

CHINA EFL: Foreign teacher needed

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“A message needs to be sent to incoming teachers that China is a developing country and that its students need well-trained and reliable people to teach them English as the nation moves forward. It is lamentable that some foreigners coming to China are only looking out for a quick travel opportunity.”ⁱ

We disagree with the above quote to the extent the article claims that “some” foreign teachers come to China with the primary purpose of travel rather than a dedication to teaching. It is our view, based upon a combined 12 years teaching experience in China, that it would have been more appropriate to use the word “most.”

The problem has been documented previously.ⁱⁱ The problem does not lie with the foreign teachers; it lies with the Chinese recruiting process.ⁱⁱⁱ

On July 15, 2008, we found no fewer than 864 web advertisements recruiting foreign teachers to *experience* China, *travel* China, *learn the culture* of China before ever mentioning that while doing these fun things, the vacation must, of necessity, be interrupted for a little English teaching. The following is an example:

“Have you always wanted to explore China in depth – going beyond the guidebooks and tourist attractions? Are you looking for a career advantage through connections and experience in the fastest growing economic power? This program has been developed to meet the incredible demand for English language teachers in China. It is a unique program giving people the opportunity to work as an English teacher in China while learning about the culture, studying the Chinese language and also having the opportunity to travel around China.”^{iv}

Clearly the message being conveyed to prospective foreign teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in China is that China is a great place for a paid vacation.

“Unfortunately, there have been cases in which native English speakers have turned out to be poor teachers in oral English classes because they have no teaching experience or teaching training. In these cases, the students may simply have some listening practice or gain little at all if the teacher speaks non-standard English or always speaks too fast for the students to comprehend.”^v

The reason for this is simply that there is an unfounded belief in China that anyone who can speak English can teach English. Teaching English is not considered a profession.^{vi}

On July 16, 2008 we found no fewer than 670 web advertisements offering English teaching jobs in China with no experience required, in direct contravention of the two years teaching experience required by SAFEA, the government regulatory agency. The following is a representative advertisement.

“Travel to China to Teach English (No experience needed)
Employer: Linyi University.”^{vii}

Since we began writing about this problem back in 2003, nothing has improved in the intervening 5 years. If anything, things have gotten worse. In China’s zeal to place a foreign teacher of English in every classroom from kindergarten through university, demand has outstripped supply. Due to the acute shortage of L1 (native) English speakers, qualified or unqualified; China has resorted to recruiting L2 (non-native) English speakers to teach English. We first observed this phenomenon in 2005 when we found ourselves with colleagues from Africa, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Russia and Mexico.

But even this could not satisfy China’s insatiable appetite for foreign teachers of English so foreign exchange students have been pressed into service as teachers of English while completing their Chinese studies.

We have previously questioned the wisdom of placing a foreign teacher of English in every classroom.^{viii} We have suggested recruiting only qualified L1 teachers with proper EFL training, as opposed to a quickie 30 TEFL certificate, and the required 2 years experience teaching EFL. These foreign teachers should be recruited to the Normal Universities where China’s future teachers are taught. These universities should also develop continuing education programs for the more than 1,000,000 million Chinese teachers of English who are not competent enough to teach in the target language, English.

But the real problem lies much deeper and is rooted in just plain wrong thinking about what a foreign teacher of English can accomplish. Somehow 2nd language acquisition theory has been misinterpreted and misapplied. It is believed that if a foreign teacher of English is in the classroom for 90 minutes each week, somehow that creates an English speaking environment^{ix} and implements the communicative approach. Although this has proven untrue for the past 20 years, it is continued; possibly in the belief that eventually it will be successful.

There is so much emphasis on the foreigner in the classroom that teaching materials are extremely limited. Most texts are for teaching set phrases or speech patterns. No matter how well taught, this does not lead to students acquiring English proficiency or enable them to produce comprehensible output.^x We can teach a parrot set phrases or program robots, but neither satisfies the needs of 2nd language acquisition.

Some schools provide no teaching materials but ask the foreign teacher to supply their own from their native country. This is absurd since the foreign teacher knows nothing about the Chinese student, their cultural background, their traditional learning methodology, their English level or the teaching environment. When foreign teachers point out these problems in selecting proper materials to bring to China, more than one foreign affairs officer has asked if the foreign teacher has a guitar they can bring. As a last resort when the foreign teacher does not play the guitar and can't play the role of a white monkey; the foreign teacher is told to "just come and chat with our students."

"Exactly what will we chat about?" replies the foreign teacher. "There is a cultural gap, an education gap, an age gap, and we have nothing in common to chat about." The FAO replies "that is OK. Just tell them about your culture." The foreign teacher replies "But that is a lecture and the class is oral English." Now the foreign teacher has stepped over the line and is identified as "troublesome" and the job offer disappears.

In reality, the foreign teacher is not considered a professional but either an entertainer or lecturer. Now imagine an oral English class of 40 or more students, where the students are supposed to practice their oral English with the foreign teacher for 90 minutes each week at the university level. That amounts to a lot of guitar playing or lectures on foreign culture but what does this have to do with the students practicing their oral English?

Even a well trained and experienced foreign teacher has conceptual and implementation problems with a class of 40 for 90 minutes a week. This is consistent with the Chinese belief that English can be taught in the same manner as any other discipline but it completely ignores the real import of modern 2nd language acquisition theory.

There is an English expression "You get what you pay for." China pays university level foreign teachers of English, on average, 5,000 rmb per month. With an exchange rate of US\$1.00 – 7 rmb, that amounts to a salary of US\$ 740 per month. Yes, you do get what you pay for.


As we have written previously, China does not need to refine its EFL program; it needs a major overhaul starting with the basic philosophy and a restatement of the goals and objectives.


i English Teachers Wanted: Who Is Teaching China's Youth? (China.org.cn by Chris Dalby, October 20, 2006) <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2006/Oct/185393.htm> accessed Tuesday  July 15, 2008

ii China ESL: An Industry Run A Muck, (2003), Qiang/Wolff, <http://www.usingenglish.com/esl-in-china/esl-amuck.pdf>

CHINA EFL: The Unqualified, Teaching (sic) The Unmotivated, In A Hostile Environment (2005) Qiang/Wolff, <http://www.usingenglish.com/esl-in-china/unqualified-teaching.pdf>

iii CHINA EFL/ESL JOBS: A Case of False Advertising, (2005) Qiang/Wolff <http://www.usingenglish.com/esl-in-china/false-ads.pdf>

iv <http://www.ccusa.hu/ttc/index.html> accessed Tuesday  July 15, 2008

v How Can a Chinese Teacher of English Succeed in Oral English Classes?, Zhou Jie, The Internet TESL Journal, Vol. V, No. 7, July 1999, <http://iteslj.org/Articles/Zhou-SuccessfulTeacher.html> accessed Tuesday  July 15, 2008

vi ENGLISH OR CHINGLISH? ((2003) Qiang/Wolff <http://www.usingenglish.com/esl-in-china/goals-and-objectives.pdf>

vii Please visit <http://en.lytu.edu.cn/> for more information. <http://shreveport.craigslis.org/edu/743117727.html> accessed Tuesday  July 15, 2008

viii "Linguistic Failures" (3/04) Qiang/Wolff, Parábola Editorial of RuaClemente Pereira, 327 – Ipiranga 04216-060 São Paulo, SP, BRAZIL <http://www.usingenglish.com/esl-in-china/linguistic-failures.pdf>

CAN YOU GET A FIRST CLASS EDUCATION AT A THIRD TIER COLLEGE IN CHINA? (2003) Qiang/Wolff/Teng/ Gregory <http://www.usingenglish.com/esl-in-china/first-class-education.pdf>

CHINA EFL: The Unqualified, Teaching (sic) The Unmotivated, In A Hostile Environment (2005) Qiang/Wolff, <http://www.usingenglish.com/esl-in-china/unqualified-teaching.pdf>

ix China EFL: Why Chinese Universities Do Not Provide an English Speaking Environment (2008) Qiang/Wolff <http://www.usingenglish.com/esl-in-china/china-efl2.pdf>

x China EFL: Holistic English, The revolution has begun but the long march lies ahead (2008) Qiang/Teng/Wolff <http://www.usingenglish.com/esl-in-china/holistic-english-1.pdf>