

000623 Article

On May twelfth, I attended a teacher's conference in Jinan. The conference was entitled, "The Chinese and Foreign Teachers Symposium on English Instruction in China." It was sponsored by the Shandong Teacher's Association, Provincial Association for International Exchange, Amity Foundation, WorldTeach and China Teach. It was attended by perhaps one hundred people from various schools in the Shandong Province. Most of the attendees were from universities or middle schools. The bulk of the teachers present being from the Shandong Teachers University. The conference was by invitation and I am not sure which schools were invited or why. I was invited since I am teaching here in China as a participant in the WorldTeach program. There were also other foreigners at the meeting, mostly from the US. The conference was conducted in English and the English of the Chinese teachers was excellent.

The conference was a two day meeting. The first day started with the observation of two English classes at a local middle school. The school was connected with the Shandong Teachers University and serves as a teaching lab for the university. The class observation was followed by a afternoon session that included speeches by several representatives from the sponsors of the conference. The second day started with small group discussions followed by a general assembly in the afternoon. It was very interesting to meet so many other teachers who wanted to speak about teaching English and to share their teaching experiences.

I will try to try to outline some of the main ideas that were presented in the general assemblies and the small group sessions. Overall, people agreed that one of the biggest hindrances to teaching English in China is the exam system. Currently, the exams are only testing written English (although this will change.) Therefore, teachers are teaching only to the exam because there is so little time and so much material to cover. The students and the teachers work very hard and there is a great desire to learn English on the part of the students. But, there is not enough time to try new teaching techniques or to allow varying forms of learning. Rather, the current education system is based solely on examination skills, not cognitive reasoning. Students are often not taught to think individually which leads to passive and mechanical learning.

Some solutions that were suggested to solve the problems included a change in emphasis from written English to spoken English. Furthermore, the classes should include an active learning environment that is student centered rather than teacher centered. These are ideas that have worked with success in the United States. Perhaps teacher training in the universities in China could include more training in group dynamics and in how to relate to students. In this way, teachers could teach more of what the students are interested in learning.

Interest in the teaching material by the students is important to increase the motivation to learn and due to the size of the classes. China has a large population, so large classes are here to stay for some time. Therefore, motivation is very important because a large, motivated class is better than a small, unmotivated class.

Again, finding what the students want to learn and catering the lessons towards their

interests is difficult to do. This is especially so if the material that must be taught for the exam does not coincide with what the students are interested in learning. However, teaching tools such as games or small group work based on the lesson can be used to increase the student interest. However, new teaching techniques can not be introduced into the classroom overnight, but rather must be introduced over time. In this way, the teacher and the students together can adjust to the changes in the classroom.

There was also a discussion on the motivation of the teachers. Teachers work very hard, but often the only motivation for teachers is that good students will get good scores on the exam resulting in more students applying to the school. Although the prestige of the school is important in attracting new students, the idea of additional incentives was suggested. For example, providing teachers that work hard with better salaries or better teaching tools such as computers. Although incentives such as these are not feasible at every school, some sort of reward for the best teachers would be good for their motivation.

The participation of a foreign teacher at a school was also discussed. Too often the foreign teacher is only there for the prestige of the school and the school does not know how to use the teacher once he/she is there. The expectations of the teacher and of the school must be expressed initially. The foreign teacher's lessons can be integrated with those of the Chinese English teachers. The integration will require good communication between the foreign teacher and the other teachers at the school.

Lastly, some conceptions about the English language were discussed. The idea that the students can write, but not speak was a theme that one often hears. This has been so ingrained into people's heads that many people who are good speakers do not believe in their abilities. Furthermore, there are so many sources of English and the language itself is constantly changing. An accent from the US is no more standard than an accent from England, New Zealand or the Philippines. Chinese teachers must have confidence in their own abilities rather than to constantly pursue the elusive goal of speaking "standard English".

The conference was very successful in allowing English teachers to share their thoughts on English instruction. I got a lot out of attending and I look forward to future conferences.

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