

## Helping Native-English-Speaking Teachers Adapt Themselves to EFL Teaching: A Chinese Perspective

By Zhenhui Rao  
Jiangxi Normal University, China  
[rao5510@yahoo.com](mailto:rao5510@yahoo.com)

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With the globalization of English and the rapid increase in the number of English learners around the world (Block & Cameron, 2002; Nunan, 2001), Native-English-Speaking (NES) teachers have become an integral part of EFL teaching in many non-English-speaking countries. After initial training in teaching techniques and a brief exposure to life and culture in the host countries, many of these teachers begin to wonder whether what they want to do and what they are or will be doing in EFL teaching are the same thing. This feeling can get worse when they have actually started teaching, and eventually the teachers may end up having to work at something for which they have no real motivation. Similarly, the types of relationships they have with learners and the people around them tend to be ineffective and frustrating because of cultural differences and a lack of stimulation at work.

To understand why such a phenomenon in NES teachers' classroom teaching occurs, I will examine NES teachers' problems in EFL teaching by looking at their work in the Chinese context. I will first attempt to explore the obstacles that inhibit NES teachers' classroom performance, and analyze how EFL students' classroom learning is adversely affected by these problems. Then, I discuss the sources leading to the development of such problems in China. The discussion emphasizes the necessity of considering EFL students' learning styles and students' actual needs in EFL learning. Finally, I offer some suggestions for helping NES teachers adapt themselves better to EFL teaching.

Although this paper explores and discusses EFL teaching carried out by NES teachers in China, the problems listed in this paper and suggestions for helping NES teachers improve their EFL teaching may apply to NES teachers, teacher educators, EFL administrators, and host teachers in the Mexican context and elsewhere. English is taught as a foreign language in both China and Mexico. An understanding of the characteristics of traditional Mexican educational practices and Mexican learning styles should be useful knowledge both for NES teachers who are already teaching in Mexico and for those who are interested in teaching English in Mexico in the future. This understanding may also be useful knowledge for those who do research on the teaching of English to students in other non-English-speaking countries.

## **Problems in NES Teachers' Classroom Performance**

In this section, I present some problems that Chinese students encounter in NES teachers' classes. I obtained these data from several sources, including descriptions in books and published articles, my collection of student feedback regarding NES teachers' EFL teaching, and my own teaching experience in China. NES teachers' problems in Chinese EFL teaching are classified into the following three categories:

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### ***Insensitivity to students' linguistic problems***

- Absence of learning English as a second or foreign language
- Ignorance of students' mother tongue

### ***Mismatch in teaching and learning styles***

- Global vs. analytical
- Open vs. closure-oriented
- Intuitive-random vs. concrete-sequential
- Hands-on vs. visual

### ***Unfamiliarity with the local culture and the educational system***

- Casual behavior in the classroom
  - Shortage of local examples
  - Failure to match their instruction with the school's expectations
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## **Insensitivity to Students' Linguistic Problems**

Most Chinese EFL students regarded NES teachers' insensitivity to their linguistic problems as the most serious obstacle to their efficient learning in class. Two factors were reported as sources of this insensitivity. The first, the NES teachers' own lack of experience in learning English as a second or foreign language, was the most obvious. The students stated that NES teachers were lacking in insight into typical problems that Chinese students meet in the process of learning English, and were unable to anticipate Chinese students' language difficulties because they themselves had not gone through the complex process of learning English as a foreign language. They further complained that NES teachers did not know exactly what Chinese students needed in English class, so sometimes they could not find the most efficient ways to teach. The second factor that made NES teachers insensitive to students' linguistic problems was their ignorance of the students' mother tongue. Most Chinese students reported that NES teachers were unaware of how the students' mother tongue and the target language differed. In teaching some vocabulary with abstract meaning, for example, NES teachers could not help students understand these words by comparing the words to those in the students' first language.

## Mismatch in Teaching and Learning Styles

A mismatch between teaching and learning styles is another problem for students in learning English well in NES teachers' classes. Some students stated that they felt uncomfortable with their NES teacher's global style in the teaching of English reading and listening. In most reading or listening classes, NES teachers only laid emphasis on the overall meaning of a passage. They often asked students to use holistic strategies such as guessing or inferencing, to search for the main idea, but seldom paid attention to the analysis of linguistic details. The students felt that they could learn English better if the NES teacher would explain the entire text sentence by sentence and analyze difficult language structures, rhetorical features, and styles.

Another NES teacher style identified by the Chinese students as inconsistent with their ways of learning is the open style. They reported that ever since they started their education they had learned to expect an accurate answer to each question. However, this was not what they could always expect from a NES teacher. They reported that they would frequently get multiple correct answers whenever they asked a NES teacher a question. Some students argued that everything in their course studies was determined by their examination results and that if a teacher did not give them accurate answers they could not expect to get a high score in the examination.

Closely related to the open style is the intuitive-random style that NES teachers adopted in their classroom teaching. In general, teachers with intuitive-random style deal best with the "big picture" in an abstract, nonlinear, random-access mode and constantly diverge from the planned topic of discussion by telling an amusing anecdote (Oxford, et al., 1992). Many students held that NES teachers' intuitive-random style in class was helpful in creating a friendly and relaxed atmosphere in the classroom, but that such a style was in conflict with their traditional way of learning. They insisted that a teacher behave like an authority, and carry out his or her teaching in a concrete-sequential manner.

The final teaching style that the students felt uneasy with was the hands-on style. Some students mentioned that NES teachers were frequently prone to organize various types of games, role-plays and debates. Although they reiterated that they felt comfortable and relaxed when involved in these communicative activities, they also felt that NES teachers went to an extreme in organizing these teaching activities so frequently. They further pointed out they would prefer to do more reading and other more tangible learning tasks.

### **Unfamiliarity with the Local Culture and the Educational System**

The final problem students found when attending NES teachers' classes was that the teachers were unfamiliar with Chinese culture and the educational system. Many students complained that NES teachers behaved in such a casual manner in class that it was hard for them to focus their attention on learning. In China, a teacher is a respected person who should behave solemnly and seriously towards his or her students, especially in class.

In addition, unfamiliarity with the local culture made it impossible for NES teachers to use local examples in their elucidation of concepts. A common complaint of students was the difficulty they found when NES teachers based their examples on their own experiences outside China. The students were sometimes puzzled by NES teachers' explanations, because they could not see the point implied in these examples. Actually there are many local examples in China which can be used instead to facilitate the students' learning process.

A further concern was the lack of familiarity with the Chinese educational system. Many students commented that some NES teachers failed to match their instruction with the school's expectations or with the students' needs by not following the school syllabus. Such a failure to exactly follow the curriculum made the students particularly worried about their upcoming examinations. Although the examinations are locally set, there are strong expectations on the part of students and the school administration that the content and form should be similar to those of the textbooks. Some students commented that they could not expect to pass the examination if they had not learnt what they were supposed to have learned.

### **Origins of the Problems in NES Teachers' Classes**

The above problems are not uncommon in NES teachers' teaching practices in China, making it difficult for Chinese students to learn English efficiently (Rao, 2002b). In an EFL class like this, the students tend to be bored and inattentive, perform poorly on tests, become discouraged about the course, and possibly conclude that they are not good at learning English and give up. For their part, NES teachers, confronted by low test scores, may become overtly critical of their students or begin to question their competence as teachers and find themselves insufficiently prepared for the job they have been given. Some may even return home without fulfilling their contracts rather than compromising their "pedagogical integrity" (Cahill, 1996:5). Each of these problems, however, seems to originate in Chinese cultural values, the traditional educational pattern and the Chinese EFL setting.

## **Cultural values in the Chinese context**

Three sources of Chinese culture are often claimed to have an important effect on the attitudes and behaviors of Chinese learners (Brislin, 1993). The first is collectivism and the interdependent self in Chinese culture. Chinese society is marked by a strong tradition of filial piety and familism which encompass a non-individual collectivistic orientation among the Chinese (Brislin, 1993). Such a strong collective orientation has resulted in socialization for achievement. In the Chinese cultural context, achievement orientation is based firmly on collectivist rather than individual values. This can have a highly motivating effect on Chinese students because success and failure in a collectivist culture affect not just oneself but the whole family or group. This explains why Chinese students always pay so much attention to all kinds of tests, and would exert themselves in order to obtain a high score in each examination.

The final well-recognized source of influence on attitudes and behaviors of Chinese learners originates in the people's attitudes to power and authority. In China, people in lower positions are expected to obey those who are in higher positions and people who are considered humble should show respect to those who are regarded as superior in society. When this is applied to language learning, it is apparent that teachers are considered to be authorities and students to be "passive" learners. Teachers tell students what to do and students listen and obey.

## **Traditional patterns of education in China**

For a long time, Chinese education has been dominated by a teacher-centered, book-centered approach with an emphasis on repetition, review and rote-memory (Rao, 2002b). Several distinctive features emerge from the above description. First, the teacher is considered as the "fount of knowledge", and it is the teacher who decides which knowledge is to be taught and the students accept and learn this knowledge. In order for teachers to run each course well, a selection of good textbooks is especially important. Teachers devote almost all their effort in class focusing on texts, explaining, analyzing, paraphrasing, asking questions, practicing patterns, reading aloud, retelling, etc., until the students very nearly, if not exactly literally, learn every word by heart.

Such a teacher-dominated and text-focused classroom teaching approach results in a great emphasis on linguistic details and accuracy. For most Chinese students, there is a keen interest in the exact understanding of every word, a low tolerance of ambiguity and a focus on discrete points and specific syntactic constructions (Rao, 2002b). To facilitate the process of gaining linguistic knowledge and a thorough understanding, Chinese students employ repetition as a route to understanding, and make a constant review of what they have learnt (Biggs, 1996).

## **The Chinese EFL setting**

Unlike ESL teaching in English-speaking countries, English teaching in China is characterized by some distinctive features. For example, instead of learning English as a tool for survival in business and every-day life, English language education is a required academic subject which is a part of the state education program and shaped by rigid and mandatory top-down educational policies, and by teaching practices sanctioned by tradition (Liu, 1998). Teachers at all levels in China are expected to cover the curriculum developed by the government. Based on this centralized curriculum, almost all English textbooks are designed to teach grammar, reading, and writing, with little emphasis on listening and speaking.

Another feature of EFL teaching in China is that much of it takes places in the classroom, with little exposure to the language outside class. In general, class time per week for English in most schools in China is limited to about 2-4 hours, far fewer than intensive ESL teaching programs. While such limited class time may be just enough to help students understand how the language works, it does not allow them to adequately practice using it.

## **Suggestions for Helping NES Teachers Adapt Themselves to EFL Teaching**

As we have seen above, English teaching in China is deeply rooted: 1) in Chinese culture; 2) in the basic concepts of its educational system and 3) in its EFL setting. Teaching English in China without understanding these factors could lead to failure (Rao, 2002a). Here I offer some suggestions for helping ESL-oriented NES teachers to be aware of their students' cultural and educational backgrounds and adapt themselves more effectively to a more EFL-style of teaching. I have organized these suggestions according to three different, yet interconnected, groups of individuals: host country teaching colleagues, teacher educators in TESOL degree-granting programs, and NES teachers planning to work overseas.

### **Suggestions for host country teaching colleagues**

First of all, recently-hired NES teachers need to adapt themselves to EFL teaching through the assistance of local teaching colleagues. Once NES teachers have started working, host teachers should involve NES teachers in an orientation program, which should include (a) a description of the curriculum and where the NES teachers' courses fit in, (b) the types and times of English examinations that students take, (c) the role of the textbooks in the curriculum (e.g., Is it necessary to cover them completely? Are exams based on textbook content?), and (d) the types of methodology students are used to. Obviously, a direct way for NES teachers to see how classes are taught is for colleagues to invite them to observe

their classes. In fact, there are many other aspects in which NES teachers and host teachers can complement each other. While NES teachers possess native language authenticity, familiarity and new methodological insight (Govardhan, et al., 1999), host teachers also have advantages, according to Medgyes (1994), in "providing a good model" (p. 55), "teaching language learning strategies" (p. 55), "supplying information about the English language (p. 57), "anticipating and preventing language difficulties (p. 61), "showing empathy" (p. 63), and "benefiting from the mother tongue" (p. 65). Medgyes (1994) further points out that, given a favorable mix, various forms of collaboration are possible both in and outside the classroom--teachers using each other as language consultants, for example, or teaching in tandem.

In addition, host teachers should offer NES teachers some lessons in the students' first language and help them get some insights into the differences between the Chinese and English languages, for example. The more NES teachers learn about the host language, the better able they will be to teach (i.e., to predict students' difficulties), to move about independently in the country, and to fit into the culture.

### **Suggestions for teacher educators in TESOL degree-granting programs**

In Western-based TESOL programs, the main focus is usually on ESL teaching in Western public schools and colleges (Carrier, 2003), and there exists strong ethnocentrism in TESOL teacher education (Liu, 1998). While some NES teachers are indeed trained to teach English as a foreign language, the TESOL programs for this group of trainees should also focus on EFL teaching in non-Western settings. Liu (1998) suggests that teacher educators involve trainees in ways which would ensure that the program has as close a bearing as possible to their individual teaching concerns and contexts.

Several approaches could be taken to ensure such a close bearing on practical EFL teaching. The first is to give teacher trainees an opportunity to explore "why students in a particular country want to learn English; what the policy of the government of the country regarding English is; what constraints on the teacher's innovativeness might exist; and what social, cultural, and academic adjustments the prospective teachers will have to fit into the existing setup" (Govardhan, et al., p. 124). Secondly, teacher educators must provide courses that help enhance teacher trainees' geographical and anthropological literacy of other countries. EFL teaching is nowadays carried out worldwide. Each country has its own particular social, cultural and working conditions. To help local students learn English effectively, the teacher trainees should learn to respect their students' communities, their culture, their educational systems, and the conditions and ethics of work. Thirdly, an introductory course should be offered to provide teacher

trainees with "the ability to assess the propriety, feasibility, applicability, and practicality of any one or all of the methods against a certain set of political, sociocultural, and pedagogic situations that they are going to be working in" (Govardhan, et al., 1999, p. 123). Finally, prospective EFL teachers should also be trained in areas ancillary, but essential, to classroom teaching, like the differences between EFL and ESL teaching, curriculum and material development, testing and evaluation, EFL administration, the management of resources and learning supports, and the use of information technology.

### **Suggestions for NES teachers**

As linguistic and cultural ambassadors, NES teachers play a unique and important role in helping EFL students master the English language. However, the problems listed above have demonstrated that NES teachers' classroom teaching often faces resistance or even rejection.

To avoid such resistance, NES teachers should, first of all, be very sensitive to the local customs and habits of host countries. They should never feel that they are there to change and uplift the lives of the people in the host countries. Patterns of behavior are so fixed by the time a person reaches the age of 16 or 17 that a teacher cannot hope to influence them in 2 or 3 hours a week when the other 6 or 7 hours a day in class and 10 out of class reinforce them. On the other hand, NES teachers should realize that their personal talents will find outlets in guiding the changes that may progressively emerge. Secondly, NES teachers should be open to, and accepting of, the general and academic culture of their hosts; they cannot assume that their methodology is better than that of their host colleagues, that their training is more advanced, and that they are more privileged because they are native speakers. The final implication is related with how to narrow the gap between teaching and learning styles. As evidenced by the aforementioned data in this paper and confirmed by Rao's (2002a) study, there exists an identifiable teaching-learning conflict between NES teachers and Chinese students. Bridging the gap between teaching and learning styles has, therefore, become a crucial step for NES teachers to improve their classroom teaching. Here are some recommendations for NES teachers to deal with EFL students' learning styles and strategies in the English classroom:

- Diagnose learning styles and develop self-aware EFL learners
- Adapt their teaching style to create teacher-student style matching through a variety of activities
- Foster guided style-stretching and encourage changes in students' behaviors
- Provide activities with different groupings
- Include different learning styles in the lesson plan (for more details, see Rao, 2002a)

## Conclusion

In this article I have presented the problems that Chinese EFL students encounter in NES teachers' classes and provided some evidence that there are some conflicts between NES teachers' teaching styles and Chinese students' learning styles. To gain an understanding of these problems, I have provided some insights into Chinese culture and the educational system. In fact, only when NES teachers understand and recognize the roots of their problems in EFL teaching will they be better prepared to develop instructional alternatives to accommodate their EFL students' practical needs. In these aspects, I have offered some suggestions for teaching colleagues, teacher educators and NES teachers themselves, which would hopefully assist them in facilitating their EFL teaching.

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### The author

Zhenhui Rao is professor in Jiangxi Normal University, China. He has a PhD in applied linguistics from the University of South Australia. His recent publications have appeared in journals such as *System* (2002), *TESOL Journal* (2002), *ELT Journal* (2007), and *Language Awareness* (2007). His main research interests are in English teaching methodology and language learning strategies.

Email: [rao5510@yahoo.com](mailto:rao5510@yahoo.com)