

Primary School English Teaching in China – New Developments

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Introduction to the background

Prior to 2001 English has not been a compulsory course in primary schools although some teaching of English has taken place at this level since the mid 1980s. This has been on a very modest scale although on an increasingly larger scale mostly in urban key schools in over 27 provinces. It has been estimated that there were about 8 million primary school pupils studying English in 1998, and that number has been growing rapidly, with an increase of one million every year since 1994 (Liu and Gong 2001:36). Nevertheless, the teaching of English at this level had not been standardized, due to its unrecognized position in the school curriculum, limited availability of qualified teachers and lack of appropriate teaching materials. The starting age varied from age 8 to age 11 and the weekly time allocation ranged from 1 period to 4 periods depending on the availability of the teachers. The approach to teaching was more often a mixture of the structural and functional, with situational dialogues being the main form of texts along with a strong emphasis on learning IPA to ensure correct pronunciation and intonation at the initial stage. Most textbooks used for primary schools were produced locally including a few licensed foreign textbooks, such as ‘Look, Listen and Learn’, ‘English 300’, ‘New Concept English’. Some schools simply used secondary school English textbooks for the primary level. The transition or continuity from the primary to the secondary has long been a problem but never seriously tackled as there has been very little research conducted on foreign language teaching at the primary level in China.

Since the start of the new millenium, the Chinese government has become increasingly concerned with the upgrading the level of English of all Chinese citizens. It was decided in

early 2001 that English would be offered at primary level from September of that year, starting in cities and then gradually towns and villages (Ministry of Education Document, April 2001). The Basic Requirement for Primary School English was designed and issued at the same time by the Ministry of Education (MOE). The Basic Requirement makes it clear that the beginning age is grade 3 (age 8) and the time allocation recommended is 4 times a week, with a minimum of 80 minutes, based on the principle of shorter periods and higher frequency. The numbers of primary school pupils and teachers are difficult to estimate at present as the total number of primary school students reaches 130 million and it is just the beginning of this large scale development of English language teaching.

The Basic Requirement for Primary School English

The Basic Requirement for Primary School English postulates that the main aims of primary English include:

- to develop pupils' interests, self confidence and positive attitude towards learning English;
- to cultivate the pupils' language sense and enable good pronunciation and intonation;
- to develop the pupils' preliminary ability to use English in daily exchanges and lay a good basis for further study.

The specific teaching requirements are designed into two levels. Level 1 is for grade 3 and 4, Level 2 is for grade 5 and 6 (MOE Document on Primary School English Teaching, 2001). The following provides the framework of strands used in the Basic Requirement.

Level 1

- Listen and Do
- Speak and Sing
- Play and Act
- Read and Write
- Audio and Visual

Level 2

- Listening
- Speaking
- Reading
- Writing
- Playing and Acting; Audio and Visual

Specific descriptions under each strand are given as performance standards (See Appendix). Although the Basic Requirement does not enforce any specific method for teaching, the performance descriptors designate a change in methodology. They clearly reflect an activity-based approach, encouraging teaching and learning through listening, speaking, singing, playing, doing, acting, viewing, reading and writing to provide children opportunities to experience the language and facilitate their own discovery of meaning as a first-hand experience. Children are required to do things with English, and the learning process is expected to be a playful and happy experience.

It is also stated in the Basic Requirement that the assessment for primary school English needs to meet with the purposes of enhancing students' overall development and teachers' effectiveness in teaching. Formative assessment is expected to be used as the major method of assessing students' achievement in English. Variety in forms of assessment and opportunities for pupils to choose from the different forms according to their own strength and interests should be the characteristics of the new assessment system for primary schools. Examination-oriented evaluation is not encouraged for primary school English teaching.

Measures taken to ensure success of primary English

Introducing English into primary schools is not a temporary policy. It is rather a long-term goal and an enterprise to enhance the cultural and educational quality of all the citizens and promote quality-oriented education. To ensure success in primary school English teaching, the Ministry of Education has encouraged the use of satellite TV for both English teachers and school children. A separate channel on satellite TV is used to broadcast primary school English teacher training sessions and actual English

lessons for use in classrooms where needed. So far, three primary English programmes have been developed and are being broadcast through satellite TV. All textbooks for use in the primary school will have to be reviewed by the national textbook review committee under the MOE. Textbooks that pass the review will be formally recommended to schools. From September 2002, textbooks without passing reviews will not be allowed to be used in schools. Up until the end of 2001, 24 textbooks had been submitted, 14 have passed reviews and are now in use in different parts of China. Most of them are joint-venture productions between a Chinese publisher and a foreign publisher. The government does not welcome complete imports of foreign textbooks but cooperation in textbook writing and production is encouraged, as textbooks by foreign publishers have to be localized to meet the needs of the Basic Requirements and the needs of children in the Chinese contexts.

In order to ensure success, the Ministry of Education emphasizes that research in primary school English teaching is to be strengthened and supported. It requires that full time ELT advisors on primary school English teaching be recruited into local educational departments to take responsibility for guiding teaching and research in the area. Demonstration schools and regions are encouraged to carry out experiments and reforms so as to lead the whole area for teaching and research. To protect other foreign languages taught in schools, special support will be given to keep the present number of schools teaching Russian and Japanese or other foreign languages within the same areas.

The Ministry of Education expects that educational departments at all levels be energetic and committed to taking effective measures to train primary school English teachers. Both pre-service and in-service courses are being developed to prepare and

train primary school English teachers. The MOE requires each province to work out their strategic plans for implementing primary school English teaching in terms of timeframe, scale of teaching and teacher training (MOE Document on Primary School English Teaching, 2001).

Looking into the future: Primary English faces both chances and challenges

With the government decision to introduce primary English in China and with the issuing of the Basic Requirement for Primary School English, English teaching in the primary school will move gradually from the current 'chaotic' situation towards standardization in terms of its teaching objectives, the beginning age and time allocations. As far as teaching methods and assessment are concerned, the Basic Requirement provides some guidelines for teaching and assessment. Textbooks are also going to be geared more towards children's needs and the level of their cognitive development as the government will make sure that only those textbooks that meet the Basic Requirement and the Chinese context will be recommended. Assessment will enter a new phase of development to better reflect the nature of primary school foreign language teaching.

Despite many positive sides to standardizing primary school English teaching in China, many problems still remain to be tackled. The first and foremost is the training of enough qualified teachers. Both pre-service and in-service training programmes are to be developed to train large numbers of teachers with a modest estimation amounting to as many as 300,000 in the next few years. The questions to be answered are: Where do all the teachers come from? What kind of training is needed and most effective for preparing qualified primary English teachers? Who will be responsible for conducting training, as most teacher training institutions and universities have been involved

exclusively in training secondary school English teachers in the past? What kinds of support are needed for teachers to tackle problems they encounter in teaching?

With the introduction of primary English, a new college degree for training primary school English teachers is to be introduced and programmes are being designed for training future primary English teachers. At the same time, many of the existing teachers need to go through in-service training as many of them will face the situation of working with lower age groups and they need to acquire new skills and techniques to work with younger learners. Also, the teaching aims and objectives postulated in the Basic Requirement expect primary school teachers to change in many aspects. First, they are expected to change their views about language teaching from a knowledge-based one to an ability-based one. Second, they are expected to change their role from that of a knowledge transmitter to a multi-role educator aiming for the whole child development. Thirdly, teachers are expected to use a more activity-based approach and make the students the center of learning. Fourthly, teachers are expected to change their way of assessing pupils' achievement in learning the language. They need to use formative assessment in addition to using tests, which they are already very familiar with. Last but not the least, teachers are expected to use modern technology in teaching, creating more effective resources for learning and for using the language. In addition to all of these, the teachers' own language proficiency need to be improved, without which other roles can hardly be fulfilled.

For any educational change, teachers are the crucial factors as they are the implementers of the new ideas. Their contributions to and participation in the innovation are essential. Without their willingness, understanding, cooperation and participation, there can be no changes (Brown, 1980, White, 1988). However, teachers

have to accommodate new beliefs and see themselves in new roles and this can be very demanding (Wedell, 2001:3). Furthermore, one's belief systems can not be changed overnight. The change required of teachers can only be supported through involving them in their professional doings and reflection; as Fullan (1992) points out that '(it) is what people develop in their minds and actions that counts. People do not learn or accomplish complex changes by being told or shown what to do. A deeper meaning and solid change must be born over time'(p.115). We need to be fully aware of the fact that conceptual change is a difficult and lengthy process (Champagne et al, 1985; Fullan, 1993; Karavas-Doukas, 1998)) and the new beliefs or ideas will have to be gradually incorporated into the teachers' own belief structures through continuous practice and reflections so that adjustments can be made in their own thinking (Lamb, 1995).

Conclusion

English language teaching in China has entered a new era with the introduction of primary English. There is an obvious shift of paradigm from the structural audio-lingual approach to a global approach to language education through activity-based learning in the primary school. Increasing numbers of teachers, teacher educators and researchers are now beginning to devote themselves to the study of language teaching with young learners. New textbooks are being developed and teacher training programmes at primary and secondary levels are being funded by both the national and local governments. Many teachers are beginning to realize the need to change their beliefs about language and language learning, and the need to acquire new skills and techniques in teaching and in assessment according to the new concepts in teaching and learning and according to the needs of their students. Research into primary school English teaching and teacher training are urgently needed to ensure a better understanding so as to better inform and improve practice.

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Appendix

Basic Requirement for Primary School English in China*

*The Basic Requirements are designed into two levels for primary school pupils from age 8-12. Level One is for Grade 3 & 4, Level Two is for Grade 5 & 6. It is effective from Sept. 2001.

| Performance Descriptions | |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------|
| LEVEL 1 | Listen and Do |
| | Speak and Sing |
| | Play and Act |
| | Read and Write |
| | Audio and Visual |

| Performance Descriptions | |
|--|---|
| Listening | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Be able to understand simple spoken English or recorded English. ● Be able to understand questions in classroom activities. ● Be able to understand and react properly to repeatedly-used instructions. ● Be able to understand simple English stories supported with pictures. |
| Speaking | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Be able to pronounce English clearly with the right intonation. ● Be able to make short dialogues on familiar personal or family topics. ● Be able to use very common daily expressions e.g. for greeting, farewell, gratitude and apology. ● Be able to tell simple stories with the help of the teacher. |
| Reading | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Be able to recognize learned words and phrases. ● Be able to pronounce simple words according rules of spelling. ● Be able to read and understand simple instructions in the textbook.. ● Be able to read and understand simple information from cards. ● Be able to read simple stories or short texts with the help of pictures, and form the initial habit of reading in a sense group. ● Be able to read aloud correctly the learned text or stories. |
| Writing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Be able to write sentences based on given models. ● Be able to write out simple greetings. ● Be able to write captions for pictures or simple descriptions for objects. ● Be able to use capital and small letters in writing and use correct punctuations for simple sentences. |
| Playing and Acting Audio and Visual | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Be able to play games in English according to instructions. ● Be able to perform stories or short plays with the help of the teacher. ● Be able to perform simple rhymes or poems 30-40 (including Level 1). ● Be able to sing English songs 30-40 (including Level 1) ● Be able to follow simple English cartoon films or other English programmes at a similar level. The time spent for audio-visual should be no less than 10 hours a school year with an average of 20-25 minutes a week.. |

Vocabulary requirement: 600-700 words based on topics such as numbers, colours, time, weather, food, clothes, toys, animals and plants, body parts, personal information, family, school, friends, entertainment and sports, holidays, etc.