The Review of Literature
for the Changing Context of Tertiary English Teaching in
China and Teachers’ Responses to the Challenges

Lianli Gao
University of Wollongong

Beverly Derewianka
University of Wollongong

Zhongli Chen
Beijing University of Chemical Technology

The purpose of this review is to analyse the topic of the study: the changing context of tertiary English teaching in China and teachers’ responses to the challenges.

The main research question is how well tertiary English teachers are prepared to meet the challenges facing them within the changing expectations in their profession? There are five contributing questions:

➢ What changes have occurred in the Chinese context over the past 20 years that have increased the demands placed on tertiary teachers of English?
➢ What sort of expectations are placed on the teachers as a result of these changes?
   Eg: in terms of
   ● curriculum development,
   ● knowledge of subject matter,
   ● a higher level of English proficiency,
   ● and contemporary pedagogy
➢ What resources do teachers bring to the workplace in responding to these expectations?
   Eg:
   ● What sort of training have they undergone?
   ● What levels of English proficiency do they have?
   ● Why should they change?
   ● What would help them change?
   ● What does it mean to be a professional in China?
➢ How are the teachers constrained in meeting the expectations by such factors as eg:
   ● the examination system,
● the textbooks,
● the lack of professional development opportunities,
● the syllabus,
● lack of financial resources,
● lack of facilities and so on.

How might change be effected to address the gap between what the teachers can currently do and what the expectations of them are, keeping in mind the constraints above?

This review is to seek to answer these research questions by discussing the changing expectations facing college English teachers (CETs) working in Chinese universities, and the resources that the teachers bring to meet these changing demands.

The scope of the literature review discussed in this paper ranges from what the changing expectations on English Teachers are to what these teachers bring to their job. Therefore, it is structured in two categories:

The changing expectations placed on Second Language teachers:
Teachers in TESOL field
Teachers in tertiary education in China

The resources college English teachers bring to their workplace:
Teachers’ pre-service training
Teachers’ professionalism
Their level of English proficiency
Their knowledge of the subject matter
Their teaching methodology
Their attitude towards the changes in college English teaching in China

1. The Changing Expectations Placed on Second Language Teachers

Two parts are involved in this section: the changing expectations for TESOL teachers in TESOL field and the changing expectations on college English teachers in China.

1.1. The Changing Expectations on Teachers in TESOL Field

Research into the expectations placed on teachers in TESOL can be divided into three parts based on the complex and dynamic nature of language teaching: the definition of TESOL teachers, the specific expectations on TESOL teachers, and the theoretical definition of the knowledge structure of TESOL teachers.

1.1.1: The definition of TESOL teachers. Internationally, there is a hot debate about whether TESOL teaching can be considered a profession, if using strict criteria such as self-regulation, high social status, restricted entry, and consensus on their knowledge
structure (Lortie, 1975; Schon, 1983; Elliot, 1989; Stake, 1989). This will be significant to the present study, as the status of and expectations on English teachers in China are in a state of flux.

1.1.2: The specific expectations on TESOL teachers. In the recent past years, there has been much discussion on the changing expectations with regard to the nature of teachers’ professional skills (Burton, 1998; Freeman, 1989; 1996; Flowerdew, 1992; Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Golombek, 1998; Leung & Teasdale, 1998; Nunan, 1996; Richards, 2001; Roberts, 1998; White, 1998).

A number of TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) organizations have attempted to determine the changing demands facing TESOL teachers. The UCLES (The University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate) Certificate in Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA), a widely taught initial qualification for language teachers in UK, provides six aspects of standards in its syllabus overview (UCLES, 1997). Although these standards focus on developing professional skills, they neglect criteria for the evaluation of teachers’ language proficiency. The Standards for Teachers of the Adult Learners developed by the TESOL Association in America (2002) focuses on eight domains involving planning, instructing, assessing, identity and setting, language, learning, content and commitment to professionalism with relevant standard criteria. Although these standards are continually revised (2002), there still exist some limitations to EFL (English as a foreign language) teachers in non-target language contexts. For example, “use a variety of assessment tools, both formal and informal (TESOL, p.3)”. In some EFL contexts, the assessment tools or instruments are subject to administrators. Thus, the changing expectations on TESOL teachers have to consider the interdependence between first and second languages and the different cultural contexts.

Leung and Teasdale (1998), make explicit factors regarding ESL (English as a second language) teachers competence for the purpose of professionalism in the changing world. These factors involve context, current policy and practice, the purpose of teachers’ development, teaching actions, personal beliefs, discipline-relevant theories, curricula, and syllabus objectives. After discussing those elements and their relationship, they provide a model of the skills for TESOL teachers. Compared with other expectations and demands on TESOL teachers, this model is more suitable to the EFL contexts because most of the competencies of TESOL teachers provided by Leung and Teasdale (1998) could be applied in China.

1.1.3: The theoretical definition of the knowledge structure of TESOL teachers. The knowledge structure of teachers relates to understanding what the teachers have received in their area preparation, how they perceive this preparation reflected in their workplace, and what they perceive is needed for their professional growth (Shrier, 1993, p.112).

Peyton (1997) in his article lists a number of TESOL teachers knowledge base:
language proficiency, the ability to comprehend contemporary media, a strong background in the liberal arts and their content area and understanding of the realities, pedagogical knowledge and using various technologies. They are not only the expectations on TESOL teachers but also used to solve problems in TESOL teaching, particularly in EFL contexts because the language proficiency is normally considered as the prerequisite in EFL contexts.

From this we can see that there is as yet no consensus as to the expectations of teachers in the TESOL profession, however it is clear that it is a burning issue that will have repercussions in terms of the demands placed on TESOL teachers internationally.

1.2. The Changing Expectations on English Teachers in Tertiary Education in China

Compared with the changing expectations on TESOL teachers worldwide, there exists a lack of the literature in China in terms of the changing expectations from the college English teachers (CETs) themselves, from the administrators and policy developers, and from the college English teaching system. What is reviewed here is the conventional expectations on teachers in the philosophical sense in China, some expectations in the College English Teaching Curriculum (CETC, 1999, Revised) and the Demands on College English Teaching (DCET, 2004), and some current expectations on college English teachers from some students, officials and “teachers researchers” (Gao, 2000, p.96).

1.2.1: The philosophical expectations on teachers in China is summarized by Hanyu, one of the philosophers on the Confucianism two thousand years ago, the teacher as a person who transmits wisdom, imparts knowledge, and resolves doubts. This idea has lasted thousands of years until now. The new definitions of teachers are revised as “the engineer for the soul of a human” (means transmitting wisdom) or “the gardener” (means cultivating embryonic understandings) (Ross,1993). In recent ten years, the roles of English teachers have been widely discussed. They were named from ‘explainers’ and ‘organizers’ of the class to ‘participants’ and ‘communicators’ with their students (Wang, 1996; Xia, 2002; Li, 2003). This is a critical change in terms of contemporary second language teaching theories. However, there are no further specific explanations and discussions about these expectations on the tertiary English teachers in the pedagogical sense, although there are growing expectations and demands placed in the Curriculum (CETC, 1999, Revised) and the Demands (DCET, 2004).

1.2.2: Based on the expectations on English teachers in the College English Teaching Curriculum (CETc, 1999, Revised), there are eight stressed points on English teaching at university level, such as acquiring appropriate language abilities in teaching; teaching by grading students; providing ESP and EAP courses for junior and senior students as higher level of teaching; balancing the integration between reading and listening, writing, and translating; identifying appropriate teaching approaches based on different contexts and situations; emphasizing the function of textbooks; understanding assessment and teaching; and knowing technical means for different contexts. This
syllabus takes many aspects of English teachers into account for the sake of actual tertiary classroom. However, the crux of the matter is that the syllabus does not exemplify any teaching model. It overemphasizes the contents of textbooks and ignores teachers’ professional development in terms of CETs’ expectations.

Compared with the CETC (1999, Revised), which was designed for the pedagogical purposes, the Demands on College English Teaching (DCET, 2004) emphasizes teachers’ proficiency, and commitment to their professionalism including the new teaching model with Internet and multimedia. However, DCET (2004) ignores the role of teachers in English teaching, the theoretical teaching approach teachers are expected to use, and the workouts which the teachers have to follow as “a variety of ways through which to make the learning process engaging and rewarding” (Dubin & Olshtain, 1986, p.96). These points related to CETs might be a hot issue to be discussed further since some expectations on CETs’ are becoming significant in English teaching (Chen, 2003; Liu & Tan, 2003; Xia, 2002; Zhang, 2003; Zhang, etc. 2003; Zhang & Ding, 1996; Zhou, 2000).

1.2.3: The expectations on CETs will be discussed in the proposed study in the contexts of tertiary English teaching in China from the perspectives of the definitions of college English teachers, the theoretical definition of the knowledge structure of College English teachers, and the systematic descriptions on the expectations on College English teachers in terms of teachers’ language proficiency, their knowledge of subject matter, teaching methodology, and teachers’ development and professionalism with relevant standard criteria. These expectations will be discussed specifically in the final report based on the results of the further document review, survey, and interviews with College English teachers, administrators and policy-makers.

The expectations below will be considered from the standpoint of some students, officials and “teachers researchers” (Gao, 2000, p.96) mainly in terms of teachers’ language proficiency, their knowledge of subject matter, teaching methodology, and teachers’ development and professionalism (Chen, 2003; Li, 2003; Liu & Tan, 2003; Xia, 2000, 2002; Zhang, 2003; Zhang, etc. 2003; Zhang & Ding, 1996; Zhou, 2000).

Some studies place expectations on English teachers from the point of views of students and officials. Ford’s (1988, p.168) research attributes the students’ success of English learning to nine points. Three of them are on the expectations on well-trained teachers, effective teaching methods, and high social status of English teachers in China. Huang (1997) points out that the successful adoption of communicative method depends on teachers’ language proficiency in control of the classroom and English content.

Some other studies discuss the expectations on English teachers from the point of view of ‘teachers researchers’ (Gao, 2000, p.96). Zhang and Ding (1996,p.59) believe that CETs should meet the following standards: professional knowledge and skill, teaching organization and implementing ability, good personality and characteristics, systematic linguistic knowledge, knowledge of second language acquisition, and knowledge of
teaching approaches. It is important that Zhang and Ding (1996) emphasize the structure of college English teachers’ knowledge in China. However, it is a common phenomenon as in some other education research in China: there exists little research method to support these conclusions.

Similarly, when Tan (1999, p.49) discusses the right function of college English teachers in ‘learner centeredness’ language teaching, without the support of any research method, he provides three expectations on teachers: the skill of communication; the skill of education; the skill of course design. Apparently, these expectations on teachers are simply limited in a certain teaching approach.

In the point of view of English teacher researchers, Xia (2000, p.3) discusses the relevant factors, which prevent the quality of college English teaching, such as educational background, professional proficiency; educational ability; teaching attitude; research ability; communicative ability; organization ability; social experience; the ability to solve problems; the knowledge of language; language skill; the ability to compare languages, and others. In another article, Xia (2002, p.35) tests these factors by designing a thorough questionnaire to try to provide an opportunity for English teachers’ self-evaluation and further professional development. Compared with literature above, many expectations are discussed and placed on college English teachers, if some other factors might be put into account, such as the specific expectations on teachers’ language proficiency, teaching methodology, and the ability of using various contemporary technologies.

The limited literature above reveals that the expectations on college English teachers (CETs) are not clear, systematic and complete in terms of teachers’ language proficiency, their knowledge of subject matter, teaching methodology, and teachers’ development and professionalism. Some studies focus on only one aspect of expectations on CETs, other studies just emphasize another aspect of expectations. As such, it needs further research in this study together with the expectations from college English teachers themselves, from the administrators and policy developers and from the college English teaching system itself in the context of China by the means of document review, survey and interviews.

2. The Resources College English Teachers Bring to Their Workplace

This issue should be reviewed for current tertiary English teachers in terms of college English teachers’ (CETs’) pre-service training, professionalism, their level of English proficiency, their knowledge of the subject matter, teaching methodology, research ability, and their attitudes and beliefs towards the changes in college English teaching in China. Due to the deficiency of literature, it will be reviewed only in relation to the resources current college English teachers (CETs) bring to their workplace.

2.1: Some scholars and policy developers (Feng, 2003; JFL, 1999; Zhan, 2000; McCarthy, 2000; Ross, 1993; Zhou, 2002; Zhang, 2003; Xia, 2000, 2002; Hou, 2001)
note that language proficiency is a main problem to prevent the improvement of college English teaching. However, it is seldom taken as a crucial issue and the improvement of teachers’ language proficiency has not received great attention (Chen, 2003, p.51)

Zhang (2003), as a senior bureaucrat of the Government, points out publicly that the general low standard of language proficiency of college English teachers (CETs) has prevented students learning and the implementation of college English teaching innovation. However, he does not provide further empirical data in his report to support and explain to what extent English teachers’ language proficiency should be attained.

Zhan (2000) in her thesis profiles the demographic status of the college English teachers at Jilin University in China by using a quantitative survey for English teachers there. She finds that “English proficiency (in particular, the four basic communicative skills) was perceived as being the most important skill for EFL teachers at Jilin University” (p.v), followed by the importance of the knowledge and skills pertaining to classroom teaching. This is a constructive empirical finding although her study is limited to the college English teachers’ knowledge base and to the gathered data from a particular university.

2.2: Some evidence shows that college English teachers (CETs) are not ready to adopt recent teaching methodology for classroom practice (Feng, 2003; McCarthy, 2000). Some other scholars point out that the ideas and beliefs of teachers in teaching are vague and perplexing (Xia, 2000, 2002; Zhang etc, 2003).

Feng (2003) in his report specifically describes the current teaching model as “intensive reading” in college English teaching and names it as the “Chinese version of Grammar-Translation or Audio-lingualism”. In discussing the feasibility of the communicative method, he points out that “teachers seem to believe that the communicative methodology is not realistic for the Chinese classroom” (p.12). He admits that this idea comes from the inadequate training teachers have received in using communicative methods in classroom situations.

McCarthy (2000) provides powerful evidence with historical, descriptive study on this issue. She specifically describes the Grammar–Translation method and Audio-lingualism that college English teachers used in their classroom. By using survey and interviews, McCarthy (2000, p.23) concludes that it is the Chinese teachers’ English proficiency that limited teaching critical thinking skills, which made teachers use rote learning and memorization of language items in their teaching and on the tests, and led to the failure of the communicative approach.

Xia (2002, p.39) investigated the teaching methods and approaches which the tertiary English teachers in China adopted by using the questionnaire. As a result, 25% of the teachers at average had used the contemporary methods, such as “communicative

In their survey, Zhang etc, (2003, p.24) found that 73.8% of teachers spend most time in class by explaining and translating textbooks and asking questions about textbooks. Among the regularly used teaching approaches, “communicative method” or “situational method (although is taken as audiolingualism)” takes the proportion of 8.9% of them. 65.5% of teachers still take the means of “a piece of chalk, a book and a piece of board”. This indicates the actual case in college English teaching methodology.

2.3. Some scholars point out that the research of English teachers seriously divorce from teaching practice although research is considered as an important access for them to improve their proficiency (Hou, 2001; Zhang, etc. 2003). Some other scholars find that English teachers’ general ability of research is not satisfactory (Chen, 2003; Xia, 2002; Zhang, etc, 2003).

Xia (2002, p.40) finds that more than 50% of English teachers never attended to any teaching project and did not know how to be in charge of it. 40% of teachers never did any experiment. 39% of teachers did not know statistics. Only 15% of teachers took qualitative or quantitative research. In five years, there was less than one article at average for each English teacher, Zhang, etc.(2003, p.25) claim in their survey.

The literature above is not sufficient to describe the resources college English teachers (CETs) bring to their workplace in China. The proposed study will enhance our understanding of college English teachers’ (CETs’) pre-service training, professionalism, their knowledge of the subject matter, and their attitude and belief towards the change in college English teaching by means of document review, survey, interviews and focus groups.

3. Summary

The literature attempts to answer the contributing questions of the research: the expectations on college English teachers, and what the college English teachers bring to their workplace (See Appendix 1: Table 1: Literature Review). However, except for the general demands on TESOL teachers widely discussed, there is a deficiency in the literature regarding the expectations on English Teachers in Tertiary Education in China and the resources college English teachers bring to their workplace. This niche is going to be filled by the present study with a great amount of document review, survey in large scale, general interviews and in-depth multiple case studies.
References


Flowerdew, J. 1992. Pragmatics in L2 Teacher Education. In J. Flowerdew, M. Brock & S. Hsia (Eds.). *Perspectives on Second Language Teacher Education.* Hong Kong: City of Polytechnic of Hong Kong.


Golombek, P.R. 1998. A Study of Language Teachers’ Personal Practical


陈国崇, 2003。新世纪大学英语教师面临的挑战与对策。《外语界》。2003 (1): 48-51。

高一虹, 2000。"研究"和"研究方法"对英语教师的意义。《现代外语》。2000 (1): 89-98。

夏纪梅, 2000。影响大学英语教学质量的相关因素。《外语界》。2000 (4): 2-6。

张逸岗, 丁方, 1996。试论外语教师的基本素质。《外语界》。1996 (3): 57-64。


夏纪梅, 2002。大学英语教师的外语教育观念、知识、能力、科研现状与进修情况调查结果报告。《外语界》。2002 (5): 35-41。

张宜, 网新, 郭威, 于淼。2003。大学英语教师素质调查报告。《外语与外语教学》。2003 (10): 23-26。