

A CRANE AMONG THE CHICKENS?

evaluating a training programme
for English teachers in China



SHANGHAI FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION PRESS

A CRANE AMONG THE CHICKENS?
evaluating a training programme
for English teachers in China

Tony Ward
Betty Barr
Chai Mingjiong
Hua Dongfan
Kong Xinqiang
Lu Haihong

Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press

(沪) 新登字 203 号

A CRANE AMONG THE CHICKENS?
evaluating a training programme
for English teachers in China
编著 *Tony Ward* 等

上海外语教育出版社出版发行

上海市印刷七厂印刷

开本 850×1168 1/32 5.5 印张 137 千字

1995 年 3 月第 1 版 1995 年 3 月第 1 次印刷

印数: 1—1 500 册

ISBN 7-81046-010-2

G·436 (外) 定价: 6.50 元

Preface

This book presents an evaluation of the impact of two teacher training programmes held in Shanghai on the views and teaching practices of those who took part in them. Sponsored by the State Education Commission of the People's Republic of China and the Overseas Development Administration of the British government, the inquiry was carried out by a team composed of four members of staff from Shanghai International Studies University — Chai Mingjiong, Hua Dongfan, Kong Xinqiang and Lu Haihong — together with two British Council lecturers, Betty Barr and myself. Drawing up this report fell to my lot, but what it has to say naturally rests upon the work of the team as a whole.

On behalf of the team I should like to take this opportunity to thank all the former students who took so much time and effort to assist us, particularly those who so kindly extended their hospitality to us on our visits to their institutions. Among the many others who assisted us with our work particular thanks are due to Yuan Hejuan and Yu Jianhua of Shanghai International Studies University for helping to smooth the path of the project. Barbara Wickham performed a similar role from her base in the Cultural Section of the British Embassy. Indispensable assistance on many of the field trips was provided by George Wang. Mike Wallace provided great impetus to the project in his capacity as

our consultant. Thanks are also due to Jenny Thomas for her contributions in this role during the initial stages of our work and to Cyril Weir for valuable advice and suggestions.

Tony Ward
Shanghai, July 1994

Contents

Preface	1
Chapter 1 Introduction	1
Chapter 2 Aims and methods	21
Chapter 3 Classroom observation.....	39
Chapter 4 The questionnaire	55
Chapter 5 Follow-up workshops	102
Chapter 6 Summary and conclusions	121
Appendices	
Appendix 1 Middle school English lessons	137
Appendix 2 Observation scheme category definitions— first draft	140
Appendix 3 Observation scheme category definitions— final version	141
Appendix 4 The observation schedule	142
Appendix 5 Summary data	143
Appendix 6 SMSTT questionnaire	144
Appendix 7 ATT questionnaire	153
Appendix 8 Pilot questionnaire on ways of teaching English	160
Bibliography	165

Chapter 1

Introduction

“Sometimes you try to share the ideas, they even turn up their noses at you, describing you as ‘trying to be a crane among the chicks’.” The forlorn comment comes from a middle school English teacher recently returned to his school in a remote province of China, full of enthusiasm for the new methods of teaching English garnered from two years away on a teacher-training course in Shanghai. The fate that met this teacher and his colleagues on the course once the course was over is the subject of this study. That the trainees were gaining in terms of competence in using different approaches to teaching was evident while the course was in progress, but what we wished to know was whether this had any impact once they returned to their schools. Our hope was that they would be returning from Shanghai to the remote regions from which many came taking with them something more than just the fashionable Shanghai clothes that so many took as gifts, but whether their new ideas would be so welcome was, as we have seen, rather less certain.

What follows, then, is a report on a study undertaken to assist in the evaluation of two in-service training courses for teachers of English held at Shanghai International Studies University (SISU) through a follow-up study of former trainees.

The study took place over a three-year period from 1991 under the auspices of the Chinese State Education Commission (SEdC) and the British Overseas Development Administration (ODA), as did the two courses themselves. The most recent of these was a senior middle school teacher training (SMSTT) course for teachers working in less developed areas of China. This two-year course, designed and run at five universities, is still in operation at SISU and forms the primary focus of attention of the study. The other course, no longer currently in operation at SISU, was a one-year course in advanced teacher training (ATT) for lecturers in higher education. For the ATT group we focused our attention on the 143 trainees who completed the four courses held between 1984 and 1988, for the SMSTT group on the 170 who graduated from the three courses held at SISU between 1988 and 1992.

Our principal aim was to determine to what extent the teaching practices of former students on the courses have altered following their return to their schools and colleges. In other words our concern was not with assessing improvement in students' language proficiency and the ability to apply new methods evident while the courses were in progress, but in seeing how far, if at all, these changes were carried away with them. This was achieved by a follow-up study of former students to determine whether their teaching had changed and, if it had not, to try to establish why. This was set in train by visits to the schools and colleges of a sample of former students during which their teaching and, in the case of the SMSTT group, the teaching of colleagues at the same school, was observed and recorded for subsequent analysis. At the same time interviews were held with the

teachers, their colleagues and their students to gain a better understanding of the situational constraints shaping the methods of teaching English that were adopted. This in turn fed into the construction of a questionnaire sent to all those who had graduated from the courses during the years that the study focuses upon. Subsequently in the case of the SMSTT group further visits were undertaken to provide some of the additional support felt to be needed by former trainees in their attempts to introduce new ways of teaching English into their schools and areas.

A further aim was to contribute to the development of forms of follow-up research suited to the Chinese context and it is hoped that the lessons learned here may prove of use to subsequent studies.

This study pays special attention to the context in which teachers work and it concentrates on five northern provinces of China, three in the remote northwest. It therefore seems worthwhile before proceeding further to provide a general description of education in China today to help readers understand the background of the teaching programme.

The Chinese educational system

In China most children start their primary education at the age of six. In urban areas primary school usually lasts for six years, while in many rural areas it may only last for five. Children then go to middle school (the equivalent of secondary school in the UK). Middle school can last for six years, comprising three years junior middle school (13–15 years old approximately) and three years senior middle school (16–18

years old approximately). Many students start to work at the age of 16, as only 38% of junior middle school students enter senior middle school; qualified students proceed to higher education after completing senior middle school.¹

With regard to teacher training, there are different levels of provision which vary in different regions of the country. In general, the provision is as follows:

- a) Normal School (Shifan Xuexiao) — District level
junior middle school graduates are trained for 2 years to be primary school teachers
- b) Normal College (Shifan Zhuanke Xuexiao) — District level
senior middle school graduates are trained for 2 years to be junior middle school teachers
- c) Normal Institute (Shifan Xueyuan) — Provincial level
senior middle school graduates are trained for 4 years to be senior middle school teachers
- d) Normal University (Shifan Daxue) — Provincial or national level
senior middle school graduates are trained for 4 years to be senior middle school or college teachers (in fact, many find jobs other than teaching)
- e) Education College (Jiaoyu Xueyuan)
originally planned for in-service training of unqualified teachers, these colleges, at provincial or district level, now also provide some pre-service training

As mentioned earlier, the present evaluation project is concerned with the results of two in-service training courses held at SISU:

- a) Senior Middle School Teacher Training (SMSTT) — mainly

for middle school teachers of English who have attended Normal College for 2 years and now wish to be fully qualified senior middle school teachers.

- b) Advanced Teacher Training (ATT) — mainly for college teachers of English.

These courses will be described in detail later in this chapter. But before doing so we wish to outline some of the problems currently faced by those recruited to them.

Teachers' low pay and morale

China's educational spending is very low compared to other countries. According to UNESCO's 1991 report, China's expenditure on basic education accounted for 0.78% of the world's total, even though the country has 19.81% of its primary and secondary students.²

The amount of spending on education is also low when considered as a percentage of the national budget. As reported in the official *China Daily*: "Last year (1993), the government spent 3% of the gross national product (GNP) and 12.7% of the nation's budgeted expenditures on education, an increase of 0.3% over the previous year."³ This was in spite of the fact that the central government had decided that education expenditures would be no less than 15% of the country's budget during the Eighth Five-Year Plan (1991–1995).⁴

Even though 80% of educational spending went to teachers' salaries, low pay is driving an increasing number of teachers out of schools. "According to *Guangming Daily*, 216,000 teachers quit their jobs in 1992, 2.4 per cent of the total. More than half

that left were 35 or under.”⁵

As a result staff shortages can prove grave: “In 1988, in Fujian Province’s Ningde Prefecture, 850 teachers quit their jobs. This not only caused 148 schools to close but seriously affected the morale of teachers who remain.”⁶

Besides the departure of colleagues for better-paid jobs, a further reason for the low morale of teachers is that in certain regions, particularly in rural areas, teachers’ salaries are sometimes not paid for several months.⁷

It is not only the lack of money which causes low morale. Health is also an important consideration. “In a survey of 815 teachers in Zhejiang Province, 30 per cent said their top priority is keeping physically fit, far ahead of making money or worrying about housing.”⁸

Students’ low motivation

Particularly in rural areas, students are not motivated to attend school at all, let alone to study English.

China has already launched a nine-year compulsory education system. However, many localities have failed to effectively implement the compulsory system.... Statistics show that more than 10 per cent of the country’s [primary] pupils and middle school students quit school last year. And prohibitively high school charges were one of the biggest reasons behind this.⁹

In an article entitled “Why Don’t They Want to Learn Eng-

lish? ,¹⁰ a participant on the SMSTT course at Beijing Foreign Studies University lists four reasons for studying at school given by middle school students in the countryside:

- 1) Studying to join the army
- 2) Studying for "recruiting workers and cadres (a recruitment exam for which English is not needed)
- 3) Studying for "parents" (i.e., only to please parents)
- 4) Studying in order to escape manual labour

As is shown in the article, English is not relevant for any of the above aims.

Teacher training in China

As stated earlier, there are various types of teacher training institutions in China. In addition, there are educational radio and TV programmes and other forms of teacher training. However, only 41.3% of junior middle school teachers and 43.5% of senior middle school teachers "have formal training records."¹¹

The morale of teacher trainees, like that of teachers, is low. "Currently, about 75 per cent of the undergraduates at normal universities come from rural areas. Most of them enter colleges as a springboard to escape rural life. When they graduate, they try every means possible to find jobs other than teaching. In Yilong County, Sichuan Province, only 7 of the 151 graduates from a normal school became teachers".¹²

In-service teacher training is carried out at many levels: county, prefectural and provincial.¹³ The provision is, however, far from adequate; hence the existence of such courses as the SMSTT and ATT.

Recent changes

a) In March, 1993, the State Council issued the Essentials of China's Educational Reform and Development, setting objectives for reform and development in the 1990s. It introduces a series of measures that focus on breaking the government's monopoly over education, granting more management autonomy to educational institutions, restructuring the college enrolment system, and opening more funding channels for education.¹⁴

b) A Teachers' Law went into effect on January 1, 1994. "How much wages will rise, however, is unclear... Since conditions in China vary from region to region, it is difficult for the central government to offer a unified wage rise package."¹⁵

c) "[In 1993], commercialization permeated every corner of the nation, including education." Schools and universities became more "profit-oriented" and "private education enjoyed a boom".¹⁶ Unfortunately teacher training is not among the most profitable of courses for colleges to run. At a time when students are expected to pay for their college tuition some incentive is being provided through the provision of state scholarships to students in teacher training colleges.¹⁷

d) New English textbooks are being written and were already being introduced at junior level in many parts of the country by the time this study was completed. There is an urgent need to train and re-train middle school teachers in new ways of teaching so that the books will be used appropriately and effectively.

English language teaching in middle schools in China

In China, English learning in formal classroom settings starts at various times. The majority of middle schools introduce English courses from Junior Middle 1. However, along the eastern coast of China, especially in the area of Shanghai, formal English learning starts from Primary 3, whereas in areas where the necessary teachers and facilities are not sufficiently available, it may start from as late as Senior 1.

Normally, all schools allocate 5 periods a week to English learning, each lasting 45 minutes.

The set of textbooks being used in the majority of schools is the same all over the country. Compiled under the supervision of the State Education Commission and published by the People's Education Press, it is comprised of 9 volumes, 6 for junior middle school and 3 for senior middle school (each is accompanied by a teacher's reference book and 1-2 audio cassettes).

The teaching approach embodied in the junior set is mainly audio-lingual, with a lot of substitution drills on sentence patterns. Generally, a lesson is organised in the book as follows:

- introduction of and drills on new grammar items
- a short text
- a list of new words and expressions
- exercises related to the grammar items, vocabulary and the content of the text

The approach of the senior set is mainly grammar-translational, with the lessons generally organised in the book in the following way:

- a text with notes

- a list of new words and expressions
- exercises related to grammar items, vocabulary, language points (e.g., the different usage between “stop doing...” and “stop to do...”) and the content of the text
- a further reading text

There is a syllabus for the English course in middle schools and teachers are required to follow it in their teaching. According to this syllabus, the course is aimed at training students in the four basic skills, with special emphasis on the development of reading ability. It requires that on completion of middle school education students know about the basic rules of pronunciation, acquire a fairly sound knowledge of grammar, learn around 2,000 words and a good number of daily and idiomatic expressions, and develop the ability to understand simple texts of general interest, with the help of dictionaries.

Suggestions for teaching techniques and procedures are provided for teachers in the teachers' reference books accompanying the textbooks.

Generally, students' progress is evaluated by two major exams during the course of a term, viz. the mid-term and the end-of-term exam. Starting from Senior Middle 1, there is an increasingly strong tendency for such exams to be oriented, in both form and content, towards the National Matriculation English Test (NMET), one of the nation-wide standardised examinations administered in July each year, which are also known as the College Entrance Examinations.

The NMET consists of three parts, which are called K, KU and U respectively. Part K is further divided into two sec-

tions, the first of which tests the learner's knowledge of English pronunciation by, for example, asking the learner to find among the four words "gave, save, hat, made" the word that shares the same vowel sound with the word "have". The second section of this part asks the learner to select an answer from the four given to complete a sentence. Each of the 30 sentences in this section tests a grammar point or an idiomatic expression.

Part KU is a cloze test, with 20 blanks to be filled. The examinee is to fill in each blank with one of the four candidate answer words given for that blank. This test is supposed to test the learner's overall reading comprehension of the text and his ability to apply his knowledge of English vocabulary and grammar.

Part U tests the learner's ability to use English. It is further divided into a reading and a writing section. The reading section has at least three short passages, each followed by five comprehension questions. The questions are aimed at testing the learner's understanding of both the gist and details of the texts; both the concrete facts and abstract concepts therein; and both the literal and implied meanings (including the author's intention or attitude) of certain sentences in the texts.

The writing section requires the examinee to write a passage of about 100 words based on the situation given or a set of pictures.