Instead, half of the class wrote about the sleepless nights they had suffered after receiving their college entrance exam scores during the previous summer vacation, how disappointed their parents were, and of the students’ resulting depression. The current testing system sets high hurdles in the strangest places and mocks those who do not clear them the first time.

The future of new students arriving at the college gate is largely dependent on the opportunities for personal development provided by college teachers, either directly in class, or through the moral and academic environment they create. It is our duty to equip our graduates with the skills and knowledge they need to be successful in the global marketplace. A complete on-going revision of teaching methodologies is required in order to provide a first class education.

The Ministry of Education has recognized the need to improve teaching quality and has promulgated the following policies for teachers:

⁷ Three Represents is the operational phrase coined by President Jiang Zemin at the 16th National Communist Party Congress held in March 2003. The “Three Represents” theory, created by Jiang, calls on the CPC to always represent the development trend of China’s advanced productive forces, the orientation of China’s advanced culture and the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people.

As part of the effort to emphasize quality education, the MOE has begun to raise teacher qualification standards, provide appropriate rewards as an incentive for improved teaching, and eliminate the iron rice bowl that prevented incompetent teachers from being fired.

The MOE noted that the existing academic promotion system was based on seniority and did not accurately assess the academic performance of teachers or grant them material rewards commensurate with their contributions. This was said to dampen teachers' enthusiasm. The MOE therefore announced in November 1999 that China would allocate considerable funds to raise salaries in accordance with workloads and efficiency. By 2005, instructors at higher-learning institutions would be better paid than most professions. The MOE also prioritized the improvement of teachers' working and housing conditions.

In recognition of the increasing complexity of teaching in the information age, the MOE in late 1998 stipulated that all college professors under age 50 had to become computer literate immediately, and that primary and middle school teachers had five years to learn computer skills.

Moreover, in September 1999, the MOE launched a five-year program to upgrade the professional skills and teaching methods of primary and middle school teachers. It also announced that it would require teachers to upgrade their techniques and knowledge every five years via special training courses. Those who did not pass the courses would be dismissed.

The ministry further decreed that beginning in October 1999, teachers would have to pass government-set standards before assuming their posts, and that an employment contract system would be implemented to create a fair, competitive environment for teachers. The MOE began encouraging universities to find non-academic employment posts, such as at school-run enterprises, for those teachers who failed to meet academic requirements, and to introduce forced and early retirement.

The MOE introduced a post-rotating system between urban and rural areas to reduce disparities in teaching quality. It also encouraged regional educational administrations to adopt policies and financial incentives to encourage normal university graduates and urban educators to go to rural, underdeveloped and minority areas. In early 2000, the MOE started a program to train 1,000 primary and secondary school teachers in small western towns.

In recent years, the MOE has tried to lure outstanding Chinese scholars working overseas to return to China to assume key teaching and academic research posts with programs such as the "Spring Sunshine Project" and the Hong Kong-based Cheung Kong Scholarship Plan (http://www.chinaonline.com/refer/ministry_profiles/MOE.asp, 6/22/00).

We support every one of these comments. Additionally we suggest that the same continuing education training required of primary and middle school teachers be applied uniformly, across the board, to include all university and college lecturers and professors.

We also suggest that college oral English be taught exclusively by qualified Foreign Experts, or by people who have extensive experience functioning in an English-speaking environment. People who have management experience in a western commercial environment should teach business courses. Please see Appendix B for details of course recommendations. This will facilitate the 'modernization' of China's educational philosophy through pro-active engagement with those already immersed in the application of such modern approaches to higher education.

INADEQUATE TEXTS

Many currently utilized Business English texts are written by Chinese English speakers who have had little or no English cultural immersion and are printed in Chinese. The Ministry of Education issued a directive back in October 2001, which provided that English courses should be taught in English using English texts (<http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200110/22>) but it is our experience that this directive has not been widely implemented.

People who apparently have never worked in an English-speaking environment wrote many of the current texts. It is difficult to produce competent English speakers when the textbook gives the following as exemplary English copywriting:

Give me Longyan Peanuts
Or let me go nuts.
Longyan Salted Crisp Peanuts
Savour the Epicurean Flavour
Oh-so-good-to-be-alive (*Business Writing*, Higher Education Publishers [2000] p. 325)

Most students, like the writers of their texts, are unable to distinguish between very informal English, formal legalese English and purple prose.

CURRENT CURRICULUM DEFICIENCIES AND PROPOSED REMEDY

The historical and present Chinese education system is test-driven.⁸ Students, both in the middle schools and colleges, devote years of their lives to passing exams. One need only stroll around any Chinese town in the evening and they will observe rows of middle school students concentrating on a teacher reading from a supplementary text in the belief that this might boost their college entrance exam mark. Walk into a college or university late in the evening on any day of the week and you will see classroom lights on and students rocking back and forth in their seats repeatedly reciting each word in extensive vocabulary lists. Young Chinese have few goals other than getting a good score on their exams.

English is one of three compulsory subjects on the college entrance exam. All college and university students should pass CET4 (College English Test Band 4) in order to graduate, whatever their chosen career. In order to achieve these, Chinese children and young adults spend their evenings studying, their weekends studying and their national holidays studying.

It has been noted that this emphasis on test preparation leaves far too little time for the student to engage in extracurricular activities and to develop social skills (*China Daily*, (2/17/00)). In January 2000 the Central Government recognized this problem by issuing a directive to reduce the “overburden” of too much work that damages the social development of school children (*China Daily*, 3/27/00). However, the same article indicates the refusal of many teachers to implement the directive due to a perception that it will result in reduced standards. During the First Session of the 10th National People’s Congress in March 2003, Qian Honglong, one of Jiangsu Province’s deputies to the Congress and an experienced middle school teacher, questioned why students are still under so much academic workload that they are unable to engage in any activities outside of school, particularly in light of the prior Government directive (*21st Century*, 3/12/03).

Chinese parents spend much of their income on ensuring that their child has had the best educational opportunities possible. Until they enter the work force, young Chinese have had most of their lives structured by regular classes, extra classes and supplementary courses. All these have one focus; passing examinations.

The college entrance examinations stress recognition of complex grammatical structures and difficult vocabulary. They put little emphasis on writing and listening ability (20% of the total score of

⁸ The philosophy behind the Imperial Examinations, commencing with the Chin Dynasty, still provides the current day foundation for the test driven educational system, which places a person’s entire future within the sphere of test taking success. (Crozier, 6/02, “A Unique Experiment”, *China in Focus* Issue 12).

CET4 and CET6, the exam for English majors) and do not include any speaking. These exams unfortunately underlie English teaching in China.

Consequently students can recognize that a given grammatical structure is wrong and correct it, but they cannot themselves correctly use this structure in their own writing. For example, when reviewing college English homework, if a phrase such as “In the past people had no much money” is written on the board, the class can, in unison, correct it. Most of the students shouting this correction would not themselves have been able to correctly use that structure. Students memorize rhetorical essays on improving society, for example, but many are unable to spell ‘business’ or write about themselves.

Chinese education at present is so focused on memorizing words and structures that sometimes even the best students forget that there might be a purpose to their efforts beyond passing the next test. One author asked a class of college students to learn a list of household items for a test next class. Next class, the author held up a picture of one of these items to begin the test. The class monitor, an outstanding student with an exemplary work ethic, raised his hand to object that the test was not fair, as everyone had learnt how to spell the words but not what they meant!

As a result of the huge length of time students spend in directed activities; they have very poor study skills. Most believe that they will ‘master English’ if they put in enough hours reading texts. Few, if any, students with this educational background can write an appropriate business letter, after memorizing the examples in their texts.

Weaker students have little understanding of what is being taught to them, as their English level does not support the texts used. For example, instructing a class of final year diploma students to ‘look at the example on page 85 in book number #2’ produced a class all intently reading. Unfortunately, many of them were reading the wrong book or the wrong page! All too often teachers are happy that their class of ‘low achievers’ is quietly reading and less concerned about the learning outcome.

From our experience we believe that the average third-tier college student has very weak spoken English proficiency and a poorly developed listening ability, which are directly attributable to the middle school curriculum (Appendix C). Many do not even recognize the question ‘what is your name?’ in context, for example from a new foreign teacher. This can erroneously give foreigners the impression that these students have not studied English. In a face-to-face business setting though, such individuals effectively have no English production ability.

The college English testing system relies heavily on multiple-choice exams. Multiple guess is a more appropriate description of how weaker students answer them. This, coupled with the easier re-take of a failed class examination, ensures that students, once admitted to the college, graduate.

At this juncture we identify and sympathize with the remarks of Michael Moore, President of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, Blackpool, England, made at the annual association meeting, “[Students] are being railroaded into a testing culture that squeezes the joy of learning and turns schools into factories. ...Too many [students] are turned off learning because they are fed up with what they see as a boring curriculum diet that has little choice and less relevance to their lives....” He stated that “straightjacket education” was “being doled out by robotic teachers day in and day out” (Woodward, 4/16/03). Upon first blush, this article, re-published in the *China Daily*, was thought and perceived to be about higher education in China, but was in fact about primary school education in Great Britain.

While the philosophy that ‘no student shall be left behind’ is admirable, and one that we hope continues, this is an inappropriate way of ensuring everyone graduates. It perpetuates the concept that higher education has been reduced to a form of assembly line production that is lacking in any systematic quality control.

These problems are increasingly recognized by educators, employers and graduates who are required to speak English in their work. “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). “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).

A student in a third-tier college asked the following question: “What use is a degree from this college when I can only get a job as a laborer?” It is generally accepted that the premium jobs go to graduates from the most famous universities. This also holds true in the West. So long as students can graduate with a diploma in Business English but with little usable English, then employers will rightly view all third-tier college graduates with suspicion.

But are graduates of China’s top-tier universities any better at producing English? The established universities in China essentially train academics. Their English curriculum is based on studying literature. Few businesspeople from English speaking countries have immersed themselves in the works of Dickens or Shakespeare so it is wholly inappropriate, in a course aimed at producing competent EFL/ESL speakers, to give classic literature anything more than a cursory glance.

The majority of college English students are intent on pursuing a career in business⁹, not academia. Therefore, in a third-tier college setting we suggest that the focus should be on producing graduates equipped with the skills needed to succeed in business. So we are designing a syllabus around this educational philosophy, see Appendix B. Our proposed curriculum approach emphasizes the ability to effectively communicate in English with native English speakers and those L2 speakers with whom they will most likely have daily contact in their region of the world (Kirkpatrick, 11/00). This approach also prioritizes enabling students to produce the vocabulary and grammar that they have already learned. We need to move away from the unnecessarily complex, outdated vocabulary and expressions that still permeates most current texts, as they are simply inappropriate for effective present day communications, for business or otherwise.

The government policy for improving universities and colleges places emphasis on practical experience, of sorts:

As part of the above-mentioned policy, the MOE is urging universities to research and develop high and new technologies and commercialize them through cooperation with enterprises.

In July 1999, the government announced that in 2000, it would initiate “university-based high-tech projects” whereby schools would help develop key technologies to upgrade traditional industries and speed up rural economic development. The MOE supported this by allowing students to suspend their studies for two years to start high-tech businesses, and encouraged the participation of teachers as well. Unfortunately, these students lack market experience and have limited access to venture capital, which could limit the development of these start-ups.

In January 2000, the MOE and the Ministry of Science and Technology decided to jointly set up high-tech scientific parks on 15 campuses, similar to Zhongguancun (China’s Silicon Valley, located near Peking and Tsinghua universities). If successful, the two ministries planned to set up 100 similar parks over the next five years (http://www.chinaonline.com/refer/ministry_profiles/MOE.asp, 6/22/00).

The above-stated policy appears to foster the idea that learning theory alone is insufficient and must be supplemented with practical application ability. Extrapolation of this basic concept results in the formulation of a new Business English curriculum (see Appendix B) that places greater emphasis on practical speech production and creative problem solving, both qualities, which are necessary in the modern business sector.

⁹ Most of the English certificate and degree programs are entitled “Business English.”

We also recommend a program limited to 20 hours of classroom study per week, a significant reduction from the current 28 hours required in Chinese colleges. We are of the opinion that reducing the current classroom commitment to be more in line with the 12 to 18 hours per week, considered to be full time study in the U.S., will result in enhanced learning performance. Quality of teaching is far more important than quantity. We do not agree that the more time spent in the classroom equates with more learning. The widespread acceptance of the burgeoning distance learning industry bears witness to the validity of our position in this regard. It may result in more rote memorization but leaves little time for gestation and creative thought process and production. It is a waste of time and resources for a teacher to stand in front of a class reading from a text. Students do not mature under the current system, which treats them like primary school children, who need more guidance and structure in their lives.

We encourage departing from the educational philosophy of memorizing as much content as possible and favor teaching when, where, and how to access information as needed. There is simply too much information available in any given field to expect a single person to memorize and retain everything available or needed at any given moment. It is far better to know when to seek additional information as well as where and how. Thus, it is essential that students learn how to find information themselves. To this end, research skills need to be taught and coursework should be used in assessment.

The comments of Yam San Chee (1997), that intellectual growth occurs through creative thinking and problem solving, not rote memorization, support our contention that departure from the traditional rote memorization and regurgitation educational system is necessary for what would constitute true “modernization” of China’s educational system, particularly in the EFL/ESL context.

We agree with Kirkpatrick (2000) that “the best option for regional governments is to promote local varieties of English. Instead of spending large sums of money on importing native speaking teachers and externally developed materials, funding should be set aside for the professional development of local teachers and for the development of developing regionally appropriate ELT curricula...The curriculum of a new variety of (regional) English should reflect the lives, cultures and values of the learners....”

We also agree when Kirkpatrick (2000) states that “funding should be set aside for the professional development of local teachers and for developing regionally appropriate ELT curricula.” College teachers with business experience know the needs of their students better than anyone else. The standard college business English curriculum, although amply supported by locally produced texts, fails miserably in producing diploma students with usable business English. College English texts should be less expansive in their scope, but teachers should expect their students to be able to competently use all the material they have been taught. This is certainly untrue at present.

The continuing professional development of Chinese college teachers (lecturers, associate professors and professors) should be encouraged. Teaching excellence should be appropriately rewarded, for example through teacher training mentors and fast track promotion. Pouring money into the FE program alone is inappropriate, as it does not build up the capability of Chinese staff. After all, most FEs move on after only one year, and this has the potential to create a division between Chinese and expatriate faculty who have different philosophies, methodologies and objectives.

USE OF MODERN TECHNOLOGY AND RESOURCES

At present, English majors at Xinyang Agricultural College, and many other second- and third-tier universities and colleges, do not have access to a campus computer lab, despite the requirement that they pass a basic computing exam in order to graduate. Their teachers are also effectively English

computer illiterate, despite the requirement that they must learn the use of computers by the end of 2003 (see “Teachers’ Influence on Students’ Success at College” earlier in this chapter).

Students at Xinyang Agricultural College who wish to use a computer at present must go off campus and pay 2 RMB per hour. It should be stressed that these students are primarily from peasant and farm families and many have a normal daily food budget of 3 RMB. To spend two-thirds of their daily food budget on one hour of computer access creates an unacceptable economic hardship for 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 most obvious shortcoming in a Business English course designed to prepare students to work in a modern business setting. This is an unacceptable disparity, which must be rectified.

The Internet has numerous sites dedicated to augmenting EFL/ESL courses, providing free supplemental teaching materials for teachers and supplemental exercises for students. Certain textbook publishers also offer auxiliary or support Web sites to enhance the student’s learning experience. It is unfortunate that these free resources cannot be accessed by the most underprivileged and needy faculty and students within the entire higher education system. Most of the students have little experience with life outside Henan Province, as few are financially able to travel. Internet access would enable students to explore other ways of thinking and acting, and contribute to their intellectual development, thinking outside the box.

We wish to emphasize our commitment to the proposition that no English department (particularly one emphasizing business English) can be considered complete or adequate without a computer lab. We are not alone in placing such importance on computer utilization in higher education. Biola University of California has a policy statement worthy of replication:

Biola University believes that the computer is an increasingly valuable tool and that one of our educational goals should be to prepare students for a world in which the computer will continue to play a significant role.

Accordingly, it is our desire to integrate computer use into the university curriculum. Thus, the University provides access to computers for every student and requires their use in freshman English. It is the intent of the University, over time, to require the use of these computers over a wide spectrum of the curriculum (www.biola.edu).

We argue that an appropriate computer lab should be designed for 40 students to attain maximum efficiency, taking into account budget limitations for public universities. The computer system must be English language based and loaded with English only programming. Strict rules must be promulgated and enforced restricting access to English Web sites only and denial of access to pornographic and arcade game sites. In an English department with 600 students, a computer lab with only forty computers must necessarily be restricted to use by English majors exclusively. This will require a staff monitor of the lab during free use or unstructured use periods to insure that only appropriate students utilize the limited resource. English majors who lend their password to non-English majors must suffer an access denial punishment period to deter such future misconduct by themselves and others.

CLASS SIZE

Quite possibly the large classes (50 to 60 students per class) should not be our concern in light of the fact that many Chinese classes have up to 150 students (Zhichang Xu, 2001). We are mindful that in the U.S. some lecture classes are held in halls with a seating capacity of 1,000 and closed-circuit

TV broadcasts the lecture to another 1,500 students in other classrooms. It is undeniable that many lectures are well suited to this class size.

We also agree that even a computer lab class can have 150 students if the computer lab has enough computers. However, for reasons that will become imminently clear, we recommend that computer lab classes and classes with computer lab components have no more than 40 students.

An oral English class is the place where English students practice the vocabulary, pronunciation and speech production that they have learned in their reading comprehension, listening comprehension and phonetics classes. Now, consider an ESL conversation class designed for three consecutive 45-minute periods, twice a week (such as that of the Sino-Canadian Joint Program at Shanghai University of International Exchange). The actual class time is effectively 135 minutes each day; 270 minutes per week. Or, consider an ESL conversation class designed for two consecutive 45-minute periods, once a week (Xinyang Agricultural College, Henan Province), for a total of 90 minutes per week. Now further consider that this is the class where all of the learned grammatical rules, vocabulary and intensive reading are to be applied through oral practice where correction may be applied by the teacher to inappropriate pronunciation, phraseology, word choice or syntax.

In the public universities these conversation classes have an enrollment of up to 60 students. Now let us do the math. At Xinyang Agriculture College, assuming that each student needs absolutely no correction from the teacher, each student can pick-up and continue the conversation from the prior student without any lapse of time in between; then each student has exactly 1.5 minutes per week to practice what has been learned and to become proficient in the oral use of English as a second language. IMPOSSIBLE! Common sense tells us that 1.5 minutes per week is not enough time to practice anything to a point of accomplishment, particularly English as a second language.

Private business institutes in China, such as Delter Business Institute, Telfort Business Institute and Mount Royal Business Institute, limit their oral conversation classes to between 10 to 15 students, for durations of two hours per day, five days per week, and these programs are producing very capable English speakers (source: author's personal experience).

Due to budget restraints in public universities, class sizes must of necessity be larger than the private school. However, they cannot be allowed to be so large that they do not have any appreciable chance of meeting their objective. The ideal class size for a public university may be approached in this manner; if a computer lab is designed and equipped with 40 computers, then all lecture classes utilizing the computer lab should be limited to 40 students. For conversational classes, the 40 students should be divided into two groups of 20 students each.

This may be accomplished administratively or the teacher can simply assign half of the class to the computer lab while preceding with the other half of the class in the speech lab. Since all conversation classes should have a proposed computer lab component, this allows the natural division of the class into two workable groups of 20 students each, assuming the computer lab scheduling is handled efficiently.

ENGLISH CORNER

When and where English corner began in China is difficult to ascertain.¹⁰ However, it is fairly certain that it started when one Chinese English speaker met another on a street corner and started to talk to each other in English, an accidental meeting. As they spoke in this "strange language" others gathered to listen. Occasionally another English speaker would happen upon the group. As these

¹⁰ The phrase "English Corner" originated in the 1980s, and from that time people called the place for an English salon English Corner (Feng Yikun 04/02/2001, China Internet Information Center).

chance meetings grew more in intensity, they became regularly scheduled meetings on street corners, primarily where there were large parks such as circular intersections with their adjoining parks.

The purpose of English corner was for Chinese English speakers to identify with each other and to have a forum to practice their English speaking skills. As time passed, people started using English corner to make speeches. Then as the popularity of English corner grew and became institutionalized, it was transformed into just another lecture format for Friday or Saturday evening and the original purpose was lost. Now, most universities treat English corner as just another lecture forum.

A recent CCTV Channel 9 (Chinese English television channel) series featured a program about the Northwest Minorities College's English Department. Of special interest was the Saturday afternoon English corner held outdoors, in an open gazebo, in a park-like area. All of the Foreign Experts and Chinese English teachers were required to spend one hour making themselves available for the students to engage in idle chitchat or whatever the students wanted to discuss, in English of course. This college has recaptured the original spirit of English corner with a foundation of spontaneity, a little frivolity, and is a great opportunity to practice English in a friendly environment with people of a like mind.

At Xinyang Agricultural College there have been recent experiments with an English Corner format limited to questions and answers, with no introductory lecture. The increase in student participation was phenomenal and encouraging.

Languages must to be used to be learned and retained. The most effective way to do this is by integrating English speaking into the students' daily lives so that it is not something they do only once a week in conversation classes. "Of all the language arts, listening and speaking are those most often used on a daily basis at home, school and work or in the community. Skill in speaking is universally recognized as a primary indicator of a person's knowledge, skill and credibility. In person, by phone or through video, good listening and speaking skills are essential to sending, receiving and understanding messages. To understand messages spoken by others, students must be able to listen carefully, using specific techniques to clarify what they have heard. For speaking properly and making messages understood, grammar, sentence structure, tone, expression and emphasis must be part of students' repertoires." Illinois State Board of Education, (<http://www.isbe.net>)

It is unfortunate that many Chinese colleges fail to *emphasize* the need for conversational English. Colleges could deliver more confident and articulate graduates if their students were immersed in an English-speaking college environment. Language immersion is the teaching methodology utilized by many private language schools that produce much more competent English speakers than government colleges seem to produce. Students should be encouraged to think and speak in English by an appropriate example set by their faculty and staff, constantly speaking in English with their friends, by relaxing watching the CCTV9 English channel and by viewing English movies on DVD or CD.

HYPOCRISY

It is almost universal throughout Chinese universities that students are not allowed to smoke on campus while faculty and staff are not so restricted. A recent poll of students¹¹ revealed that Xinyang Agricultural College students were almost evenly divided on whether the university was within its rights to prohibit students from smoking on campus with a vote of 52% in agreement and 48% opposed. However, when asked if the university policy that disallowed students smoking was

¹¹ Survey of 211 Freshman and Sophomore Business English students at Xinyang Agricultural College in Henan Province, a rural school of approximately 5,000 students. The students are predominantly 19 or 20 years old; it should be noted that four students complained they did not like the questions because it forced them to think (Qiang/Wolff, 12/04, "Chinese University Diploma: Can Its International Image Be Improved?" *Progress in Education*, Vol. 14).

compatible with the same college allowing faculty and staff to smoke on campus, the students said that having two different rules was hypocritical by a margin of 92% saying it was hypocritical and only 8% disagreeing. A poll of students at Shanghai's Tong ji University¹² produced similar results. 51% said that the university was within its rights to restrict student smoking on campus while 70% found the policy to be hypocritical when staff and faculty are exempted from the smoking prohibition. As smoking is so widespread among Chinese men this leads to situations such as college lecturers smoking while talking to their students outside class; very much a case of "do as I say, not as I do." At XAC this double standard was compared to a father advising his son of the vices of drinking alcohol and smoking while holding a half-empty beer bottle in one hand and a burning cigarette in the other. (Do as I say, not as I do.) Many XAC students admitted to smoking on campus notwithstanding the administrative prohibition.

This double standard is an important issue when contemplating the overall integrity and effectiveness of any educational process. In conversation classes FEs stress the student's need to practice oral English at all available opportunities, including class breaks, meal times, etc. All English teachers are encouraged not to respond to student questions until they are framed in English and then to respond only in English, unless a Mandarin explanation is absolutely essential.

But time and again Chinese English speaking faculty and staff ignore this suggestion. The English department staff meetings are held in Mandarin (students passing by the open door observe this); the faculty and staff usually communicate with each other, in front of the students, in Mandarin; and even the Foreign Affairs Office English speaking staff regularly utilize Mandarin in front of the students. This is by no means unusual in Chinese higher education; it is the result of poorly trained English teachers who have not sufficiently embraced the English thought process and speech production to routinely use their L2 within their employment context.

As educators we cannot insist that students conduct themselves according to rules or suggestions that we ourselves are unwilling or unable to observe, or have no belief in (Orton, 1996). We lose our credibility as teachers. Hypocrites are neither admired nor considered authoritative.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Student evaluations should be advisory only with peer review and administrative review being determinative. Students who boycott a teacher's class should be warned to return to class or suffer a failing grade. Teachers should receive administrative support and defense.

Third-tier salaries must be brought into parity with the top tier universities so that the third-tier college can attract the best available talent and improve its academic level.

Each professor and associate professor employed by a top tier university should be required, every four years, to take a one semester teaching sabbatical to teach at a third-tier college away from a major city. This requirement is consistent with the authority, mandate and objectives stated in the announcement posted by the Ministry of Education on its Web site on 6/22/00, as cited above.

Every Ph.D. candidate at a top tier university should be required to serve a one-semester teaching internship at a third-tier college as a requirement of the doctoral program. This requirement is consistent with the authority, mandate and objectives stated in the announcement posted by the Ministry of Education on its Web site on 6/22/00, as cited above.

A continuing education program should be designed and implemented to ensure that all college teachers are trained in state-of-the-art teaching methodologies and are aware of teaching materials

¹² Survey of forty-three 20- to 22-year-old English students at Shanghai's Tong ji University (Qiang/Wolff, 12/04, "Chinese University Diploma: Can Its International Image Be Improved?" *Progress in Education*, Vol. 14).

available for their use, both on and off line. This will ensure that college teaching is continually updated so that it meets the needs of college students.

Course syllabuses should be based on the likely needs of students when they enter the workforce. It is essential that the current system of prioritizing a smooth passage through college for every student, regardless of whether or not they have any understanding of the course material, be changed. Course syllabuses should be truly designed for college students, not the watered-down theoretical university courses taught at present. Assessment methodologies should be realistic and relevant. This will ensure that employers can be confident that new college graduates have a solid grasp of English and a practical understanding of business.

We endorse the casual or informal conversation format for English corner and suggest that the lecture format be abandoned, even if a few token questions are allowed at the end of the lecture. Students must be encouraged to think and speak in English, and not confine practicing oral English to the limited time available in structured oral English classes.

We are convinced that any modern business English curriculum must include computer training and Internet access. There is an urgent need to improve the computer literacy of college students, through incorporation of Information Technology, in every aspect of the college curriculum.

It is essential that students have continuous access to computer facilities. The computer lab must be for the exclusive use of the English department and every class, where practical, should include a computer lab component. Today's local and global business is conducted in a computer environment with correspondence, reports, market research and even marketing sales and distribution being conducted on-line. A business English program without including computer training is simply not credible.

We strongly suggest that class size is appropriate to the class format. For example, in computer classes each student must have their own computer. In conversation classes, the maximum group size should be 20, so that each student can interact with the teacher. Many more students can attend a lecture, as student-teacher interaction is minimal.

Textbooks and teaching materials must be current, relevant, interesting and challenging to the target student consumers.

The English department faculty and staff must set the proper example by creating an environment of language immersion which implements the constant utilization of English as the primary language of daily usage.

CONCLUSION

Based upon our preliminary research and combined experiences, we conclude that it is entirely possible to obtain a first-class education at a third-tier college, within current budget constraints, if the third-tier college adopts the educational philosophy that each student is entitled to an educational experience that allows for maximum development of each individual student's particular ability.

The unstated undertone that third-tier students are a necessary but undesirable drain on society's educational resources must be transformed into a positive educational approach to maximizing each student's personal potential so that they may each contribute to society as much as they are capable.

Unless we can produce skilled graduates equipped with the business tools they need to succeed in a highly competitive job market, our graduates will join the ranks of the 20% of Chinese top-tier graduates from the 2002 group of graduates who were still unemployed 10 months subsequent to graduation (CCTV Ch 9, April 15, 2003, "College Graduates' Employment Prospects"). With China producing 2.5 million university and college graduates each year (with increasing numbers every year [Qiang/Wolff, 2003]), it is our conclusion that the third-tier college students must get a first-class education or continue to be relegated to the ranks of mere day laborers, as observed by the Xinyang

Agricultural College student who inquired: “What use is a degree from this college when I can only get a job as a laborer?”

APPENDIX A

Due to the nature of the historical development of education in modern China, defining a top tier, second-tier and third-tier institution of higher education in China is a convoluted matter, capable of supporting a separate journal article. We are not dealing with a rule subject to exceptions but rather exceptions, which overtake any rule. Simply stated, there are no universal criteria. The recognized criterion includes the level of government administration, the level of government financing, the level of students admitted, the level of faculty employed, as well as the history and reputation of the school. Top tier colleges and universities cater to the elite top 10% of the potential freshman class. While there are some general determinative guidelines, the final determination is left to the court of public opinion.

In China there are separate classifications for colleges, technical colleges, training colleges, vocational colleges, universities, TV universities, institutes and academies. Rankings are based upon the level of government supervision or management authority over the institution; the primary governmental source of funding; the quality of students accepted for enrollment; the geographical areas from which students may be accepted; the certificate or degree granting authority; the authority or law establishing the institution; its history and reputation; the quality of the faculty; the size of its campus, its total student enrollment; the ratio of Ph.D. faculty and full professors; and the extent and quality of its labs and other facilities. Top-tier universities are usually located in the cosmopolitan cities of Beijing or Shanghai.

All comprehensive universities under the direct administrative authority of the Central Government, Ministry of Education, are top tier; while only some colleges and institutes under that direct authority are top tier, based upon their long history, community reputation, the quality of students, and quality of faculty. All of these top tier colleges and universities have the authority to grant doctorates and masters degrees.

Comprehensive universities under the administration of provincial governments are second tier. Comprehensive universities under local municipal administration are third tier. Comprehensive universities at all levels are required to have an area of 1,000 mu, 10,000 students, and a specific ratio of professors, associate professors, lecturers and Ph.D.s or they remain colleges.

Provincial colleges are under the administrative authority of a provincial government and provide technical training. They may grant a two or three-year certificate, four-year diplomas, four-year bachelor's degrees, seven year master's degrees, and some may grant nine-year doctorates. Professional training colleges grant three-year diplomas. A top-tier provincial college has the authority to grant a doctorate degree and is usually located in a provincial capital city. All others are second tier. These colleges are primarily funded at the provincial level but they also receive some financial support from the provincial government and sometimes from the Central Government.

Municipal colleges (as distinguished from municipal universities) are under the administrative authority of a local municipal government and grant three-year special technical certificates or four-year bachelor degrees. These colleges are primarily funded at the municipal level but they also receive some financial support from the provincial government and sometimes from the Central Government.

Vocational colleges are professional training institutions administered at both the provincial and municipal levels, with corresponding funding, but primarily they are municipal. These colleges grant three-year diplomas and four-year bachelor degrees. Ministry of Education, are top tier; while only some colleges and institutes under that direct authority are top tier, based upon their long history,

community reputation, the quality of students, and quality of faculty. All of these top tier universities have the authority to grant doctorates and masters degrees.

Some comprehensive universities or colleges under the administrative authority of other Central Government Ministries may be top tier depending upon their long history, community reputation, quality of students and quality of faculty. Those that are top tier may grant doctorate and masters degrees. The other ministry institutions that are second tier may also grant doctorate or masters degrees.

Professional training colleges grant three-year diplomas. A top tier provincial college has the authority to grant a doctorate degree. All others are second tier. These colleges are primarily funded at the provincial level but they also receive some financial support from the provincial government and sometimes from the Central Government.

Institutes are highly specialized colleges or universities granting bachelor and masters degrees and doctorate in agriculture, medicine, science, law, technical subjects, music, language, and physical training. These institutes are administered at the national (top-tier), provincial (second-tier), and municipal (second-tier and third-tier) levels with corresponding financial support. However, provincial institutes may be top tier based upon long history, community reputation, quality of students, and quality of faculty.

TV University is a unique higher educational system financed by the Central Government and can issue certificates, diplomas and bachelors. They have schools administered at provincial (second-tier), municipal (third-tier) and branch (fourth-tier) levels.

Academies are military schools with Central Government financing from the army and may be first tier, second tier and third tier based upon the type of training offered and the types of degrees granted.

APPENDIX B

Proposed Curriculum (New) Bachelor of Arts in Business English

First Year

1. * Introduction to Business 2 hrs. (lecture)
 2. Reading Comprehension 2 hrs.
 3. Listening Comprehension 2 hrs. lab
 4. Introduction to Computers 2 hrs lab
 5. * Oral Communication lab (National/International Issues) 4 hrs.
 6. Core courses 8 hours
- 20 hours total per week

Second Year

1. Business Written Communications 2 hrs. classroom plus 1 hr. computer lab
- 2.* Business oral communication lab (local issues, i.e., tourism etc.) 4 hrs.
- 3.* Research, writing and study skills (Computer lab) 3 hrs.
4. Reading Comprehension 2 hrs.
5. Listening Comprehension 2 hrs. lab
6. Core and elective courses 6 hours

20 hours total per week

Third Year

1. Basics of Accounting 2 hrs. classroom plus 1 hr. computer lab
2. * Business law/International negotiating (Lecture) 2 hrs. classroom
3. * Oral communication lab (International Business Issues) 4 hrs.
4. Computer lab 5 hrs. (Word, Excel, Power Point)
5. * International Business 2 hrs. plus 1 hr. computer lab
6. Core courses and electives 4 hours

20 hours total per week

Fourth Year

1. * Marketing (lecture) 2 hrs. classroom plus 2 hr. computer lab
2. * Human Resource Management (lecture) 2 hrs. classroom plus 2 hr. computer lab
3. * E Commerce 3 hrs. computer lab
4. * Debating/Public Speaking 4 hrs. classroom plus 1 hr. computer lab
5. Core courses and electives 4 hours

Externship Program one semester

20 hours total per week

* Denotes courses that should be taught by Foreign Experts.

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