

# **A NEW CHINESE PUZZLE**

**Martin Wolff, China Foreign Expert**

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## **QUESTION:**

What Chinese industry has been around for at least 30 years; targets children; bleeds over 2 billion \$ from the Chinese economy annually; employs more than 1.0 million Chinese and approximately 250,000 foreigners; provides no nutritional value; contributes little or nothing to the development of a better off - harmonious society; and puts more than 5.0 million defective products into the stream of commerce every year?

## **ANSWER:**

No, the correct answer is not McDonald's.

The correct answer is Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL).

## **IN THE BEGINNING**

It all began when a misguided U.S. President Richard M. Nixon met with Chairman Mao in 1972, for the express purpose of opening China's vast market of 2 billion plus people to western profit seeking business interests.<sup>1</sup> Little did he realize that in actuality, he was opening the west to Chinese Government owned monopolies who would flood the west with cheap Chinese export products and in the process amass great fortunes at the expense of western economies<sup>2</sup>. The great U.S.A. came to rely on China to purchase its treasury bonds to finance its wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and to fund the economic recovery stimulus package of 2009.<sup>3</sup>

In 1978 China officially opened its door to the west. Shortly thereafter the first wave of native English speakers entered China to teach in China's universities.<sup>4</sup> With the 1991 fall of the USSR<sup>5</sup> and 1987 recognition of China by the USA's President Carter;<sup>6</sup> ENGLISH FEVER descended upon China like a plague; spreading from east to west,

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret MacMillan, (2006) *Seize The Hour: When Nixon Met Mao*, John Murray Publishers

<sup>2</sup> China.Org.Cn, *China's World-Largest Forex Reserves - Not Just About the Money* (2006)  
<http://japanese.china.org.cn/english/2006/Apr/165139.htm> accessed July 7, 2009

<sup>3</sup> China.Org.Cn, *China buys US\$14.9b of US treasury bonds*, (2008)  
[http://china.org.cn/business/2008-09/19/content\\_16505870.htm](http://china.org.cn/business/2008-09/19/content_16505870.htm)

<sup>4</sup> Mark Salzman (1986), *Iron and Silk*, Random House

<sup>5</sup> Martin McCauley, (2007) *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union*, Longman

<sup>6</sup> *Carter Opens Ties With China*, *The Ledger*,  
<http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=Ts0SAAAAIBAJ&sjid=pvoDAAAAIBAJ&pg=6648,6151&dq=china+1978> (1978) (accessed July 5, 2009)

north to south, invading every school from kindergarten to university and spawning a new brand of Joint Venture higher education schools.<sup>7</sup>

## **WHY?**

Previously, when China believed that the USSR would become the post-WW II economic and military super-power of the world, most Chinese universities taught Russian language. This abruptly changed when China and Russia had a political falling out and the reality of the U.S.A.'s rise to the number one position was foretold by Chairman Mao's world famous handshake with President Nixon and the subsequent demise of the USSR. Chinese teachers of Russian were retrained to teach English, with Russian language remaining in only a few key universities in Heilongjiang Province and Beijing. English became the rage all over China.

Learning English became a National obsession.

Private EFL/ESL schools (kindergartens, primary, middle, high and college) have proliferated to such an extent that according to statistics from the Education, Science, Culture and Health Committee of the NPC, about 54,000 private schools had been set up in China by the end of 2000, with 6.93 million registered students. (People's Daily, 5/23/01).

The teaching of English as a Foreign/Second Language (EFL/ESL) in China has become a nationwide endeavor pursued at all academic levels, from the kindergarten to the University. In the past ten years there has been an explosion in the development of public school English programs and private English language schools throughout China. EFL/ESL has become very big business in China (China Daily, HK Edition, October 9, 2002.) Reports show that ESL has become a 10-billion yuan business in China. Of the 37 billion yuan annual book sales, ESL takes up as much as 25% of the market share. And a few ESL teachers in Shanghai command an hourly rate of 1,000 yuan (US\$120). Even on average, a student pays 10-20 yuan (US\$1.2-2.4) for one hour of ESL training.

China's reasons for learning English were well summed up twenty years ago by a team from the U.S. International Communication Agency after visiting five cities and many educational institutions in China: "The Chinese view English primarily as a necessary tool which can facilitate access to modern scientific and technological advances, and secondarily as a vehicle to promote commerce and understanding between the People's Republic of China and countries where English is a major language" (Cowan et al., 1979).<sup>8</sup> <http://www.iatefl.org/content/newsletter/155.php> (accessed July 14, 2009)

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<sup>7</sup> China Moves Toward Establishing Joint-Venture Universities, China Daily (2002) <http://mdjnkj.china.com.cn/english/2002/Mar/28035.htm> (accessed July 1, 2009)

<sup>8</sup> Cowan, J., Light, R., Mathews, B. and Tucker, G. 1979. English teaching in China: a recent survey. TESOL Quarterly 12, 4, 465-482.

At first blush, it may appear admirable that China has so wholeheartedly made such a concerted effort to adopt English, the international language of commerce, as its second language. On October 24, 2002, Zang Xinsheng, Vice-Minister of the Ministry of Education reportedly said: "With China's accession to the World Trade Organization and the approaching Olympics in 2008 more than ever is it a priority for young Chinese to learn and improve their language skills" (China Daily, 10/25/02). The same article states "Beijing is striving to reach its goal of teaching citizens to speak English to improve its image as an international metropolis." Beijing wants its 13 million residents to speak English to enhance its image as a cosmopolitan metropolis (China Daily, 10-05-02). China's Ministry of Education wants all young people of China to learn English due to China's WTO membership and China's hosting the 2008 Olympics (China Daily, 10-05-02). Certain municipal governments in China require all of their civil servants to learn some English (China Daily, 10/05/02)

These goals or objectives beg the question, WHY?

Market studies, market analysis and affirmative recommendations from experts in the fields of business, math and linguistics should support each of the forgoing propositions, but do not appear to have been conducted.

What is the mathematical probability that each of Beijing's 13 million or so residents will need to be able to speak English for an intended or even accidental encounter with a single English speaking foreigner during the 2008 Olympics? Probably not very high.

Does a market study support the proposition that Beijing's image will be enhanced in the eyes of foreigners if all the residents of Beijing can speak English? Further, would such image enhancement translate into increased economic benefit for Beijing? If so, how much economic benefit will accrue to Beijing and does it offset the social, cultural and political costs that must be paid along the way by the people of Beijing? These questions do not appear to have been addressed by any formal study.

How many bilingual (Chinese-English) jobs will actually be created in China due to China's World Trade Organization (WTO) membership and hosting the 2008 Olympics? Does the number of new jobs requiring English support the need for all of China's young people to learn English? Answers to these questions are not readily available. And about the bilingual jobs created by the 2008 Olympics: How long will they last? A few months? Why should someone spend three or four years studying English in College for a job in 2008 that will only last a few months? Post Olympics what becomes of these Chinese English speakers? What is the mathematical probability that all municipal government civil servants, in any particular Chinese municipality, will need to use English in their daily work? Very slim.

## **THE TEFL CURRICULUM**

The entire English curriculum is based upon learning to the exclusion of acquisition.

English is taught in 4 separate, distinct and disconnected courses, i.e. reading, listening, writing .and speaking. The entire emphasis is on memorization; memorizing extensive lists of English words, memorizing extensive set phrases; and memorizing pronunciations.

Not even the slightest attention is paid to Krashen's 2<sup>nd</sup> language acquisition theory or immersion, or any other 2<sup>nd</sup> language acquisition theory.

There is no disagreement that the results are dismal. China produces over 5.0 million college graduates every year. Most of them have learned English for 16 years but are unable to produce comprehensible English output. Those fortunate enough to matriculate to graduate studies are further compelled to engage in additional English study, no matter what their major. This is because their undergraduate English study was only adequate to pass the National English Proficiency examinations but they remain functionally illiterate, unable to produce comprehensible oral or written English. At the post-graduate level, the same pedagogy and methodology that failed for 16 years is utilized for another semester, in the hope that it will work.

Chinese college graduates know more about English than most native speakers. Unfortunately, they can't use a language that they have studied for 16 years. This is a terrible waste of time and resources. In the west it would amount to a National disgrace.

In China, TEFL employs more than 1.0 million Chinese teachers of English.<sup>9</sup> Less than 40,000 of these teachers are accomplished enough in English to teach English using English. Imagine,<sup>10</sup> 960,000 Chinese teachers of English who teach English in Chinese. UNBELIEVABLE. It is no wonder that the Chinese students can't produce comprehensible English when their teachers can't.

## **REFORM IS ESSENTIAL**

The goal of universities and colleges throughout China is to have students pass national English competency examinations such as TEM 4, CET 4 and CET 6. Setting aside, for the moment, the fact that these national English competency examinations bear little or no relationship to comprehensible output, the pass rates have become the exclusive focus of administrative attention and false pride. This is in part due to demands of Chinese employers who are misinformed that passing CET 6 is the evidence of an accomplished English speaker<sup>11</sup>. Wang Shugua, President of Harbin Institute of Technology is quoted as saying "I recognize CET as a good tool to promote English studies but I am against the

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<sup>9</sup> MacArthur, (2003) English as an Asian Language, English Today

<sup>10</sup> Qiang/Wolff/Teng (2009) Chapter 13 China EFL: Holistic English: The Revolution Has Begun, but the Long March Lies Ahead, China EFL: Curriculum Reform, page 160, Nova Science Publishers

<sup>11</sup> Yuankai, Tang, 9/6/07 Beijing Review, Education Feared to Raise Robots [http://www.bjreview.com.cn/special/txt/2007-08/31/content\\_74644.htm](http://www.bjreview.com.cn/special/txt/2007-08/31/content_74644.htm) (accessed July 10, 2008)

practice of regarding a CET certificate as the prerequisite for graduation, which is totally misleading.” He tried to eliminate the requirement for a CET certificate in order to graduate from HIT, but gave up without success. "I had to reconsider the usefulness of CET certificates in job hunting for our graduates. Almost all employers want their recruits to have a CET certificate, so I had to push my students to pass the CET for their good, although it is against my will,"<sup>12</sup>

The market need to have graduates who can produce comprehensible English output has been completely ignored. Consequently, foreign employers, Joint Venture employers and Chinese companies doing business abroad are hiring university graduates from India because they are better able to produce comprehensible oral and written English, than their Chinese counterparts. Imagine more than 5 million Chinese university graduates, who have learned English for 16 years, many of whom are being passed over for Chinese jobs in China. This is simply unacceptable! English is one of “*the 10 most popular disciplines that saw low rates of employment last year.*”<sup>13</sup> Chinese universities are under tremendous pressure to change curriculums to meet the needs of the job market. But instead, they are simply reducing enrollments in certain majors.<sup>14</sup> “One of the reasons for the difficulty in university graduates finding employment is that they are unable to satisfy the needs of employers,” he said. (Yang Weiguo, associate professor of Beijing-based Renmin University) He said the universities needed to adjust their teaching methods and content quickly to conform to social development and demand.<sup>15</sup>

Both “in house” and private corporate English training centers are proliferating throughout the business hubs of China. The curriculum is usually industry specific and amounts to ESP (English for a specific purpose), i.e. the teaching of technical language and phrases to meet the perceived need to limit English communication to a standard or formal form of English related to a specific discipline such as medical English, legal English, architecture English, IT English, etc..

. “While there is a need for specialist terminology, the greatest need of international employers is to have employees who can communicate successfully in English. Thus, communication and accommodation should be emphasized in language instruction; the mastering of perfect grammatical forms is an added bonus that can be reserved for later refinement. Flexibility is just as important as the mastering of prescribed forms, if not more so. In order to communicate across international boundaries, students must learn to adjust to their interlocutor in order to facilitate understanding. Moreover, because of the

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12 Beijing Review., Education Feared to Raise Robots [http://www.bjreview.com.cn/special/txt/2007-08/31/content\\_74644.htm](http://www.bjreview.com.cn/special/txt/2007-08/31/content_74644.htm) (accessed July 10, 2008)

13 [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2008-06/27/content\\_6799171.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2008-06/27/content_6799171.htm)

Beijing-based survey company Mycos HR (accessed May 1, 2009)

14 Hot courses' won't secure good jobs(Xinhua News Agency January 12, 2008) [http://www.china.org.cn/china/national/2008-01/12/content\\_1239129.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/china/national/2008-01/12/content_1239129.htm) (accessed October 10, 2008)

15 20% university graduates fail to find jobs in 2007 (Xinhua News Agency January 14, 2008) <http://www.china.org.cn/english/China/239233.htm> (Accessed October 1, 2008)

growing use of English as a global lingua franca, students of the language need to be exposed to a wide range of English accents in order to increase their abilities to understand the people they are likely to encounter in an international career. Furthermore, it is not only formal but informal language skills that should be practiced at university; students should be made aware of the different genres and registers in English, so that they can determine the appropriate use of the language in the various situations in which they are likely to find themselves .... Finally, students should be taught skills that allow them to mediate between languages and cultures. Thus an intercultural approach is needed in language teaching, so that future employees are 'able to view different cultures from a perspective of informed understanding' (Corbett 2003:2)<sup>16</sup> An approach that has the goal of successful intercultural communication at its core will prepare students for the relatively unpredictable needs of language use in corporate Europe."<sup>17</sup>

### **REFORM IS IMPOSSIBLE**

Wholesale reform of the TEFL curriculum is impossible under current circumstances. There are simply too many vested interests in English learning. It begins with the National English Proficiency examinations. Graduation and employment decisions rely heavily on passage of these tests. A school's academic standing depends upon the pass rate for these tests. These examinations primarily test knowledge about English and memorization skills. They do not adequately test functional literacy<sup>18</sup>. The authors of these tests have a vested economic interest in residuals every time the tests are used. Although some famous Chinese linguists have criticized the tests<sup>19</sup> as inaccurate and irrelevant; the supporters launched a strong defense.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Corbett, J. 2003, *An intercultural Approach to English Language Teaching*, Clevedon & Buffalo: Multilingual Matters

<sup>17</sup> Erling and Walton 2007, *English at work in Berlin*, *English Today* Volume 23 Number 1

<sup>18</sup> Wang/ Zhou (4/2005) *A Validation of CET For Testing Communicative Competence ....*, *CELEA Journal* Vol. 28 No. 2

<sup>17</sup> Wang/ Zhou (4/2005) *A Validation of CET For Testing Communicative Competence ....*, *CELEA Journal* Vol. 28 No. 2;

Niu Qiang, (April. 2001) "Problems in Current College English Tests in China " in *FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND RESEARCH* VOL. 33 NO. 2.

Authors' names 牛 强, date 2001 年3 月第33 卷 第2 期, Article name

《现行高校英语测试中的问题》, *Journal 外语教学与研究(外国语文双月刊)*

The Issues In The Current College English Test

Niu Qiang

*Foreign Language Teaching and Research* (bimonthly)

Mar. 2001 Vol. 33 No. 2

<sup>20</sup> Kang/Chen (2005) *Testing The Test: Aspects of CET 4 Revisited*, *CELEA Journal* Vol. 28 No. 2

Authors' names 辜向东, Article name 怀疑与误解—评《文汇报》文章“要素还是应试”

*Journal 外语界*, Date 2002年 第 6 期(总第92期)

Gu Xiangdong, (2002) *Suspicion and Misunderstanding -A Review of the article "To the Quality or the Test" in Wen Wei Po*, *Foreign Language World*, No. 6 2002 (General Serial No.92)

There are literally thousands of textbooks written by Chinese scholars intended to assist students in passing the National tests. The scholars receive economic royalties on the sale of their books. Some include foreign coauthors or editors but these are mainly window dressing.

Less than a handful of State Owned Publishing Houses, usually attached to a famous university, have a monopoly on publishing texts for English study. They have a great deal invested in publishing English learning texts. They have no motivation to publish English acquisition texts because Chinese scholars have no motivation to write them because they are perceived as useless in passing the National examinations and they would not conform to the curriculum designed to support the tests. The test authors have no motivation to change the tests.

Chinese teachers of English have no time to acquaint themselves with acquisition theory, pedagogy or methodology and they have no incentive to do so. Plus they are limited by the students' need to pass the National examinations.

When suggesting reform of an industry generating more than 2.0 billion \$ a year, one must necessarily tread very lightly.

The native English speaker is utilized as little more than an encourager as opposed to a real language teacher.

[http://www.networkesl.com/english/web/48\\_73.html](http://www.networkesl.com/english/web/48_73.html) (accessed 7/15/09)

## **SOLVING THE CHINESE PUZZLE**

For those unfamiliar with China, the obvious answer may be to simply have the National Ministry of Education hand down an edict that acquisition must become a part of the EFL curriculum. Nothing in China is that simple. China is much more complicated than “One China – Two Systems.”

When Beijing speaks, not everyone is required to listen. China has 2 SAR's, 7 semi-autonomous regions and 4 semi-autonomous municipalities. These areas are basically immune to National mandates. They can take or leave Beijing's advice with certain limitations. Even the Provinces have a great deal of freedom through their provincial Departments of Education.

Reforming TEFL in China is a monumental task, sort of like eating an elephant. Of course the only way to eat an elephant is one bite at a time. Possibly the way to reform TEFL in China is one teacher at a time, one classroom at a time, one school at a time, one province at a time. A much quicker way would be to reform or do away with the National English proficiency examinations. Or, find a cure for English fever.

## CONCLUSION

### **QUESTION:**

How can TEFL in China be reformed to graduate students who can produce comprehensible oral and written English?

### **ANSWER:**

That is the 2 billion \$ question.  
If I knew I would surely tell you!

## **SOLUTIONS FROM THE PUZZLE MASTERS**

### **The following are unedited attributions:**

The only magic process I've ever seen to work is the total immersion into L2 for at least a year (as I did). I started to seriously learn English at age 18 a few months before I emigrated to Canada. (True, in Austria, we all had English for four years "in der Hauptschule" but with the same dismal success as China has). After arrival in Canada, after a brief survey of what works and what doesn't, I decided to stay away from all German-spoken people for at least a year, which I did. Actually, I neither called nor wrote home to my family in Austria for almost two years . . . with the result that I learned to sound like a native Canadian, even without going to school. If the Chinese did something similar, meaning working in an English-only environment while living in an English-only community with a native roommate, they would also acquire English the way I did . . . the way natives do . . . through role modeling what they hear.

Can that be done without leaving China? I think it could in a convoluted sort of way, but the easier answer would be to simply have a youngster commit to the use of "English only" for at least a year, somewhere, preferably in an industrial environment--learning some marketable skills, rather than a scholastic one--to acquire more (questionably useful) knowledge.

The second important solution: China needs to put more emphasis on the value of learning skills if she wants to remain a role model to the world. Yes, knowledge, per se, has been the West's major export over the last fifty years; yet, as valuable as it was a few years ago, with the advent of the Internet, knowledge has become a public commodity . . . it has virtually lost its market value. If Chinese students would start to use the English section of their library more, they would discover this for themselves. In fact, to me, it seemed almost criminal how little research was done by our NCC students here at NJU last year. But this mindset is not likely to change while the powers to be focus on the passing of "knowledge" tests rather than the acquisition of comprehensible output (by both teachers and students). Joe Anthony Blum, MA TESOL

For those of us who have been around for awhile and have seen the fruits of China's foreign language program, it is obvious that what the Chinese really want is for

the rest of the world to learn Chinese. Absolutely you can quote me. In fact, I just went on record with that position in a MKL promotional article I wrote for [EzineArticles.com](http://EzineArticles.com) ([Teaching English in China—Debunking the Myths](#)).

New Oriental as well as English First have both added Chinese language programs for foreigners. Even my former boss at Hainan YuDa has applied for an educational license to teach Chinese to foreigners. Of course, Chinese universities have been doing this for awhile but now everyone is going to get in on the act. At least it's honest.

As disorganized as the mainland Chinese government is, if they really wanted their populace to speak English, they would be speaking English by now. The whole thing was just for show in preparation for the 2008 Olympic Games, just to prove how "international" China really is (a point you have made numerous times). There was never any real intent. That's obvious based on the result. Gregory Mavrides, PhD, China Foreign Expert

As for the "Puzzle" you mentioned, it is really a puzzle for me, and also for lots of Chinese teachers of English, I think. However, the puzzle stems from a variety of factors, such as economic, military, political, technical, scientific development and the change of the world, I think. CET-4 or CET-6 can not shoulder all the blame and responsibility. In fact, English as a foreign language, has been raised to a higher position because of CET-4 and CET-6, without which many students of science may choose to put more time on their majors though it may not be a bad thing..... So, you see, it's really a puzzle. Jane Li, Chinese teacher of English

I don't think any of us can change China. However, we can all change the corner where we work. Each year I train teachers and a whole district has now given me a document that through my effort they have a large pool of good local English teachers and that the level of English in the district has been raised.

As for, why teach English? Some of the respondents seem to have over looked the fact that Russian was universally taught in China for many years. When there was the fallout with Russia, Russian had to be replaced, and so, long before Nixon came to China, the teaching of the "international language" had already begun. For proof of this, read WILD SWANS.

There weren't any English teachers then, so the Russian teachers were told to use the international phonetic symbols to learn the English and teach it. All of today's teachers still copy their teacher's method even though they know it is ineffective.

It is possible to turn a country around one degree at a time. You will not move people 180 or even 90 degrees by just being adamant. Now when you apply that to a conglomerate like China, it becomes even more obvious, that is the way an egoistic nation like China is.

That is why I only train teachers with the total backing of the Education Authorities in the area where I am working and go back to see how it is implemented. Great changes have taken place and I make it clear that this is a work in progress, not that my training is the last they will need in their lifetime.

In our lifetime we will not see a total change, but from 1992 until now I have seen a lot of change and I know this will continue. Stop looking at what is not, but start

implementing the change you can. Maybe my training is so successful because it is done without any gain to me, except the satisfaction that I am making a little difference in one corner of this great land. Ria Smit, China Foreign Expert, Zhengzhou, China

Just think of the puzzle game. A puzzle game consists of many pieces which are "locked" to each other in a special way. One piece doesn't make any sense. The key to solving the puzzle is to start from the edge, first make a line, then a small area, a big area, finally the whole picture will show up.

An old saying in China: "The outsider sees the most of the game". Chinese students and teachers are the pieces of the puzzle. Foreign experts are the outsider. For this reason, you can see the situation objectively. English is a foreign language in China. The government should invite foreign experts to design the English curriculum, course and textbooks, and to train teachers. This can also avoid the problem of vested interests. Yu Yi, Chinese teacher of English