

Understanding English Teaching and Learning Context in China

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Abstract

The recent economic boom has seen the number of English language learners escalating in China. The Chinese enthusiasm for learning English has generated a growing interest from the West to teach in China. There is a need for these teachers to understand the unique teaching context in China. This understanding will help them deliver effective teaching. Focusing on EFL teaching history and discusses the impact of Confucian educational philosophy on its distinctive features of EFL teaching. This paper will be useful for all the educators who deal with Chinese learners and will help them make informed decisions in their classroom practices.

Key words: EFL teaching, Chinese learners, Chinese conceptions of teaching and learning, Confucian educational philosophy

Introduction

With the role that China plays in the world economy and the opportunities that English provides for an individual, more and more Chinese are committed to learning English. They have become one of the largest language learners in the world by far (Jin & Cortazzi, 2002; X. Li, 2004). Consequently an increasing number of Western teachers have been attracted to teach English in China. It is critical for these teachers to understand the teaching context in China in order to adopt appropriate teaching methods and implement efficient curricula. Although some preliminary studies have taken place in education (e.g. Watkins & Biggs, 1996), study of this kind is lacking in the discipline of second language acquisition (SLA). This paper aims to fill in this gap. It starts with a brief history of English as a foreign language in China. An examination of the wider teaching and learning context in the Confucian tradition follows. The unique features of EFL teaching in China are discussed in the last section.

Development of EFL in China

Although China prides itself in its more than five thousand years of civilization, its EFL teaching history is much shorter. Based on previous accounts (e.g. Bolton, 2003; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Jin & Cortazzi, 2002; X. Li, 2004;) and my 15 years of teaching experience in China, the history of English language teaching in China can be summarized in these three major periods: (1) before the Cultural Revolution (1949-1966), (2) during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1977), (3) the reformed and market economy era (1977- present).

Prior to the establishment of the communist New China in 1949, there were very few foreign language programmes available in schools (Jin & Cortazzi, 2002; Yao, 1993 as cited in X. Li, 2004). In the early 1950s, Russian became the widely taught foreign language in schools due to the political and economic support that China received from the (then) Soviet Union. The split between China and the former Soviet Union saw the replacement of Russian with English between the late 50s and early 60s, which resulted in a serious shortage of teachers of English. To meet the demand for more language teachers, a lot of teachers of Russian were retrained to teach English, most of them having learned English as the second foreign language.

During the Cultural Revolution, like all other subjects in schools, English language teaching was disrupted. Political movements replaced academic teaching; many English teachers were attacked or sent to the countryside (See Bolton, 2003; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Jin & Cortazzi, 2002).

The open-door policy in the late 1970s marked a new era in China. Education had its renaissance and resumed its past importance. Ever since then, English has become the most important subject in the school curricula from primary school through to university and has held a unique position in the education system in China. According to Jin and Cortazzi (2002), while the full scores for all the other subjects are 100 points in the National University Entrance Exam, the scores for English were increased “from 100 points to 120 points in the early 1990s and more

recently to 150 points” (p.56). English is the compulsory foreign language for most universities in China; most universities require their students to pass at least Band 4 of the College English Test in order to graduate. With the development of the Chinese economy and the role that China now plays in the world, learning English is no longer limited to school. More and more people start learning English to do business and further their career. Many parents send their child/children to learn English abroad. Chinese interest in English has risen further since China entered the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 and held the 2008 Olympic Games. This enthusiasm for learning English has attracted an increasing number of Western teachers to China. It is essential for them to understand the unique teaching and learning context in order to deliver effective teaching.

One of the keys to make sense of the distinctive English teaching and learning context in China is through understanding the Confucian educational philosophy. Confucius, one of the greatest thinkers and educators in ancient China, has had an enduring impact on teaching and learning in China and most of East Asia e.g. Japan, Korea, Singapore, Malaysia, etc. (Littlewood, 2000; Watkins & Biggs, 1996). The core of the educational principles in China derives from the Confucian educational philosophy. Hence, it is worthwhile to review some of the traditional educational philosophy. Drawing on historic accounts, the next section discusses Chinese conceptions of teaching and learning in the Confucian tradition.

Chinese Conceptions of Teachers and Teaching

Central to the Confucian tradition is the idea of respectful learning. Teachers are regarded as people who teach, answer questions and solve problems; learners are expected to obey and respect teachers as authority figures.

In the Confucian tradition, teachers are generally expected to assume two major responsibilities. The first and most important one is to teach. Liu (1998) pointed out Asia in

general and particularly China has ‘a long tradition of unconditional obedience to authority where the teacher is regarded as a fount of knowledge’ (Liu, p.5). The primary role of teachers is to impart knowledge to students and supply answers. To fulfil this role, teachers should have an in-depth knowledge of their discipline and effective skills for transmitting that knowledge. This is reflected in the Chinese metaphor that “teachers must have a full bucket of water to dispense to give students a bowl of water” (Hu, 2002). It is teachers’ responsibility to decide what is to be taught and ensure that students progress satisfactorily.

Secondly, teachers are expected to “cultivate people” (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006, p.11). That is, teachers have to help learners develop good moral virtues such as loyalty, fidelity and modesty (Hu, 2002; Zhang & Watkins, 2007). It is not uncommon for Chinese teachers to make themselves available for pastoral care and give advice to their students on various issues ranging from their future career to their personal problems (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Hu, 2002; J.Li, 2004). The social and moral obligations that teachers are obliged to take on are evident in the various honorable titles that have been given to teachers in China, such as “the people’s teachers”, “engineers of the human soul”, “sculptors of the future”, “the gardeners” (Hu, 2002, p. 99).

To sum up, teachers in China have dual responsibilities. One is intellectual education where teachers are seen as the source of knowledge. Another is related to the moral education of learners. Teachers are expected to teach the book and cultivate the person (*jiao shu yu ren*). Thus, teachers are held in deference and deeply respected in the Confucian tradition. The loyalty and deference that one demonstrates to a teacher is expected to be on a par to that shown to one’s father (Flowerdew & Miller, 1995; Hu, 2002).

There are a number of empirical studies that have investigated Chinese learners’ conceptions of teachers and teaching. Jin and Cortazzi (1998) surveyed 129 Chinese and 205 British university students’ conceptions of what a good teacher entailed. They found a good

teacher as described by Chinese students was someone who had deep knowledge, was able to answer questions and was a good moral model. In comparison, British students described a good teacher as someone who was able to motivate students, use effective teaching methods and organize a variety of class activities. It seems that the Chinese participants put more emphasis on the importance of knowledge while the British focused on teaching methods and techniques.

In the same vein, Zhang and Watkin (2007) conducted an empirical study of conceptions of a good teacher. The study involved three groups: 100 Chinese tertiary students, 20 Chinese teachers of English and 20 Western teachers teaching in China. They asked each participant to write a short essay in their L1 on the topic, *what makes a good English teacher at the tertiary level?* A content analysis revealed some significant differences between the three groups. While Western teachers placed great emphasis on adaptability to different teaching environments/cultures and the ability to work as a team, Chinese teachers attached importance to sound content knowledge about the subject, and Chinese students viewed teachers in accordance with their traditional roles, expecting teachers to be intellectual as well as moral models.

These empirical studies support the historical accounts that teachers in China are held in high esteem and are expected to set a good example as a source of knowledge and in terms of their moral character.

Conceptions of Learners and Learning

1. Purpose of Learning

Lee (1996), in his historical account of core Confucian educational values, discussed two purposes for learning: personal improvement and social development. The former reflects Confucius' teaching of *Ren*. According to Confucius, *Ren* (sage or goodness) is the ultimate form of human virtue and the highest purpose of human lives. A person is not born but learns to become *Ren*. Such learning is called greater learning (Lee, 1996). The loftiest and ultimate

purpose of life is to pursue human self-perfection and become a sage or attain goodness through personal commitment to learning. In other words, education and learning are meaningful only if they lead to perfection of the self and cultivation of oneself “as an intelligent, creative, independent, autonomous being” (Lee,1996, p.34). Linked to self-cultivation is another, more functional purpose for learning, that of bringing honour to one’s family and promoting social status and mobility. This purpose reflects the historical influence of the Civil Service Examination, which originated in the 7th century, on the operations of society. According to this system, those people who scored highest in the examination were selected to serve the royal government regardless of their social backgrounds; government officials were traditionally associated with fame, wealth, a beautiful wife and upward social mobility (Lee, 1996). This was not merely a vision but an achievable reality in the Confucian tradition.

J. Li’s (2003) study lent some empirical support to this account. In his comparative study of American and Chinese cultural conceptions of learning, Li employed prototype methods (see D’Andrade, 1995; Rosch, 1978, cited in J. Li, 2003; Shaver et al.1987) by asking 83 university students to provide free associations for the Chinese term *xue xi* (learning/learn). He obtained 478 terms. Then he asked 60 participants to rate the terms with regard to their relevance to learning. The rating process generated 225 terms as the core list. He then asked 100 college students to sort the terms into groups based on their similarity in meaning. Four main themes were identified: (1) perfecting oneself morally; (2) acquiring knowledge/skills for survival, self-sufficiency and careers; (3) contributing to society by linking learners’ personal pursuit of knowledge to a higher moral and social responsibility, and (4) obtaining social respect/mobility. Li pointed out that these reasons for learning were all related to Confucian values and were actively promoted by families, communities, schools and society at large (K.M. Cheng, 1996; L.B. Gao & Watkins, 2001; Lee, 1996).

Finally, learning is to pass exams. The exam culture has been predominant and influential in Chinese learning (L.Cheng, 2008; X. Gao, 2006; Kennedy, 2002). As I discussed in the preceding section, success in exams was traditionally associated with wealth, a highly-regarded government official position as well as personal and family fame. Nowadays exams play an equally important role in the society, particularly in regard to university admission. Students learn in order to pass a variety of exams. Studies (e.g. Lê, 2006; Yang, 1992; Zhong, 2010, 2012) have revealed that Chinese students did not commit to anything that was not relevant to passing an examination.

In her diary study, Huang (2005) found Chinese students were very exam oriented. They treated each exercise as if it were an exam paper. They did an enormous amount of practice test papers. As a result, they developed effective strategies for taking tests, for example, reading questions before reading or listening to any materials. Most of the students' learning revolved around exams: improving reading and listening speed as well as memorizing word lists. The students were more interested in the product than the process of learning. Because speaking was not tested, most of the learners did not address it.

X. Gao (2006) employed a retrospective interview research method to investigate strategy use of 14 Chinese learners who were studying at a British university. All the learners reported investing enormous time and energy in memorizing words in order to pass exams and fulfil curricular requirements in China. They learned for exams - to get good test results and to pass the standard, gate-keeping exams in China.

In her case study of two Chinese migrant learners in New Zealand, Zhong (2008) investigated the relationship between learner beliefs, learner strategy use and their impact on their learning. She found one learner held a firm belief about the importance of exams in his learning. Although he was learning in a new learning context (New Zealand), he did not take advantage of

the learning environment and extend his learning beyond the test requirements of his course. Instead, he spent all this non-teaching contact hours learning, revising his test papers and preparing for his upcoming exams. His learning activities were responsive to test requirements. Although the learner was in a new learning environment, the influence from his previous learning and beliefs still came into play.

Gan (2009) yielded similar findings. He found that mainland Chinese spent much more time memorizing vocabulary because the vocabulary was assessed in the national English exam.

These studies indicate that exams have a significant impact on shaping learners' approach to learning in China. Achieving well in exams is the driving force in their learning.

To sum up, in terms of the Confucian tradition, learners have three types of motivation. Intrinsically they want to cultivate themselves to become perfect. Associated with personal improvement is the practical and extrinsic purpose for learning, i.e. to have social mobility and to bring fame to one's family. Finally, higher achievement in exams leads to better job opportunities and higher social status. The supremacy of learning and the likelihood of upward social mobility have motivated Chinese for generations to strive to learn in order to realize their aspirations in life, regardless of their social status.

2. Emphasis on effort and self-determination

Although teachers are held in high esteem in the Chinese culture, there is another contributor believed to be as important and possibly more significant for successful learning: learners' determination and their own continuous efforts. As discussed in the preceding section, human perfectibility is attained in *Ren* (goodness or sagehood) and it is within the reach of everyone. This suggests that differences in ability or intelligence do not inhibit one's success in education. In Confucius' view, everyone is educable and can achieve *Ren* (sagehood or goodness) if they make an effort to learn (Lee, 1996). Xunzi, a disciple of Confucius, claimed that

“sagehood is a state that any man can achieve by cumulative effort...” (Collected in Chai, 1965, quoted in Lee 1996:30). Continuous effort and self-determination are perceived as immensely significant in the process of learning and in the pursuit of sagehood (Tweed & Lehman, 2002). They are closely tied to success and achievement. They can also result in changes in such aspects as intelligence and aptitude to perform. Although differences in intelligence and aptitude are acknowledged, they are not perceived as determinants of success. What really matters is effort, determination and steadfastness of purpose (Biggs, 1996; Hu, 2002; Lee, 1996; Snow, 2007; Zhong, 2010). It is for this reason that Chinese learners tend to blame themselves and their insufficient effort if they fail to achieve.

A variety of maxims, proverbs and sayings in Chinese is testimony to the importance attached to personal efforts. For example, *zhi yao gong fu shen, tie chu ye neng mo cheng zhen* (A continuous effort can grind an iron bar into a needle), *Qin neng bu zuo* (Diligence can make up for the stupidity), and *Xue hai wu ya, ku zuo zhou* (The ocean of learning is beyond the reach that eyes can see. Hard work is the vessel to cross it). This belief in effort and self-determination has been seen as a key factor in the academic achievement of Asians in the West (Hau & Salili, 1991; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992; Zhong, 2012).

In another comparative study of his, J.Li (2004) asked 62 Chinese and 65 US college students to describe their ideal learners, particularly in terms of what they did and how they behaved in the face of difficulty and failure. Instead of describing specific learning behaviours and actions, Chinese learners wrote extensively about what Li called ‘learning virtues’. The five virtues were:

- (1) Resolve (i.e. the determination that learners manifest to follow through on their actions in order to reach their goals in spite of problems),
- (2) Diligence (i.e. emphasizing the time and energy invested in learning),

- (3) Endurance of hardship whether this entails physical drudgery and poverty, difficult learning tasks or lack of natural ability,
- (4) Perseverance (i.e. the ability to stay on course from beginning to the end in spite of the difficulties and obstacles one encounters),
- (5) Concentration (i.e. consistent dedication involving “earnestness, patience, carefulness, and thoroughness of learning” (J.Li, 2004, pp.141-142).

In contrast, the US students’ notions of the ideal learner were more task-oriented, for example, active learning, applying scientific inquiry into the unknown world and task management and communication skills.

To conclude, Chinese students emphasize the importance of effort and self-determination in the learning process. Developing the “learning virtues” are perceived to be more critical than the actual learning activities. They believe that once they have established self-determination and commitment, they can apply themselves to any learning task and be successful in accomplishing it.

3. Typical Chinese learning strategies

3.1.Rote-memorization.

Rote learning is defined as “learning things by repeating them without thinking about them or trying to understand them” (Collins Cobuild English Dictionary for Advanced Learners, 2003, p. 1256). Gairns and Redman (1986, cited in X.Li 2004, p.9) describe the technique as follows:

This involves repetition of target language items either silently or aloud and may involve writing down the items (more than once). These items commonly appear in list form; typical examples being items and their translation equivalent, items and their definitions

(e.g. Nap=short sleep), paired items (e.g. hot-cold, tall-short), and irregular verbs. A common practice is for the learner to use one side of the list as prompts and cover the other side in order to test himself.

Rote-memorization is a learning strategy that has been frequently associated with Chinese learners. The strategy has received a lot of criticism from the West (see Barker et al.1991; Carson, 1992; Gu & Johnson, 1996; Nelson, 2001). It is regarded as simplistic and associated with a surface approach to learning. For example, Prat and Wong (1999, cited in Tweed & Tehman, 2002) reported that Western instructors in Hong Kong sometimes criticized Chinese approaches to learning as overly instrumental and regarded Chinese learners as being unwilling to think deeply and adopting a surface approach to learning. However, there are a number of studies that have challenged the view that students from the Confucian heritage tradition are merely reproductive, surface learners. Lee (1996), for instance, argued that rote-memorization should by no means be equated with mechanical rote learning, that is, learning without understanding. Lee claimed that the process of learning in the Confucian tradition also involved reflective thinking and thus entailed a deep approach rather than a surface approach to learning. According to Confucius, learning should be like this: “studying extensively, enquiring carefully, pondering thoroughly, sifting clearly, and practicing earnestly...” (The Mean, 20.19 quoted in Lee 1996, p. 35). In fact, Confucius considered critical thinking so important that he deemed learning without thinking a waste of effort: “seeking knowledge without thinking is labour lost; thinking without seeking knowledge is perilous” (Analects II.15). Although Lee agreed that rote-memorization was a crucial aspect of the learning process in the Confucian tradition, he also argued that it was never meant to be an end itself. Lee cited Wang Yangming, a neo-Confucian philosopher and educationist, who suggested three significant phases in learning: the first was memory which led to understanding and digesting what was in books. The final phase was the most important part of

learning, i.e. incorporating what one had learned from books in one's own experience. Therefore, rote-memorization is only a stage in learning and the ultimate goal of true learning is to develop one's own opinions and full comprehension. In this regard, rote-memorization precedes understanding and the purpose of using rote-memorization is to understand deeply.

Like Lee (1996), J. Li (2004) argued that Chinese learners believed that learning was a gradual process that required dedication. He observed four distinct steps in tackling learning materials: 1) memory, 2) understanding, 3) application, 4) questioning and modification of the original material. This corroborates the observation of Pratt, Kelly and Wong (1999) that Chinese students often felt frustrated and bewildered when they were confronted with a Western teacher "whose expectations and forms of assessment thrust them immediately to the far end of this chain (questioning and analysis)" (p.253).

These studies suggest that learning strategies must be understood in terms of the goals and setting. Rote-memorization in Chinese learning should not be equated with the Western idea of mechanical rote learning; it is not synonymous with surface learning. Instead it is used as a means to reflect, deepen and develop understanding. Rote-memorization is not an end in itself but a route towards understanding and a tool for creating meaning (Lê, 2006; X.Li, 2004; Rao, 2006; Tweed & Lehman, 2002).

3.2.Repetition

Repetition is linked to rote-memorization. It is a strategy usually used by Chinese learners to understand a given text further and enhance their memorization (Gan, 2009; Lê, 2006). Marton et al. (1996), for example, interviewed 20 teacher-educators from all over mainland China to explore their perceptions about learning and the extent to which rote-memorization features in these conceptions. They found that repetition, rote-memorization and understanding were interconnected and that they enhanced one another in the Chinese learning process. In other words, in

the learning process, sometimes Chinese students memorized with understanding and at other times deepening understanding came through rote-memorization. One of the participants said, “In the process of repetition, it is not a simple repetition. Because each time I repeat, I would have some new idea of understanding, that is to say I can understand better” (Marton et al.,1996, p.81).

Dahlin and Watkins (2000) interviewed 48 Hong Kong Chinese (HKC) and 18 German senior secondary school students in Hong Kong about the role of repetition in the processes of memorising and understanding. They found that a similar number of participants from both groups remembered being encouraged to recite by their parents, but the HKC students frequently said they were made to recite by their teachers. While the HKC students focused on the value of the subject matter of these early memories, the German students focused on the value of the activity itself. In other words, they used repetition to check if they really remembered something, whereas HKC students used it to lay a foundation for deeper understanding. Another difference was that the German students tended to perceive understanding as a process of sudden insight while the HKC students viewed understanding as a long process which required attentive effort and discovering new meanings in the materials studied with each repetition.

It seems that there is a difference in interpretation when the terms repetition and rote memorization are used in the West and in Asia, e.g. China. According to Chan (1999), Chinese learners have been misinterpreted as rote learners when it is, “in fact, repetitive learning that has been adopted” (Chan, 1999, p.300). Repetitive learning enables learners to attach meaning to the material learned. Two possibilities are inherent in repetition: a deep impression on the mind and discovering new meaning.

Features of EFL Teaching in China

The afore-mentioned Confucian philosophy of teaching and learning has had significant impacts on many aspects of EFL teaching in China. This influence can be summarized as follows:

1. Emphasis of rote-memorization and repetition as a teaching and learning technique. As I discussed earlier, in the Confucian tradition, rote-memorization and repetition are regarded as an important, integral aspect of a learning process. Using L1 (i.e. Chinese language) teaching as a model where texts are usually taken from literary works of renowned authors and learners are required to learn by heart each work as part of their learning, English learning in China focuses on intensive reading as a basis for language study. As Rao (1996) pointed out, teachers devote almost all their class time to teaching a text where they spot some language points (e.g. tenses, sentence structures) to explain and analyse, which is followed by paraphrasing and translating the text, drilling the patterns in the text. Students are then left to memorize new vocabulary from the text and recite their textbook from memory. Many studies on Chinese learners yielded similar results that Chinese learners reported being compelled to recite and memorize English vocabulary and texts as a learning routine in China (e.g. Huang, 2005; X.Li, 2004; Rao, 2006; Zhong, 2012).
2. Paradoxical roles of learners. As teachers are regarded as the authority in the Confucian tradition, a typical English lesson is delivered with teachers being the centre of transmitting knowledge. Learners play a very passive role in the classroom where they listen, copy notes from the board and occasionally answer questions (Rao, 1996). However, they are also expected to take charge of their learning outside the classroom and put in more efforts in their learning. Chinese learners are cultivated at home and in schools that diligence is the key to successful learning. It is not uncommon to see them spend hours and hours learning on their own initiative .e.g. previewing and reviewing lessons, memorizing wordlist and texts (Zhong, 2010, 2012).

3. Teaching and learning for exams. Exams have remained high stakes in China since the 7th century. Because of the role high-stakes testing plays in the society, achieving well in exams has remained the ultimate goal of learning for both teachers and learners. The key role of a teacher is to prepare their students to pass various competitive gate-keeping exams, particularly the National University Entrance Exams. Students' passing rate is often used as a significant criterion for determining a teacher's promotion and performance (Li, 2004; Rao, 1996, 2006; Zhong, 2012). Consequently, English teaching materials and methods are all geared to exams. Because English exams mostly test learners' explicit grammatical knowledge and reading comprehension ability, English instruction focuses on the formal properties of the English language with a little attention given to the development of learners' communicative competence. The corollary is that learners can achieve well in their discrete grammar tests and comprehend complex written materials with ease but they are barely able to engage in real-life communication. In her longitudinal study of five migrant Chinese learners in New Zealand, Zhong (2012) revealed that although four out of the five learners had learned English for more than 10 years in China, they were not competent in their listening and speaking skills; and that all her participants were not able to carry out a simple conversation with Kiwis when they first came to New Zealand but had to rely on interpreters in their daily life.
4. Co-existence of traditional and communicative teaching approaches. Before the early 1990s, the approaches to English language teaching in China were mostly grammar translation methods and the structural approach. However, learners' incompetence in their communicative skills has concerned educators and the government. In 1992, the State Education Development Commission, the official authority for setting educational policy and determining the goals, curriculum, course books and even teaching methods

throughout the country, initiated curricular changes. As a result, the traditional structure-based national syllabus has been replaced with a communicative language teaching (CLT) approach (Hu,2005; Liao, 2004; Yu, 2001). Although the government has changed the curriculum, it has been observed that a lot of teachers still adopt the traditional methods in practice (see Hu, 2002, 2003). Leng (1997, as cited in X. Li, 2004) described the phenomena as “new bottles, old wine.” In other words, the traditional instructional practices still predominate or exist side by side with CLT activities in most classrooms (Hu, 2005). Jin & Cortazzi (2002) reported that although greater emphasis had been put on adopting communicative principles and oral skills, in practice, both teachers and learners focused on grammar, reading comprehension, vocabulary and translation rather than on communication. The implementation of CLT in Chinese context is constrained by many factors (Hu, 2002, 2005; Jin & Cortazzi, 2002; Rao, 2002; Yu, 2001). These include:

- Large class sizes: most English classes in primary and secondary schools have between 50 and 80 students. Non-English major university students vary from 40 to 100 depending on the type of university. Large classes make it difficult to use pair or small group work.
- Centralized curriculum (i.e. the curriculum set by the government): teachers have very tight teaching schedules and usually dominate the class talk.
- The need for oral proficiency: CLT requires teachers to have a high oral competence. However, most teachers of English in China are non-native speakers. Not all of them are capable of delivering the whole lesson in English.

- Diversity of learning contexts: teaching facilities and resources are different between cities and rural areas, and between inland and coastal areas. Teaching innovations cannot easily be implemented in those rural and inland areas.
- High stakes exams which dictate the focus of teaching practice.

Summary

This paper aims to provide information about English learning and teaching context in China. The Confucian conceptions of teaching and learning can be summarized as follows:

- Chinese learners show high respect and trust towards teachers because they are believed to have profound and solid knowledge and they are also moral models.
- Even though Chinese endorse utilitarian benefits as part of their motivations for learning, their purposes do not end there. Individuals also seek learning to cultivate themselves morally and to aim at self-perfection.
- Chinese place a great score on constant and persistent effort, which is realized through five learning virtues: resolve, diligence, endurance of hardship, perseverance and concentration. The actual learning tasks are not of major concern. When the learning virtues are cultivated and established, they are applicable to the learning processes and the learning tasks students are engaged in.
- Typically observed learning behaviors are rote-memorization and repetition. However, current research views them as not merely mechanical in nature. They are more subtle and complex than they appear to be. Rote-memorization and repetition initiate a learning process that enhances deeper understanding.
- Exams play a critical role in both teaching and learning. Examination-oriented achieving behaviour is typical of the Chinese learner.

Apart from the influence of the Confucian philosophy of teaching and learning, approaches to English language teaching in China have also been influenced by the grammar translation method and the structural approach. The mixture makes EFL teaching in China distinctive which has the following unique features:

- Teaching relies heavily on translation, drilling and constant testing.
- Emphasis is placed on grammar, vocabulary and reading.
- Formal lecturing is a common delivery mode where teacher talk dominates and students keep notes. It is used to prepare students with the knowledge about English they need to pass the competitive and selective National University Entrance Exam.

With the increasing contact of China with the rest of the world, particularly the West, there is a dire need for communicative competence among the learners. This need has seen some changes in terms of teaching methods in China. However, due to a variety of reasons, particularly the predominant role of text-based exams, the change seems to be slow and gradual. It is essential to take these features into account when teaching in China.

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