

ENGLISH LEARNING TENDENCIES IN CHINA

by

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**ABSTRACT**

This pilot study seeks to address issues about teaching English as a second language in China. It is a wakeup call to administrators and policy makers of the urgent need to consider. The paper suggests ideas prospective foreign teachers should consider to devise a more engaging teaching strategy to break the silence typical of the ESL students in China. It elucidates several English learning tendencies in the classroom, and offers also, some remedial considerations to manage and interact with students. The implication is that, without active support from administrators, any method tried is bound to yield only palliative progress results. As such, an uninhibited and robust discourse is needed concerning the introduction of placement tests into the curriculum. The discussion about Chinese cultural learning filters and the negative effect these filters may have on English learning are too important to ignore. Improving English learners' speaking skills through a new and innovative methodology such as "Experiential Method", while addressing certain ancillary measures to make the method work, is a good investment.

**Key Terms:**

1. **Filter:** A behavior that prevents a learner from changing or modifying a dysfunctional learning style.
2. **Remedial:** Activity through which English learners can enhance their

current English skill set.

## **II. INTRODUCTION**

Education reform is alive and well in China. Chinese intellectuals and academics work hard at it. Progressive school administrators, despite budgetary constraints, push for innovative changes. The campaign for reform is palpable among student's comments. However, progress remains only moderate. Many decision makers sound miffed by the lack of progress in their efforts to implement changes. The slow pace in students' progress raises such questions as: What has gone wrong? Whose is to blame? What amount of criticism are Chinese intellectuals, academics, opinion molders and students willing to face in order to really live up to the ideals of the educational reform

The understanding is that, even in the most prestigious Chinese universities, students practice a hodgepodge or indiscriminate variety of learning styles in their intellectual zeal to learn new languages. Students are self-motivated, with or without guidance in their approach to learning. Once their attitudes are set in motion, students need only a modicum of instruction and, in many cases, nothing at all from their instructors. As such, applying such a hands-off approach to all students in less prestigious schools alienates intellectually less gifted students. This paper addresses learning issues relevant to students attending colleges and universities from category 5 up to category 3 schools in the Chinese educational system.

Imagine teaching a student who has been learning English for 15 years, but has a hard time speaking or writing in English. She comes to you for

help. You point out a number of things she has been doing wrong. You offer very simple strategies and modifications for improvement. She agrees with your suggestions, but refuses to make any modification in her style. She keeps on using her old strategy, despite knowing full well it does not work for her. What would you do to contribute to the learning of such a student?

These kinds of incidents happen in the classroom more often than is generally recognized. At first, these situations are hard to believe. Each situation is unique but the behavior suggests a seemingly passive aggressive behavior that Western Psychologists and Psychiatrists may have fun addressing if they do not already have. . Probing deeper leads one to believe that this learning style may be a filter deep-seated in the culture, in which case there is little one can do. Only Chinese opinion makers, educators and intellectuals are fully equipped for the challenge because the silence in the classroom is cultural in its origin.

Chinese students take pride in their being quiet in the classroom. A foreign teacher may have great difficulty trying to get a response from the students or read their reactions. Students hardly engage their foreign teachers in conversation or bring up questions for reasons that Westerners have yet to understand fully. Very seldom do students talk to their teachers in class about the mistakes they make. The more one thinks about each situation, the more one needs to open one's mind to the possibility that the behavior points to a broader issue beyond one's reach. It may well be a cultural filter, and this may severely limit English teaching and learning progress to a colossal degree. Inevitably, one looks for answers and root causes of this filter in the Chinese educational system. One works with it

because it is the Chinese way of doing things. That is a serious challenge to many Westerners who are bent on engaging students' active imagination and abilities.

It is no wonder that rumor goes around among foreign teachers speculating about this puzzle in their conversation. Despite being lectured about the pride in how deep the culture is and how no foreigner is equipped to understand "deeply" a culture that is five thousand years old, foreign teachers do not seem to take the Chinese style seriously. They often take such lecturing as just a humorous pep talk with a lot of Chinese spin in it. In the mind of many foreign teachers, what people say and do is the only culture about which one is concerned. Whether based in pride or in something else, the typical behavior of Chinese students in being silent and merely pretending to listen carefully accomplishes very little towards learning a new language. It may be an extreme form of a learning style filter. Ultimately, the effect of this style will curb students' enthusiasm to learn a new language. Good students suffer the most in trying to fit in. They settle for teaching standards far below their own potential to learn. Merely trying to understand the learning culture in individual classrooms leads to broader questions, such as why many Chinese students are hard-pressed to articulate coherent sentences after having spent 15 years learning English.

The suspicion among many foreign teachers is that the student behavior is a reflection of the teaching management, the school administrators and the educational system as a whole. As for the administrators' actions regarding foreign teachers, they often seem to be only interested in finding a warm body to sit in the classroom, play games,

watch video clips, crack jokes, and call the day. There are few activities of substance to improve students' English. Curiously, there may be elements of cultural relationship or favoritism between students and their superiors to explain the charade of teaching and learning in the classroom. Whatever it is, it is not clear to foreigners. Indeed if that is all administrators expect from students, a foreign teacher has no choice but to conclude that the system is broken. Since foreign teachers have little interest in changing the educational system, they play along and education suffers a gradual regression. Changes would be easy to implement if administrators would openly confront the issue head on with the right innovations. Heartbreaking comments are often heard from students who say they feel cheated. After studying English for 15 years and pass their exams with grade scores of 85 to 95, they still have major difficulties speaking, carrying out a minute of conversation, or writing sentences intelligibly to Westerners. Ultimately, the void palpable in the classroom interaction and the frustrations in learning English would reach manageable level for many students. If the tendencies that seem to hold students back under the current practices would go away with classrooms rearrangement and modest adjustments to the teaching units. The debate on these tendencies may continue to serve as a yardstick by which to measure the impact of other issues on learning a foreign language.

### **III. LITERATURE REVIEW**

In one of his many books, Chomsky (1988) says "... operations in all languages are structure dependent..." To speak and function in a language, one would assume, one must consider the order in which words fit together to make a coherent sentence. A short sentence in English is more beautiful

than a long and convoluted sentence littered with contradictions. It is counterproductive to write sentences that obfuscate the intentions of the writer. It is not clear as to why many Chinese students feel that writing long sentences, which convey very little of their intentions, speaks well to the depth of their English knowledge. Some Chinese teachers who teach English as a second language seem to support that style, for whatever reason. That in itself is a cultural filter many Chinese intellectuals, educators and opinion makers may have to address. Coming up with an acceptable common ground for learning and teaching a new language would help everybody involved, especially teachers.

Nearly ten years ago, Jin and Cortazzi (2002) made positive predictions about teaching English in China. They predicted, “English teaching would continue to flourish” due to the energy level and enthusiasm to learn a new language. Indeed, there is no turning back; English is in China to stay. Along the way, however, there are pitfalls in the learning process. The ESL teaching method is long and grueling for students. School administrators’ actions show only a negligible success rate in implementing the reforms needed in the foreign language curriculum. Indirectly, that encourages students’ reticence in language learning. One hears of no academic penalty that a student pays for failing. Why bother?

Yet, from a Western perspective, the frustration in the classroom is palpable. Students’ silence in a seemingly passive-aggression form always stands out in the mind of foreign teachers. It is extremely difficult to find a foreign teacher who does not feel that the current English teaching approach in China needs substantial modifications. Innovative changes would enhance students’ English learning. The literature one comes across shows some

urgency on the part of Chinese academics to substantiate the claims being made in this paper. They discuss making changes to the curriculum, but hardly any discuss the cultural learning-style filters openly. Internal communication about curriculum reform has yet to raise awareness about the learning filters as contributing factors to the relative lack of student progress.

The need for improvements in the teaching methods is suggested by student performance results, which are below acceptable standards. Yang and Dong (2010) argue that the method they offer has a “potential to a quality English teaching” in Chinese universities. This is perhaps an indication that teaching quality needs be more closely looked at, for the benefit of students. Qia (2009) says, “Methods determine success or failure”. Fair enough! The slow progress that one witnesses in the classroom is primarily an issue of the learning-style filters. The method currently in place for teaching English encompasses a very limited scope. Wang (2010) notes, “English Courses at College should be gradually replaced by content-based course[s]”. Hu (2010) believes that “students’ traditional learning style[s]” affects their perceptions on learning English. Luo and Shao (2009) suggest that compiling a course book on college English translation is missing. A book on it must materialize as soon as possible to contribute and enhance English teaching translation. Liang and Qu (2009) assert, “...the higher positive mood” is, “the higher the students scores” are in listening comprehension. One might add that taking notes while listening is also helpful for reinforcing long-term memory recall.

The messages above suggest that policy makers need to elucidate the learning filters that are embedded deep in the Chinese learning style and

adapt them to the Western learning style. Lee and Ng (2010) appear to have an explanation for students' reticence in the classroom by suggesting that "teacher's strategies are the major reason for students' reticence". The assumption is that the solution to students' reticence is to change instructors' behavior. What these two intellectuals are alluding to has much to do with cultural learning filters. This group is onto something new and interesting. Their teaching manual for designing lessons and setting class objectives in China are long overdue. Chinese students' energy level is usually low, and their desire to learn something of substance in English is below standard. The mere suggestion of taking notes in order to enhance comprehension draws little interest from students. One is therefore anxious to read about manuals such as the one mentioned. The day their manuscript is out, it will be an instant hit among ESL teachers in China.

Finding answers for student's cultural learning filters is difficult and time consuming. There are many layers to consider. For one, Chinese parents are active participants when it comes to raising their children. The relationship between parents and educators is tangible. Teachers play a respected and pivotal role in students' education. Communication between teachers and students' parents at the university level, however, seems to have gained little traction. Until cultural learning filters ring true in the mind of Chinese parents, it appears that the topic of including parent representatives in the university-level language learning debate will make little headway. In addition, foreign teachers understand very little about the relationship between students and their Chinese teachers, let alone between students and their parents.

This reality limits one's capacity to address that issue as an outsider.



One focuses on the exchanges between foreign teachers and students in the classroom because too many foreign teachers students possess an understanding unknown to foreign teachers that justifies and rewards the students' unproductive English learning style. In the classroom, this little secret escapes foreign teachers' imagination. Thus, at its core, this paper discusses learning-style tendencies and cultural learning-filters from a foreign teacher's perspective. Working on reducing Chinese tendencies in learning English and working to explode the myths surrounding cultural learning filters may help students achieve their goals in the short term.

#### **IV. TEACHING ENVIRONMENT**

The scope of this study was strictly limited to colleges and universities slightly below elite schools in the Chinese educational system. It drew from the experience of teaching in Category 5 schools to Category 3 schools on a scale of six with the number one being the most elite school in China. It was an individual undertaking since there was little room on the various levels to support the project within the existing institutional teaching structures. Students took English as a second language. Instruction was common to all for a grade. In each class the instructor had anywhere from 30 to 55 students for speaking and listening, and 25 to 35 students for writing and reading. All students served in the role of the control group. They came to class to learn English for a grade. Textbooks were often beyond the students' skill level. Classrooms were often overcrowded with students. Classroom benches were restrictive. There was little room to move around, with the 'bolted in' chairs and benches, and thus it was time-consuming to adjust lesson plans to accommodate the physical

space.

### **TEST GROUP:**

Test group students were volunteers. They did not get extra points for their desire to learn more English outside of their regular class hours. Participants were mostly those who were frustrated with the status quo in teaching and were looking for an alternative approach in order to pass their IELTS or TOEFL exams. Meetings were held during odd hours, e.g. from 12:00 to 1:30 p.m., when they had free time late in the afternoons (3:00 to 5:00 p.m.) or in the evenings after class (6:00 to 8:00 p.m.). They came with specific needs. Often the course would start with 4 to 6 students and finish the term with 3 to 4 students. Those who dropped out said they found the extra work grueling. They expected something more casual.

### **CONTROL GROUP:**

The control group was mixed. Some students knew more English than others. Class activities were for some either too easy or too difficult to follow. The expectation was that an instructor could devise a happy medium to engage all of the students. Their expectations caused them to take it lightly. Less experienced students expected some entertainment, such as playing games, singing songs or watching video clips. Their English class time was a way for them to take a little nap, relax and crack jokes. Advanced students found the class not challenging enough as lessons were below their existing English skill level.

### **TEACHING VISION**

The initial intent was to activate student learning by doing some activity and then integrate that learning style into the students' prevalent

learning style. An aim was to convert academic skills into playful activities, connect with students through speaking and listening, reading and writing, and to foster in students an appreciation of American learning styles as well as to encourage students to practice writing for a Western audience.

Writing, translating, reading, speaking and listening classes were offered over the span of 4 years. In each one of these courses, the idea was to identify learning tendencies common to all students in order to find answers to the seemingly intractable problem of deficient communication between Chinese students and foreign teachers. The control and test groups received the same instructions. The test group had an advantage over the control group because the instructor would go over exercises offered in the official class. Students would talk about the impact their tendencies might have in frustrating their progress. The test group students undoubtedly did a little more work to hone their skills. Lessons were remedial in terms of strategy in order to address common tendencies in students' conversation skills.

#### **V. TEACHING ACTIVITY**

Encouraging role-play activities and associating them with students various skills levels were critical. In some cases, listening to pod casts or movie video clips played a part. Other times, inviting former students for a chat as guest speakers enhanced students to aim higher. This exercise enhanced students' confidence. Control as well as test-group students built on their existing English skill levels. With the test group, students specifically had to confront the significance their tendencies had on their English improvement skills and talk about the negative effects they had on their studies. Exercises focused mostly on College English Test (band 4/6),

IELTS and TOEFL exams or activities related to students' specific needs. At the end of the term, questionnaires to assess the level of communication with students and the quality of information they learned in class were distributed.

### **WRITING TENDENCY**

According to students, their Chinese ESL instructors adapt their lessons to the demands of the testing. To some ESL Chinese teachers, writing long and convoluted sentences is a mark of the intellectual quality of students. Many ESL Chinese teachers appreciate students' long sentences over short sentences. Culturally, Chinese writers tend to tell readers at the beginning what it is they will find later in the text and at the end of the text give clues about the benefit of the text just read. Based on our Chinese ESL teacher's comments and the way our education present knowledge to their audiences, we believe that this approach is the only acceptable form of writing to connect or make a favorable impression with readers.

### **REMEDIAL WRITING:**

Consistent with their learning tendencies, Chinese students generally ignore the value of introductory sentences or paragraphs in essays and the role of verb tenses in sentences. Looking at writing in this manner hinders interest in the Western writing style. To many Chinese students, this style is not suitable, especially for Chinese tests. To bring students' writing more in line with Western standards, students are encouraged to take more interest in introductory paragraph writing. Students write simple sentences having up to three verb tenses. The students were encouraged to expand upon their ideas by reaching deeper into their imagination. Soon after, the writers go

through a series of steps to describe what it is they would like readers to infer. Around the fifth week of the semester, students write different kinds of paragraphs. They practice writing one paragraph (100 to 150 words) in the first 45 minutes of the lesson and talk about it for the remainder of the meeting. Those who are translating the school TV news Chinese scripts into English focus on conveying the facts and their details. The emphasis is also on logical sentence structure, writing different kinds of paragraphs and essays. Students zoom in on the main idea. They practice finding facts, details, and expanding their understanding of writing descriptive, persuasive, causal, narrative and logically coherent paragraphs. Together with their proofreader, students discuss the grammar of dissecting long and difficult sentences, writing a coherent sentence and finding a logical structure to connect sentences together. With student translators, there is always a reminder that they translate the facts offered in the Chinese news script sources into English. Overall, students plot an overall view of paragraphs to grasp and appreciate details. They understand that such practice in writing for a Western audience becomes an asset to boost their understanding of Western writing styles. It leaves them with useful skills for Western-related exams such as TOEFL and IELTS.

### **READING TENDENCY:**

By their own admission, Chinese students pay excessive attention to the bottom half of any passage. Except for the first sentence, they skip over the introductory remarks, thinking that the most important idea comes at the end. They also race through with little concern for the middle parts. They ignore details that, however, would be important for their understanding.

The matters focused on are often insignificant. “We just leap over the first few sentences in the passage because the key to understanding is buried in the final sentences of any document.” To many students, their Chinese teachers focus less on finding word meanings in the text. That is why students are helpless without a dictionary in their hands. Students focus on the first sentence and last sentence because “that is enough” to understand everything. They ignore the value of the details. When there is no conclusive sentence, students invent a conclusion irrespective of the facts. Seeing the connection between paragraphs details means little to them in their efforts to learn English.

### **REMEDIAL READING:**

Something is troubling about a picture where high marks are pursued at the expense of accumulating more knowledge. Relying on incorrect words and reading any given text with very little consideration of words nuance in a sentence reveals a certain degree of short sightedness. Indeed, neglecting word nuances in a sentence limits Chinese students’ understanding. Being overly dependent on a dictionary is counterproductive. As a remedial class, excerpts or passages’ selection was mostly from Western authors. Students read with the perspective of understanding the grammar of a sentence. They read excerpts having 100 to 200 words and sometimes more. They read about “hot” issues in the form of abstracts, excerpts and articles having up to 1000 words. Western descriptive style, cause-and-effect, compare-and-contrast essays for a discussion were almost exclusively prioritized. Handouts were available for upcoming discussions in advance in order to give participants ample time to think “deeply” about their reading style and appreciate details in a document. At other times, essays in class were offered for speed-reading

activities. Toward the end of the semester, students prepared for the College English Test (band 4/6). Others aimed at sitting internationally recognized English exams.

Enhancing students reading comprehension quality, various texts were selected from periodicals and textbooks. Students read for the main idea, facts and supporting details, followed by another Q&A session. Students were encouraged to improve the skill of finding the meaning of difficult words in the context before consulting a dictionary and monitor their reading speed. Every meeting, students went through a 10-minute silent reading followed by a five-minute content discussion. Thereafter, students spent the rest of the time responding to questions in writing. Students absorbed information through “Learn by Teaching” practices.

Walk-in “self study” social conversations, which were held in the evenings once a week, were just an extended version of creating an environment to help students find the courage to practice. This remedial training involved students’ creativity and perked their curiosity to think outside of the box. The class design was fluid and accommodated students’ skill levels. There was always room to encourage students to read with a more open mind in their method of learning. Modifications depended on learners’ needs, enthusiasm and interests because knowledge was never restricted to one book or one writer.

### **SPEAKING TENDENCY:**

Overreliance on electronic dictionaries for proper pronunciation clues slows down student readiness to speak. Neglecting vowels and syllables came to mind in this regard. The reason for the slowness of improvement in speaking English cannot be attributed to the environment, however.

Compromising the quality of word usage for the sake of remembering more and more words is not a convincing argument to foreign teachers. The desire to go abroad to learn English is misplaced in purely pedagogical terms. Indeed, a case can be made that it is the effort which counts, because the majority of their foreign teachers speak no Chinese even though they live abroad in China and have plenty of help if they so desire. It is also true that there are students who speak English very well and have never been outside of China. These students are fluent, and their diction is quite commendable. In addition, many Chinese who live abroad in the Anglo-sphere speak English only with great difficulty or none at all, since they have been living within their own Chinese communities for, in some cases, more than 30 years. Yet, in some cases, they speak pathetically little English because of a lack of desire to learn and, more importantly, they can find everything they need or want by speaking Chinese within their communities.

### **REMEDIAL SPEAKING**

Students start out with a quick reading aloud exercise followed by a tongue-twister story. Soon after, a novel phonetic association rule is used. The instructor introduces Chinese speaking tones as having 5 tones They are: [0 ( ) whisper tone; 1 (--) neutral or flat tone; 2(/) question mark tone; 3 (v) umlaut tone; 4 (\) sharp tone] for proper intonation. Students and their teacher dissect unfamiliar words into syllables. Students apply this rule by guessing the pronunciation of words without the help of a dictionary. Students focus on delineating syllables. The facilitator simply assists them in appreciating the value of vowels. (Incidentally, the whisper tone is a made-up tone to fit the instructor's teaching style.) There is also an assignment of reading aloud daily for five minutes nonstop as homework in



the privacy of students own homes.

In the second module, students learn skills in delivering a persuasive speech. Each student writes a 5-minute speech on any topic of interest. The class is divided into teams. Students go through the rotations of asking one student on each team to deliver a speech. In the first half of the meeting, three speakers deliver their speeches. Classmates adjudicate and evaluate each speech. During the second half, students discuss these topics or offer comments. At the end of the term, students take a self-evaluation quiz. The above strategy as a whole helps students to reflect on their answers, work their lip muscles and their speech flowing. At the end, they give a grade score to themselves for class participation and offer evidence talking about important skills they have learned and for the merit, they talk about.

### **LISTENING TENDENCY:**

Students dislike taking notes regardless of whether they listen to or watch the news. When they watch TV, they do not practice writing what they hear in the classroom. They practice input without output. They listen to their favorite music for the melody, but pay only cursory attention to the lyrics. Reading after class is not in their routine. “Teacher, what can we do to improve our spoken English?” Many students ask this question in order to avoid talking about anything. They ignore asking questions or listening to answers about things, they have tried in the past to improve. Students retort, “A speaking culture thing is going on in our minds.” A cultural learning filter of this nature from students who rarely practice or accept suggestions leaves little room for a compromise.

### **REMEDIAL LISTENING:**

To address this issue, students take notes as their instructor dictates excerpts from various texts. Students read passages or stories having 50 words to 100 words. Other times students take notes while listening to recorded monologues, dialogues or conversations. For a variation, video snippets from international news broadcasts, such as the Voice of America (VOA) mp3 download from the Internet or the British Broadcast Company (BBC), which are on the local TV English channels, were used. The instructor grades students for the accuracy of their notes. Soon after, students discuss the story content together in teams of five students for 5 minutes. They fill in missing links in their notes to get a full understanding of the message. Students use the rest of the time speaking and responding to a series of trivial questions about the news items, and they are permitted to look at their notes. Sometimes it works; other times it does not. The level of interest dictates the tempo.

### **CONTROL AND TEST GROUPINGS**

Consistency among test group students was the prerequisite to substantiate the claim of making significant progress. Volunteers who dropped out were automatically recorded in the control group.

#### Year One.

Semester 2

Control group: 300 students total.

Test group results: 4 volunteered. 3 finished

#### Year Two

Semester 1

Control group: 600 students total.

Test group results: 10 volunteered. 5 finished

Semester 2:

Control group 400 students total.

Test group results: 4 volunteered. 3 finished

#### Year Three:

Semester 1

Control group: 120 students total.

Test group results: 3 volunteered. 3 finished

Semester 2:

Control group: 150 students total.

Test group results: 3 volunteered 2 finished

## **VI. FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION**

### **TEST GROUP RESULTS:**

All students in the test group who did not drop out passed the tests on their first attempt. Among test group students, the enthusiasm was quite high. They looked for the instructor in the hallways with a burning desire to talk about their success. Comments centered on the ways they used the skills and strategies they learned in class. Those who dropped out of the volunteer session failed their tests. Some of them would come back seeking advice on how to do well in the following school term with more energy to focus on their weak areas. They were free to come back in, but were no longer counted as part of the test group.

### **CONTROL GROUP RESULTS:**

No student reported passing an English test. In a class inquiry about their exam, the results drew little enthusiasm. No one raised his/her hand. As a result, one would conclude that none of them passed. One general comment among them was that they learned more than they ever did in their previous English classes. Comments were numerous among control group students after taking their official college English test (band 4/6). “The test was too hard”. “Reading or listening comprehension was hard.” “I need to learn more words.” “I will have to go to an English training school to learn English”. Many students blame the environment as their reason for their poor

performance. They want to go abroad to learn English. Others avoid having a conversation about their exams results. They just want to pass the class and call it good.

### **INTERPRETATION**

However small the test group is, the results reveal that a teaching adjustment in the Chinese educational system would not be a waste of time. New changes would help the program, not hurt it. It would benefit students more than the existing teaching status quo. Inevitably, students must go through a placement test on every level to meet expectations and demands. The added pressure of having to reach a new, higher placement grade level would enhance students' enthusiasm. Classrooms settings need modification because there are reasons to believe that excessive large class sizes, the 'bolted down desks' are a contributing factor to the frustrations of learning English as a second language.

The search to identify other English learning tendencies may be useful to foreign teachers in helping them to cope with the lack of active participation by students. It may help raise awareness, confirm the existence of overriding cultural learning filters, and find other areas of disconnect in this seemingly intractable learning phenomenon. Due to the lack of a genuine discourse, the missing sense of urgency among administrators is understandable. However, there are progressive voices out there, though the mechanisms to implement their suggestions are weak. The majority of foreign teachers think that the performance level among students who have a stake in English would improve if concerns were voiced publically by decision makers to accommodate the new changes that are needed. Even

those who find little joy in learning English would benefit.

## **VII. REFLECTION**

This pilot study points to a critical moment in today's Chinese educational reform concerning the teaching of English as a second language due to the excess of cultural filters, which are hampering progress in the methods and approaches being deployed. JC & Rodgers, RS (2001) make the point that having a theory for learning a language, which serves as the source for the teaching practices and principles, "is always a good start". Confronting learning filters and the effects they have on student's tendencies in the current education environment creates a healthy language environment. Students' exasperation or lack of enthusiasm is palpable year in year out. It manifests itself in students' low expectations for gaining knowledge from their foreign teachers. A small number of students acknowledge this openly. Whatever the reason, one always keeps the issue low key, as if it were a long-held cultural taboo. There are students who, in their frustration, speak of hating English, perhaps forgetting how this frustration came about in the first place. Some students think that the only way to learn English is by going abroad. There is also the notion that all that matters is getting a high score – this at a time when some students who have been getting high scores for 15 years in English in some cases still have difficulty speaking, let alone writing in English. The damage this exasperation has caused in some students is worrisome because of its possibly deep linkages to pride in Chinese culture. Cultural filters hamper success from day one. One sees, for instance, that many students want to memorize the pronunciation of every word before they are unable to

phonetically separate syllables. Their mind seemingly refuses to recognize that the majority of words they are having trouble with can be guessed at correctly if students learn to parse words into syllables. The filters compel them to think that the only way one can learn to say a word correctly is through tutorial software in their electronic dictionary. The myth that the language can only be learned in the country where it is spoken persists, even though this has been debunked by students who speak impeccable English without ever having stepped outside of China.

One should understand that cultural filters have negative effects on the learning of English. Mitigating the effects of these filters reduces the damage they cause to learning. The filters, should they continue in their present form, will continue to be an impediment to student progress among English learners. The frustration involving the learning of English in China gives us ample historical background against which we can gauge the damage it has caused in ESL learners; we cannot afford to allow this trajectory to continue, for in the long run, it is unsustainable. Should no reduction of these filters occur, learner's minds will be inhibited from freely exploring and absorbing new knowledge. Implementing innovative changes is in itself a sign of progress. A minimalist approach to eliminate on a few well-known impediments will benefit few people. Any policy improvements should be aimed at causing a higher number of students to meet the acceptable standards. Lack of such improvements would likely set back the learning clock to undo the damage already caused. Since English is in China to stay, one can only go forward. Otherwise, few students benefit. It certainly would be nice if the tendencies addressed in this study simply go away or, at least, are reduced to an absolute minimum, because in the meantime learning

continues to suffer. This reality has a significant influence over other sectors of the Chinese economy where English is badly needed. To date, for instance, there are still many banking services in China where Chinese is the only language for access. The assumption is that everybody speaks or ought to speak Chinese. We know so well that far too many foreigners cannot function at a full capacity because bank clerks are very limited in English and the software they use only accommodate transactions in Chinese. Banking services software developers should consider offering a friendly English interface side by side with the Chinese interface and remind bank managers to dig a little deeper to recruit front desk clerks who can communicate effectively in English to accommodate foreign clients.

In some Universities, in China, teaching is almost exclusively a task-based activity method. Yet, a significant number of students still have a hard time speaking, writing and reading regardless of the number of years of learning English. One might add that a significant number of students get so discouraged early on that they never again really try to communicate properly in English. This means that the current deployed method produces substandard results and is therefore in need of innovative changes. Some students refuse even to try to say a word in English unless they hear it from a native speaker. Yet, according to many of the test group students, reading English aloud non-stop at home for 5 minutes every day is an optimal aid. Practicing English in the Chinese first tone is a significant speaking bridge towards an excellent pronunciation. Yet some students do not even believe it could be done. Learning writing by answering multiple-choice questions is only good for exam takers, but it is hardly enough for writing a composition. It is not enough to write convoluted sentences if one has not mastered the

essence of writing in a one-, two-, or three- verb tense in syntactic units containing verbs in up to three different tense forms. Excessive number of verb tenses clauses in a single sentence confuses the reader. Resistance to note taking is also far too common among students who must improve their listening skills, despite note-taking being critical to good comprehension skills. The same can be said of words nuances. The nuances are often in the context of the sentence itself, not determinable from an electronic dictionary. Yet, many students rely exclusively on their electronic dictionaries to find words' meanings. As such, they often misuse words because they neglect to learn the exact words to convey the meaning in context. Needed in all likelihood is a diligent effort on the part of students to help eliminate unproductive learning style tendencies.

Getting it right requires bold modifications. Confronting the cultural filters, with private reflections on these by students, would help immeasurably. An open and uninhibited discourse would encourage serious discussions without the feelings of awkwardness that often occur when among peers. A placement test, for instance, would put students on a par with each other. Having smaller class sizes would increase the chance of getting students involved with greater participation. Administrators and educators could consider implementing specific criteria about teaching according to English skill levels, and by bringing about smaller class sizes. Policy makers and opinion makers should focus more on students' desires since the results from the current compulsory English learning work for some. For the majority of students, however, their potential enthusiasm to learn English suffers huge impediments due to counterproductive elements in their learning styles .The true nature of the puzzle is apparently not



addressed in the facile references hidden in the unsubstantiated pride, which that students regularly offer as use for an excuse for their learning styles. Responding “yes” when in fact not understanding or not wanting to follow would not seem to be related to cultural pride. One wonders however if an approach that accepts the 'pride' argument helps much in learning new knowledge. In this modest study, the observation is such that these findings suggest broader issues are at play when considering how to get it right on teaching English in China.

While talking about filters is one thing, talking about how they influence learning and how to get educators to engage in a more forceful way to get it right is something else. The rationale behind talking about learning filters is to introduce a greater open-mindedness into the discourse, leading to suggestions that will genuinely bear fruit. Over time, students will start to reflect and understand the significance that cultural filters have on their English learning. Many of them will begin to admit that relying exclusively on their English learning tendencies is a self-defeating learning mechanism. As exemplified in the test group, students can develop a healthy self-criticism to learn more, instead of criticizing themselves in a way that frustrates further attempts to learn English. Such an understanding offers foreign teachers a point of departure from which to devise remedial activities and address student needs. The policy of ignoring the urgency of the problems in English learning should no longer appear as a taboo. . Students' speaking mistakes should translate into honest efforts to learn the correct way forward. It can be fun to speak and spend quality time with students instead of it being just a duty, as it often is under the current system.

Positive reinforcement on campuses can blend in synergistically with students' group discussions. From a Western perspective, there will be fewer surprises in such an open communication. Students will be encouraged to look each other in the eyes without feeling awkward among peers. Foreign teachers will feed on this enthusiasm to learn about Chinese culture, spend quality time there and contribute significantly to teaching English. The feeling of being used, common among many foreign teachers, not as educators but more as warm bodies who are only expected to stand in front of students and by cracking jokes, but offer nothing of substance to improve students' English speaking skills, will come to an end. In terms of human connectedness, the occasional dread of feeling to be a stranger in a foreign land will vanish and foreign teachers' vocal criticism of the teaching method will fade or fall on its own weight.

Internal communication shows that Chinese ESL teachers concur or share the view that a more aggressive way is needed to help students master the language. They are well aware that appreciation comes from taking some responsibility. They understand that student's ambivalent promises to teachers are counterproductive and that intellectual maneuvering of these kinds do not speak well of the behavior they exhibit. It is more rewarding for students to earn respect than to begging for it in their current style of learning. Indeed students often make many foreign teachers wait in anticipation, only to find out later that the same students did not know or had no skill to finish the task in the first place, or that they did not care to even trying. Such encounters frustrate progress of any kind in anything. Underestimating these cultural filters leads to accepting a quality of teaching below acceptable academic standards. Substandard levels of

teaching also does not speak well of school graduates when they compete for jobs in the labor market either. Learning English undergoes a slow and painful process, especially when school administrators lean too heavily on finding teachers with a doctorate or masters degree, instead of making selections based on the quality of skills being taught in the classrooms by instructors. A formal degree alone does not guarantee good skills. Genuine teaching requires more than an academic degree.

Some may argue that cultural filters have little to do with learning a language fast. One could, on the other hand, make the case that the tendencies alluded to in this paper are too significant to ignore. The status of cultural learning filters in the ESL teaching is unclear in the current ESL teaching practices. Impressive course designs may be sitting on many teachers' desks. Nonetheless, the execution of those courses suffers severe logistic limitations in today's learning environment. Students' successes depends on the degree to which they can successfully overcome the prevailing cultural learning styles because these styles pose the risk of undermining everything there is to truly mastering a new language. For as long as the discourse on Chinese cultural learning filters remains largely unaddressed, mastering foreign languages will always be an overly daunting task for many Chinese students. One might argue further that there is little gain even if one follows assiduously the message or suggestions put forward in this pilot study. However, to that, the evidence clearly shows that even the modest steps taken in this study helped to accelerate students' learning because they were able to quickly bring student learning styles more in line with those in the West, as well as increase the willingness of students to share their questions and discuss their mistakes with teachers in the

classroom to practice with other students. If there is no change of understanding, the negative trends we see today will continue. One may only expect more of the same and a lack of substantial progress for the majority of students. A non-participatory silence will continue to reign in the classroom as we have come know it. One will continue to see many students who struggle to read, speak or understand even after many years of learning.

It is uplifting to see the positive effects that the modest suggestions of this study had on quality of learning and the nature of improvement in reading comprehension skills that occurred among the test group students. Students in this test group learned to appreciate the value of taking notes. Encouraging them to take notes to practice their listening skills soon became a natural listening style for them. They also claimed some improvement in understanding Western writing styles and improvements in comprehension. They gained self-confidence in speaking, and were enjoying the discovery of their new potentials in being able to express themselves and communicate in a new language. Talking more about learning filters boosted their enthusiasm and protected their desire to learn English. The improvement in their writing to Western standards is unmistakable. Their speaking lexicon frequently showed that a strengthening of their grammar skills had also occurred. Enhancing their reading comprehension skills quickly became a primary goal to which they applied themselves. Activating their intellectual aptitudes to speak fluently also became an enjoyable experience for the teacher.

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Thank you in advance for your attention.

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