

The Chaoyang English Project

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Abstract: This article details the experiences of an MFL teacher from London, working on a co-teaching project to 'internationalise' the teaching of English in Beijing. This was as part of the Chaoyang English Project, a five-year strategy, now in its second year. The article gives a 'bird's eye view' of the Chinese school day and an overview of the way English is currently taught in middle schools in Beijing. The article details the author's experience of the Project, of co-planning and co-teaching with a Chinese teacher of English, and in so doing, training both teachers and students in current best practice in communicative methods of language teaching. It details how her job as a foreign languages teacher in Beijing differed from her teaching experience and practice in the UK, and both the challenges and success she experienced in the co-teaching process. It concludes positively with an affirmation of dynamic, student-centred, kinaesthetic teaching, and a healthy respect of Chinese rote learning, both of which the author hopes to introduce or retain upon her return to the UK.

Keywords: Teaching English abroad; China, language pedagogy; team-teaching; use of target language; language teacher education

Introduction

For the first ten years of my teaching career I was an modern foreign languages teacher in state comprehensives in Greater Manchester and London. Then in 2007, seeking pastures new, I moved to Beijing to take up the post of Head of European Languages at Dulwich College Beijing, an international school teaching the British curriculum to expatriate students. In 2011, after a brief return to the UK, I was offered the chance to move back to Beijing to join the Chaoyang English Project, an English teaching and training project for local schools. I have spent a fascinating year working as a teacher of EFL and also as a teacher trainer in a reputable local state school in Beijing.

In this article I hope to give a little insight into the aims of the project; an idea of the many differences between British and Chinese state schools and how my work here differs from my work in the UK; the main challenges I have faced, and more importantly, the successes I have had. I should add that while my school is typical of many, this article is based entirely on my experiences in one year in one school, and does not pretend to offer an academic analysis of the Chinese education system.

The Chaoyang English Project

The Chaoyang English Project is a joint venture between Beijing BISS International School and Chaoyang Education Committee, Chaoyang being one of the 16 administrative districts of Beijing. The aims of the project are to improve the oral skills of English teachers and students,

and allow western trained teachers to work collaboratively with Chinese teachers of English, in order to train them in current best practice, using child-centred, inclusive teaching styles, which is in marked contrast to traditional Chinese teaching approaches. This is part of the Districts' policy of 'internationalising' its workforce.

About my role

From August 2011 until July 2012 I was based in a local middle school from Monday to Friday lunchtime, and at Beijing BISS on Friday afternoons. I was paired with a Chinese teacher of English, and together we co-planned all our lessons, team-taught and then reflected on our work together. I modelled a range of techniques and activities with which language teachers in the UK would be very familiar, but are very new and very different for Chinese teachers. In so doing, I trained my colleague in using these effectively in her own teaching. On Friday afternoons, both NET's (Native English Teachers) and CET's (Chinese English Teachers) met at BISS for teacher training sessions to which I also contributed.

About the Chinese school day

Students have a long school day; they arrive between 7-7.30am if they wish to have breakfast at school, which, like lunch, is eaten at the student's desk in the form room. Students should be at school by 7.30am when class reading time begins. Each morning is dedicated to a different subject and students sit in class and read sections of the textbook aloud, recite texts they have learned or practice pronunciation of new English vocabulary usually led by a nominated student, always in unison. Formal lessons begin at 8am and last for forty minutes, interspersed with ten-minute breaks.

Prior to the Chinese New Year holiday, there were eight lessons per day lasting until 5.20pm, but with a change of Principal over Spring Festival came a new regime and subsequently there were nine lessons, running until 6pm. (Principals are appointed and relocated, sometimes at very short notice, according to the requirements of the local Education Department).

After the first two lessons every morning, all students file out onto the playground and line up in class groups for morning exercises. This is a 25-minute synchronised group exercise session, the routines for which are learned by heart, and repeated daily, winter and summer, and only cancelled at exam time or in very heavy rain (and it very seldom rains in Beijing!). On Monday's however, EVERYONE lines up to observe flag-raising. The Chinese flag is brought reverentially to the flagpole by a small group of students, and the national anthem (The March of the Volunteers) is played as the flag is attached and hoisted on its mast.

We have two more lessons and a round of eye exercises before lunch. We have eye-exercises twice a day: a five-minute break where students take off their glasses, close their eyes, and repeat a cycle of massage moves around the eyes, head and neck. These are performed to music, broadcast over the Public Address system so that the whole school does them in unison, while a recorded voice counts everyone through the five moves in four rounds of eight counts. I think this is effective relaxation time for the students, though to what extent it actually rests or even strengthens the eyes is unclear; many more of my students in China

wore glasses than I would expect in the UK - some still squint to see the board and sharing glasses is common!

The lunch break is longer than you would expect in the UK, we had one and a half hours, but a lot takes place in that time. Our school did not have a canteen and so a catering company delivered meals in portioned plastic boxes. Students eat at their own desks in the classroom and enjoy a bit of downtime, though it is not quiet. Mealtimes are always a noisy affair in China and no less so in a class full of hungry children. Calming 'muzak' is played over the PA system during this 'rest period' much to the consternation of my foreign colleague and I; no one else seemed to bat an eye-lid! After lunch students are responsible for sweeping their own classrooms and clearing up (and they do so!) and there is a 30-minute break where students can go outside to the playground, *if* they are not required by a teacher for catch up work, a reciting test, or perhaps a pastoral matter.

The final 45 minutes of the lunch break are for sleeping – all the students return to their classrooms and put their heads on the desk, the curtains are drawn and silence descends over the school, as students sleep or rest. They are woken again by a ripple of music reminiscent of someone waving a magic wand. A quick bathroom break and then the cycle of lessons and eye exercises begin all over again. Pupils leave with very heavy bags and head home to start their homework, and concern has been expressed in the Chinese media recently about the weight of books students carry around with them and the long hours they keep. It is fair to say that Chinese pupils study for much longer and have much less 'leisure time' than their western counterparts, though the lack of sleep is just as likely to be due to staying up late playing computer games.

About Chinese teaching methods

There is much less 'traffic' in a Chinese school, students are taught in class groups and have all their lessons in their own classroom, i.e. the subject teacher comes to them. Pupils sit in rows at individual desks facing the teacher, who stands on a raised platform at the front of the class, often behind the computer desk, from where they deliver their lesson. Teaching is largely based on rote learning and memorization of facts, and traditional English language teaching frequently involves whole class chanting of dialogues and texts until they are internalised. Students stand to speak when answering a question or to address a teacher. There is almost no use of group work, problem solving, thinking skills or activities that cater for kinaesthetic learners in particular.

In English language teaching, there is almost no use of communicative language teaching or skills based lessons; and on first observing some English classes I gained the impression that it was more of a forum for choral chanting of dialogues, until they became almost meaningless. Individuals were rarely called on and there was no opportunity to try replacing some words in the given dialogue, with new language learnt previously. This is largely because communicative tasks run the risk of students making mistakes and that is a big risk where the emphasis is on accuracy and point scoring. Schools in China are evaluated and financed based on test scores and thus teaching is very much geared towards the tests, where high results are

vital to parents anxious for their one child ultimately to gain a place at university, for which competition is fierce, and vital to a teacher's salary increasing not decreasing.

How my work differed from my work in the UK

Throughout my teaching career in the UK I have always taught through the whole secondary age range, from Year 7 to Year 13, and as a regular teacher without additional responsibilities, I would expect to teach 90% of a full timetable. My Chinese colleagues however, are assigned to one grade only and usually move up with the same class through their school career. On the other hand, they are only assigned to teach perhaps two or three classes, so they have much less daily contact time than in the UK. Classes in my school had approximately 35 students per group, though in rural areas where teachers can be scarce, it is not uncommon to have 40-50 students in a class.

Thus this year my co-teacher and I have only taught two Grade 7 classes (= Year 8 in England or S2 in Scotland). It may seem like a light teaching load, but my Chinese colleagues have an enormous amount of marking to complete. Students usually have an English class every day and this is reinforced by daily homework tasks consisting of rote learning of dialogues, gap-fill grammar exercises and spelling tests, all of which has to be marked and returned the same day it is received.

My hours in school on this project were from 8am - 4pm, and during that time I taught a minimum of two English classes, reflected on the successes of the lesson and the possible improvement needed, and then planned again for two more lessons the next day. For each lesson, we would write a fully annotated lesson plan, detailing the lesson objective, the intended outcomes, what each teacher and the students would do, the purposes of each activity and which learning styles these addressed. Having taught it, we recorded how we felt about each lesson, what went well, what didn't go so well, and what we would amend, delete or repeat for a future lesson. Typically I might have finished my actual class teaching time by 9.30am, but the process of reflecting and planning could easily take the rest of the day, and, as we were trying something very new and experimental, we planned a day at a time.

I did find it very odd not to have any contact with parents, and after a whole semester, I was really concerned not to have had the chance to meet parents and convey praise or concern about my students' performance and progress. In the UK, I would always be keen to meet students with their parents but my lack of Chinese prevented me from just picking up the phone and calling parents myself as I might otherwise have done. My co-teacher was surprised at my request, as in China it is usually the class teacher who calls home, and then only if there is a big problem. I was really delighted to be asked to attend a Parents' Evening in the second semester, but as in so many things in China, the collective takes precedence over the individual. As space is limited, families are asked to send just one parent, and they come and sit in their child's own seat in the classroom. Each subject teacher then rotates around the classes and speaks to the assembled parents as a group about the general strengths and weaknesses of the class. This was an uncomfortable experience for me as I had hoped to really praise the rapid improvements made by certain students, and also to hear their views on our co-teaching experiment, but this did not seem appropriate. Typically, the

Chinese are shy in front of foreigners, and the institution of school and the teaching profession are held in high esteem. The Chinese are less likely to criticise a school or a teacher than they might be in the west, but like most western parents they want to know if their child is doing well, and what more they can be doing to support. English is a huge growth subject and many Chinese are very impressed by the presence of foreign teachers on the teaching staff. Thus when my partner teacher asked the assembled parents what they thought about the co-teaching project there were general murmurs of support, but they would not have raised concerns if they had them, while I was present, as this would have been disrespectful. The participating school's policy on using their foreign teachers is probably most indicative: we could co-teach with Grade 7 and Grade 8 but not Grade 9, as they were not prepared to take any risks with students in their exam year, prior to moving up to senior school. Thus my lack of Chinese and a culture of consent prevented me from really knowing what the parents thought of our work.

In summary, my classes were bigger but my contact teaching load was lighter and I was excused a lot of the repetitive marking (a lot of which is based on Chinese-English translation). Furthermore I only taught one age group and had the luxury of team teaching but was unable to interact effectively with parents. The biggest difference to my work in the UK was the planning process.

About the Co-Teaching Process

My co-teacher and I worked in English, my first language, her second language. In the beginning it could take us up to four hours to plan and prepare each lesson, and it continued to be a complex process of discussion, negotiation, drawing diagrams, looking up unfamiliar words, and explaining requirements we each considered to be self-evident whilst the other had never used or considered them before. In the beginning I actively modelled a lot of starters, games and communicative activities that my co-teacher could not picture by my simply explaining them, and it was a great leap of faith on her part to allow me to have students moving round the room to do a running dictation to practice the previous day's vocabulary or jumping up to acknowledge that they had heard the key words in a listening exercise. The first semester was very challenging in this respect, and it took us a long time to find a way to work effectively with each other, but the second semester was markedly easier as I grew to understand the Chinese school system much better and my teaching partner saw the benefits of creating tactile activities, problem-solving group tasks and communicative exercises and grew in confidence about using them.

About the specific teaching methods I used

Perhaps the most significant strategy I was able to share with my co-teaching partner was to ensure every lesson had a teaching objective and an identified learning outcome. The lesson would always include an active strategy for 'warming up' in English, and a plenary, to check that the objective had been achieved. Although this is standard practice in the UK this is very new to the Chinese way of teaching. My teaching partner commented frequently during the course of the year that she learned to have just one objective: previously, she would tend to have several, but these would have been along the lines of 'do some listening

exercises' and then 'do some speaking exercises' – the objectives were not quantifiable or measurable. Our 'new' strategy came to be such a ritual that whereas in the UK I may have at times been guilty of going in to a lesson unprepared without a clear objective, this would be inconceivable now.

I made a point of introducing kinaesthetic activities, previously conspicuous by their absence. These included active starters such as running dictations, and plenaries, which check vocabulary and spelling using mini whiteboards (we did this in teams in a relay, so that each team member had to take their turn to be 'on', so as to prevent the brightest always finishing first). We also used human sentences to get the students to identify grammar and punctuation errors in sample sentences and correct them. Many lessons included a group task involving words on sheets of paper, perhaps to identify new vocabulary items by matching synonyms or antonyms; or reordering a dialogue or series of broken sentences by reading and looking for grammatical or contextual clues.

Beyond this, I called on my drama teaching skills (acquired during my PGCE, and my participation in 'Impro Pékin' a French improvised theatre group in Beijing), to build confidence, promote spontaneity and create role-play and performance activities where the students actually communicate as opposed to chanting chorally, which is what oral classes looked like previously. I made a point of making pupils' designated oral lessons specifically different from their 'regular' English classes: we would move the chairs and tables to the sides of the room and sit in a circle. We would start each class with a physical warm up which involved shouting to count down from five to one, while shaking out all the limbs and finally leaping in the air. This made everyone take in lots of oxygen and laugh out loud, by which time they had forgotten their inhibitions and were keen to speak English. Early on, I realised that neither my students nor my co-teacher were recognising or responding to the 'English' names they had all given themselves. By playing 'Cowboy', they were forced to quickly learn their own and each other's 'new' names, use their peripheral vision and be quick to respond to stimuli in English (I was frequently surprised by the 'winners' who were often those who were shyer or slower to contribute during the regular classes). Using these 'games' really improved the class dynamic and, once they had got used to me, the students rapidly grew in confidence. In the oral classes, this allowed us to play word association games, improvise sketches based on a random selection of household objects, and promote and extend the learning from the regular classes in improvised role-plays. Within the main classes, we tried to make the learning real. Thus a very dry chapter from the textbook about the school of the future, culminated in groups making their own futuristic schools out of cardboard boxes and then presenting them to their peers for enquiry and assessment.

During Lent, I was able to teach my pupils about the British tradition of eating pancakes while incorporating a grammar point: the contrast between present simple and present continuous. The day before we gave the students a list of verbs to look up including 'break', 'pour', 'whisk' and 'beat'. The following day, I brought in my pancake equipment and ingredients and my colleague brought her electric hot plate: we tested the recall of the new verbs, then I introduced the words for my 'tools' and a very brief explanation of the reason for eating pancakes at the start of Lent. I then demonstrated making and frying an actual

pancake using the present continuous. My co-teacher used Information Checking Questions to check the students understanding. After two volunteers ate the pancake, we gave each group a chopped-up list of the same instructions I had used but in the present simple (e.g. “to make a pancake we break, mix, sift...” etc.) Randomly selected students then had to explain the process back to us in the correct order. And all in 45 minutes (one of the many benefits of having two teachers in the classroom!) This is an extreme example but we used realia wherever possible to promote spontaneous questions and to ignite ideas.

At the end of the year, I completed the chapter on Heroes by introducing my own personal hero, Anne Frank. I dressed up in character and told the students about ‘my’ life, which prompted all kinds of spontaneous questions from the students. We then asked the students to investigate the lives of their own personal heroes, Chinese or western, famous or family, living or dead. They wrote about these heroes (ranging from Mao Zedong to Audrey Hepburn) in the first person. From each class I then got students to volunteer to ‘be’ their hero. They dressed up in character and presented themselves to their peers, telling ‘their’ life story in character, with the rest of the class then able to ask questions. (Ranging from ‘Are you a ghost?’ to ‘What did you think of Stalin?’ addressed to ‘Winston Churchill’).

Throughout all these activities, we emphasised empathy and creativity, thinking skills and problem solving; group work and negotiating with peers in English where possible; improvisation and spontaneity; and communication before accuracy. Clearly this was facilitated by having a reduced timetable and enthusiastic, disciplined students; nevertheless, I intend to incorporate as many of these skills as I am able now that I have returned to the UK.

Some of the challenges I have faced

As an experienced teacher I was used to being in charge of my own classroom, and also to a certain level of responsibility and influence within the UK school environment, as indeed was my teaching partner, so it was a huge change for both of us to take on joint responsibility for two classes, and to allow another teacher into our teaching space.

Communication: Making ourselves understood was sometimes exasperating and time-consuming. Unlike UK-trained MFL teachers, Chinese English teachers have seldom spent much time, if any, in an English-speaking country, and thus they can lack the fluency one usually acquires by having lived abroad. As they are allocated to one grade at a time, and do not teach through the whole secondary age range, they rapidly lose the fluency or extended vocabulary they had when they first joined the profession. Many of my colleagues acknowledged that this is a disadvantage to them. Similarly, they have never had to discuss pedagogy and methodology in English before, so terms such as kinaesthetic; differentiation; rubric; mark scheme; lesson objective; starter; plenary; word search and grammar auction have all had to be explained and learned and this took a lot of time.

Assessment: A challenge for us both was that the main requirements of the Project, to improve fluency and communicative ability in spoken English, are actually never assessed in the Chinese middle school system. All formal, summative assessments measure reading, writing and listening but not speaking. Thus, although I know the students made rapid and significant improvements in their spoken English, this is not formally assessed within the

school system, and this was a source of tension, especially around the monthly exam time. As teachers are assessed and paid on the basis of their exam results, my teaching partner was keen to revert to her default teaching method of rote learning and gap-fill exercises prior to exams, and it was at times hard to justify continuing to promote a communicative approach to teaching, even though this had been my brief. It was also frustrating not being able to produce statistics to prove to students and to colleagues how quickly and profoundly the students improved in their spoken English.

Lack of recordable progression: Students are assessed monthly on gap-fill grammar activities and short writing tasks, and these are all marked out of 100%. Neither the text books, which we were obliged to follow with little deviation, nor the monthly tests, allowed for showing progression. The test scores do not really indicate whether a student has acquired more skills and is working at a linguistically more sophisticated level than in previous assessments. Much as I was frustrated by the shortcomings of the British National Curriculum Levels in the past, I sorely wished for a marking scheme that would have allowed me to evaluate the progress of my students' abilities over time, and to be able to rate their different skills separately.

Being observed: On a human level, we both had to get used to being frequently observed by all kinds of professionals, all of whom were very curious about the team teaching project and the new ideas I had been sharing. Lesson observations in China are not subtle affairs: for my very first lesson at the school in September 2011, I arrived at the room to find six other Chinese teachers of English sitting at the back of the class with clipboards, waiting to observe the 'foreign expert'. Although I was used to being observed and expected it as part of this project, I was a bit surprised to find six all at once at my very first lesson (Chinese classrooms have just enough room for the 34 desks in rows so six observers inevitably compromised the students' space). However, they were even more surprised when I expected them to join in with the lesson that included a running dictation, group work and a ball-throwing Q+A plenary. Later however, when representatives from the Chaoyang Education Committee came to observe us, there were 14 adults with clipboards, two cameramen and a photographer in the room, as well as the 34 students we were teaching.

I quickly got used to such observations, and to having myself, my resources and my students endlessly photographed. It was important to remember that I was introducing all these observers to something they had never ever seen before, and it was heartening to see officials with clipboards eager to take part in our lessons. Their response consistently was to say how much they enjoyed being in my very animated lesson and that they learned something, to which my response always was that this is how the students learn best, by being actively involved in the lesson.

The successes I have had

Increase in fluency and confidence: Both my classes, irrespective of the students' individual levels of ability, showed a rapid increase in their fluency and confidence in their spoken English within the first few months. We conducted the lessons entirely in English and students had to adapt rapidly to making requests and explaining their answers in English, which they did. In group tasks they could work together in English and would berate each

other if necessary with “No Chinese!” We ended each unit with a summative activity, e.g. a group task or project presented to the rest of the class, where students had to listen for key details in their peers’ work. It was such a delight to have pupils genuinely interact during these presentations - “How do you spell it?”, “Please speak more slowly / clearly” and “Please say it again” being frequent interjections - and they were harsh judges of each other’s work, quick to peer correct. We surveyed the students at the end of the first semester to ask them what they thought of the team teaching model and the student-centred teaching. Overwhelmingly they commented on how pleased they were with themselves that they could understand the lesson in English and that they could communicate with a foreigner! I am probably still the only foreigner most of them have ever interacted with.

Extended writing skills: I made a point of working on extending their writing skills. We focussed on using connectives to make longer sentences, giving opinions and reasons, using different verb forms other than first person and different tenses to make their writing more interesting. We then took the previously unheard of step of sharing good examples of writing with the rest of the class to show what we wanted and what some students were already producing. This was obviously culturally an unfamiliar move and was met with studied silence the first time we tried it, but it had the desired effect. Many more students produced more adventurous writing next time, once they had seen what their peers were doing. Later we moved on to peer-assessment and students used a range of different coloured highlighters to show where their peers had met the criteria for a given task.

If the successes of the students weren’t enough I am very proud of the way my teaching partner took on so many new ideas and was prepared to ‘have a go’. It was heartening to see her grow in confidence, from protesting that she was ‘too shy’, to teaching vocabulary with physical actions and eliciting the grammar point from the students after demonstrating with ‘human sentences’. Her English improved much more rapidly than my Chinese!

Outcomes at the end of the first year

On July 9th, all the NET’s and CETs involved in the first year of the Chaoyang Education Project attended a conference to celebrate the success of the end of the first year. Both BISS and the Chaoyang Education Committee recognised that our work had had a positive impact and funding was guaranteed for the CEP to continue and the work of the initial 5 local schools and the 10 initial NETs is billed to expand to 50 schools and 100 NETs by year 3.

At the conference, my Chinese teaching colleague reported to the assembled teachers present, that not only had the 3 foreign teachers at her school (myself and two others) had a profound effect on the English teachers, but that colleagues from other disciplines had been inspired by our new ideas, to examine their own teaching. Nearly all the schools, which were involved in this first year of the Project, have opted to continue next year.

The project continues to be an ‘experiment’ however, with individual Chinese teachers being partnered with NETs to work on the experiment, while working within a team of colleagues sticking to the traditional methods. My co-teaching partner often wondered and worried aloud how she would manage to keep on teaching ‘the new way’ without me to support her. Although I am more than convinced of her ability to use ‘our’ methods on her own, I was

concerned as to what incentive there would be for her to do so once I had left, other than the very much raised expectations of the students. I can now report that I know she has been allocated to a new NET for the forthcoming academic year, and thus can continue to develop her new skills as part of the 'experiment'.

Whether this project will ever be more than just an 'experiment' is unclear. The Chinese education system is rooted in thousands of years of Confucian tradition, and it is not going to change profoundly in just one year, and probably not even in the projected first five years of the project. Societal pressures can be persuasive: parents place enormous value on getting their one child a place at university; applicants far outweigh places, and competition is fierce. It is my feeling that neither parents or students are going to renege on exam success until such time as the current student cohorts are themselves the education officials and ministers who are able to start making the changes from the bottom up rather than the top down, as is currently the case.

Conclusion

Overall, despite our frequent different points of view, it has been an absolute luxury to team-teach with my co-teacher this year; two heads (and two sets of eyes) are definitely better than one. It has been an enormous privilege to be able to share so much of what I take for granted and do routinely in my teaching in the UK (and yet which somehow never seems to be enough to satisfy OFSTED and is always three steps behind the latest initiative) and instead to be thanked and respected for sharing a new approach to teaching, which has animated and motivated students and teachers alike. I too have been able to experiment with new teaching methods acquired from our Friday training sessions. I have taken back to the UK a healthy respect for the Chinese ability to rote learn pages of vocabulary and dialogue, and I intend to introduce a little of this discipline into my next job. By experimenting and sharing my skills in a new context, I feel all the more confident in my own ability to teach languages and am convinced of the benefits of an animated, dynamic and physical approach to language and communication.