

# BOOK REVIEW: INNOVATION IN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING: THE CASE OF CHINA

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**TITLE:** Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching: The Case of China

**EDITORS:** Hayo Reinders, David Nunan, and Bin Zou

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With a clear explicatory rationale, satisfying a critical need to characterize, inform, and expand the knowledge structures of English language education in China, *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching: The Case of China* is an excellent resource for both researchers and educators in the Chinese context. Part of the *New Language Learning and Teaching Environments* series, which currently has twelve titles focusing on themes of learner-centered and technology-enhanced approaches both in and out of the classroom, this book investigates the teaching of English in China with a central emphasis on innovation and change.

The opening chapter provides the historical context of English language education in China over the past 60 or so years, to acclimate the uninitiated or refresh the veteran to the current environment, which involves an interplay of key agents. Namely newly established national policies regarding English language education (which for the first time directly mention English for academic purposes (EAP), the private sector, consideration of foreign teachers, and the presence or absence of technology. A cursory outline of the ensuing 14 chapters indicates a rough grouping of the next four chapters (two through five) under the topic of general English, the following six chapters (six through 11) focusing predominantly on EAP, whereas the final chapters discuss intercultural communication (12 and 13) and learner autonomy (chapter 14).

Chapter two introduces the reader to a secondary-research study by Liu and Xu, addressing issues of assessment practice in China and positioning toward the need of assessment for learning. Noting resistance to any divergence from “exam-oriented traditions” (p. 24) in China, Liu and Xu establish a need for increased teacher assessment literacy. As China is home to one of the most well-known national testing traditions in the world, the Gaokao, it’s no surprise to find researchers, like Liu and Xu, being critical of the system. Yet, as they conclude, for China to rely less on summative forms of assessment will require a transformation of both heart and mind.

Similarly lamenting the exam-oriented educational culture in China, in chapter three Snow, Sun, and Li delve into the counterrintuitive coda that the majority of

Chinese students have poor English speaking skills, despite upwards of twelve years of classroom instruction in English, and a decade-old shift in national curriculum that emphasized speaking skills. With the obvious question of why, these researchers address students’ independent language learning (ILL) to understand which, if any, out-of-classroom and self-motivated strategies were employed by students who managed to graduate with successful English speaking abilities despite the aforementioned trend. Snow, Sun, and Li’s research offer valuable insight into the out-of-classroom innovations that students themselves develop, independent, and often in spite of, what they are exposed to from their teachers.

Focusing on the other productive skill, writing, chapter four’s authors, Ng and Cheung, review 60 studies from the past decade in search of innovative practices in writing instruction with the hopes of establishing a foundation for future research. Again, placing learners and teachers as culturally embedded beings, Ng and Cheung define innovation here as “western” non-product-oriented pedagogies; for example process-based, genre-based, or metacognition in writing (pp. 65-66). Although their research is focused on the microcosm of Hong Kong, this is one of the few chapters that includes secondary and primary contexts instead of solely focusing on colleges and universities. Ng and Cheung touch on some of the bigger issues in writing practice and make suggestions on the use of process-oriented approaches, task and genre approaches, metacognition, the teaching of textual borrowing, and dealing with plagiarism.

Concluding the general-English chapters, the fifth chapter includes two primary-research studies by Zhao and Lei who examine the effect of technology-enhanced learning environments in a content and language integrated learning (CLIL) context. An interesting look on how technology is being implemented in China, the studies herein demonstrate to the reader the challenges that arise in technology use for language learning at the tertiary level, for example garnering participation from students. Examining how students engaged with non-compulsory online tech (such as wiki-spaces and discussion forums) demonstrated that participation was a signifier of overall performance. A number of

other challenges are illustrated that any educator would do well to heed if employing similar approaches, such as ensuring student access to the technology, and teaching students how to collaborate in online learning spaces.

Heading off the six chapters that deal specifically with EAP is a remarkably informative overview, by Cai, of how English language education developed in China from the end of the Cultural Revolution to the present day. Cai explains how the Ministry of Education’s (MOE) evolving policies were interpreted and realized in the tertiary context. A major takeaway from this chapter is that the MOE policy on English education is a slowly changing one, reflecting the political, economic and national security climate. This is often in opposition to the academically-produced policy which instead aligns with prevailing second-language acquisition theory. Cai concludes the chapter with a self-written 19 page appendix, explicating how he thinks English as a Foreign Language (EFL) should be taught at the tertiary level.

Chapters seven through nine take on the increasing prevalence of English-medium instruction (EMI). Zhang and Zhang, of Tsinghua University, begin their chapter on the premise that tertiary level English education in China is in need of improvement. They continue by explaining the informed decisions which shaped Tsinghua’s current English program, the success of which is centered on the implementation of EMI, shifting from the general English of primary and secondary school to academic English, and focusing on language using over language learning. Jiang and Zhong pick up the baton in the following chapter with a case study describing four teachers’ insights and practices in delivering EAP in an EMI setting. The researchers highlight the troubles language teachers find in balancing content knowledge with language learning and how they overcame these challenges by adopting new roles whereby they co-construct knowledge alongside students and content teachers. This is followed by Ruan and Chen’s study in chapter nine which looks at the students’ perceptions of disciplinary writing at an English medium university. The researchers examine the dichotomy of learning-to-write and writing-to-learn, which is especially pertinent in an EMI setting where writing is a practice to develop both content knowledge as well as writing skills ▶

in English. Amongst their findings were student's reliance on L1 for source information and outlining of writing assignments; using expert writing as a model for their own writing; and a preoccupation with grammatical accuracy in their writing.

In chapter 10, Zhao and Yu take the reader into a close analysis of EAP education at a local university. They describe the evolution of their university's English program and the ultimate implementation of EAP. The obstacles they describe that derived from this implementation are informative, and their experiences and pedagogical model are valuable assets to any institution making similar innovations to what English they teach and how they teach it.

Two of our editors, Zou and Reinders, finish off the EAP-themed chapters with their own chapter on the use of corpora to investigate Chinese EFL university students. As EAP becomes increasingly prevalent in the Chinese context, needs have arisen in the realms of materials, training, and understanding, which Zou and Reinders attempt to remedy with a corpus study that can inform EAP practitioners on best and necessary practices. Their study highlights many of the common errors Chinese tertiary students exhibit and speculates on the probable causes of these errors through a review of relevant literature. Their study also revealed the glaring absence of advanced language learner corpora data for China, which they strongly campaign for.

The final three chapters engage with intercultural communication as well as learner autonomy. Starting with Zheng and Gao, who provide a refreshing perspective that challenges the oft-held belief that cultural education in

English language learning is akin to knowledge and skills of English "native speakers", advocate for a "productive bilingualism" where the learning of the target language and culture stimulates an appreciation for, and integration of, both the target and native language and culture. In examining a large body of data, the researchers noticed a lack of depth in students' understanding of the target culture and describe the strategies the teacher implemented to help students overcome this. This chapter is then followed by a critical review of intercultural teaching in China by Li, who likewise rejects the native-speaker model for EFL. His review found much wanting in information about how much intercultural communicative competence (ICC) was taught, how it is taught, and the attitudes of teachers who cover it. He then concludes with the recommendation that ICC be the foundation of teacher training and that more longitudinal studies be conducted of teachers' shifting beliefs on ICC. Finally, the ultimate chapter gives the reader a well-researched look into learner autonomy in China. Lin and one of the editors, Reinders, focus on three elements of learner autonomy: self-management ability, consciousness of and attitudes toward autonomy, and autonomous leaning practices. The study is focused around the creation of a questionnaire as a tool for measuring learner autonomy as an effort to advance the research in the field. Creation of reliable instruments such as this will be much needed, according to the researchers, as China puts increasing importance on students' abilities to administer their own learning.

Although China has long been a powerhouse in English language learning, the landscape of innovative practices is a constantly changing one as China's intermittently

evolving policies on English education continue to be explicated. This volume serves to remedy the need to stay abreast of change and provide readers with knowledge and tools that can enable the sustained advancement of innovative practices. Scholars interested in discovering pathways to needed research will find this book useful. Teachers in tertiary education eager to expand their knowledge of contemporary innovative practices will also discover something of use here.

Reinders, Nunan, and Zou offer a range of information on English education and learning, yet the spirit of the book lies in innovative practices, and as EAP is seen as innovative in China, it seems fitting that proportionally more of the book is dedicated to it. However, the editors have done well to include chapters on general English which highlight original methods or, at least, lament the lack of them. Critically, as China continues to make headlines on its investment in technologies (e.g., Veugelers, 2017; Chandler, 2017) it's disappointing that there is only one chapter which focuses on technology, which corresponds with an observation made in the first chapter that "technology has not played a key role as an agent of change in China" (p. 10). Also, though contributors often made their case for future progress, the volume could have been enhanced with the addition of a concluding chapter, summarizing the projected course of China's English learning and teaching.

Overall, this book provides a well edited and encompassing review of the innovation taking place in English language education in China. Interlacing theory and practice, this volume would be a practical and informative asset to both teachers and researchers.

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## FURTHER READING

Chandler, C. (2017, November 21). Why China is emerging as a tech superpower to rival the U.S. *Fortune*. Retrieved from <http://fortune.com/2017/11/21/china-innovation-dji/>

Veugelers, R. (2017, August 30). China is the world's new science and technology powerhouse. *Bruegel*. Retrieved from <http://bruegel.org/2017/08/china-is-the-worlds-new-science-and-technology-powerhouse/> ○

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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