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## **China and Secondary School Textbooks**

Surface and Deep Learning Approaches

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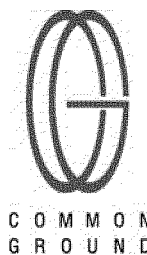
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# China and Secondary School Textbooks

## Surface and Deep Learning Approaches

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### Abstract

*This paper explores features of secondary school English as a Second Language (ESL) textbooks in use in China. It examines a number of texts in relation to surface and deep learning approaches, particularly as these relate to Western constructs of readers and users of such textbooks in Chinese secondary schools. The paper then goes on to explore the Readers that are used by these same Chinese secondary students once they have graduated and enroll in Australian tertiary institutions as ESL students, or, as they are known in Australia, as students from Non-English-Speaking Background (NESB).*

### Introduction

Given the western predilection for its own conventions of the conduct of education, it is perhaps not surprising to find a profound misunderstanding of the role of cultural signifiers and markers in the conduct of education in Confucian-heritage cultures (CHCs) in general, and as this manifests in China in particular. The result we see as being in effect an exercise in truth production: this is the truth about Chinese learners—they have developed only surface approaches to learning without ever having engaged any deep learning in the process. In exploring issues raised by such considerations, we have drawn on Foucault's (1980) suggestion of 'regimes of truth', that is, those ways with language that organise our perceptions, our ways of knowing, making some things visible and others invisible, some things true and others false.

In its explorations of truth production, this paper focusses on what has been called 'The paradox of the Chinese learner' (Watkins & Biggs, 2001), and while this has possible implications for any number of students from CHCs—those from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Korea, and Japan—our focus is on Chinese students. The paradox referred to emerges from western concepts of teaching and learning that call for small classes, of around 25-30 students, based on teaching strategies that embrace Progressivism (Darling & Nordenbo, 2003) or even Critical approaches suggested by Freire (1998) rather even than Traditionalism (Bantok, 1975), with a focus on criterion-based assessments and a relaxed classroom environments that encourage student shaping of their own learning.

In this paper we have taken up some of the issues raised by Watkins and Biggs (2001) in their study of elementary school programs in China, and applied similar concepts to a study of textbook use in

secondary school English as a Second of Foreign language (ESL or EFL) programs, specifically in a part of the northeast of China. Part of this regime of truth we found to be the sort of generalisations pointed out by Watkins and Biggs (2001), made possible by the undisputed fact of Chinese students being grouped into classes of up to 60 students, classes which may be seen to be greatly under-resourced when Western standards are applied, and where examinations are the predominant form of assessment. Perhaps it is unremarkable that a Westerner seeing this presumes Traditionalism as the major teaching and learning approach, looking upon evident memorisation with some apprehension as to what learning may be occurring. In spite of this, at the end of this particular form of engaging education, CHC students all over the world outperform western students (Watkins & Biggs, 2001, p. 3). Indeed, Watkins and Biggs (2001) give us the 1996 IEA figures for Chinese student performance ranked against those of the United States of America, concluding that 'Chinese students perform very well indeed' (p. 13). To assume that language plays a negligible role in this is to start out on a false premise, we would argue, for we hold to the dictum that all learning success is language success, just as all learning failure is language failure. Students encounter much of that language in textbooks. Even where lack of language proficiency is acknowledged as more than matters of grammar, spelling and lexis, the argument still turns back onto students as needing some form of instruction in what are presented as correct western forms.

What has brought us to this is years of experience as ESL teachers, which for us has meant close examination of the textbooks used by Chinese students in China as part of their secondary education system, based on five of the major textbooks used by all Chinese secondary students throughout the country (Grant & Jacques, 2000a; 2000b; 2001a; 2001b; 2002), and these same





students' subsequent engagement with textbooks in Australia as part of their preparation for tertiary entrance to Australian universities. To this end, we have continued our study to incorporate an exploration of the possibilities suggested in the teaching materials of Readers in Australian ESL for Academic Purposes courses, in effect textbooks compiled from a variety of authors' works.

### **Chinese Textbooks**

In all of the five Chinese textbooks that we examined, we found a number of features that any ESL teacher in the world would use to promote active language engagement. In Book 1A (Grant & Jacques, 2000), that is, the first of the textbooks a secondary school student will encounter as part of ESL studies, we find an overtly humorous anecdote of an experienced chemistry teacher (p. 6), diagrammatic representations of gradations of language as to orders and requests (p. 7) and a listening exercise that introduces the idiomatic expression rather than a factual suggestion of how a person 'finds England' (p. 129). We found such examples recurring through all of the textbooks examined, and framing each of the units presented as so much more than writing, speaking, listening and reading drills that rote learning or memorization might suggest. We found that the sorts of language activities presented in the textbooks under examination consistently maintained their emphasis on language acquisition, use and usage of the type born out of the work of leading scholars in the field, from Vygotsky (1978) to Kaplan (1966) to Chomsky (1972) to Krashen (1987). Given this, we have concluded that such exercises may be seen to take up bigger questions and larger frameworks for English than the sort of generalized picture of a Chinese language learner accounts for. Book 3 (Grant & Jacques, 2002), for example, specifically engages existing language skills to facilitate the learner's learning more in a foreign language, going so far as to have a Listening exercise help the learner to shape their own learning by identifying good advice for a language learner, to be followed up by an evaluation of that advice.

### **Deficit Discourses**

Our examination of the textbooks that these same students would encounter in Australia on enrolment in tertiary preparation English language courses such as English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) have largely ignored such interactivity in the learning that they represent. Of the six courses examined, each invariably used a device based on textbooks compiled for its teaching purposes in the form of Reader(s) including germinal and recent works in the ESL field compiled by knowledgeable staff upon which to base classroom activities. It appears that serious attempts have been

made to parallel the sorts of strategies used in mainstream courses within the institutions concerned, so that the styles of teaching and learning in the ESL components of student undertakings sat easily alongside those of the discipline units in which Chinese students were to be enrolled. These programs have not been designed to focus on any discipline specialisms, but have concerned themselves with general approaches to English language discourses across institutions' offerings. It is precisely here that the rub lies.

Multicultural policies in Australia would presuppose a cultural pluralism that has progressed beyond discourses of exclusion, of misunderstood difference. A multicultural worldview suggests appreciation and celebration of multicultural positions in educational undertakings as part of discourses of inclusion, of welcome diversity. This goes beyond practical concerns like helping Chinese students studying at international institutions to learn to function in what we have dubbed Academic English as soon as possible. It goes into the depths of culture. Yet the Readers that we have examined are based on concepts of deficits—Chinese international students to be treated, remediated, or somehow 'fixed' to overcome the constructed barriers of non-western academic traditions. This can only happen where such discourses are privileged. The very concept of NESB carries the seed of deficit discourses; we would argue that one of Language Backgrounds Other than English (LBOTE) is a far better term in that it at least acknowledges that a language background characterised as more than being 'non-English' is part of the language knowledge that each student has.

### **Resisting the Paradigm**

We would urge resistance to the pressure to shape Chinese and other international students according to practices inherent in such processes. First of all, we would question the assumptions underlying constructs of non-western teaching and learning. Such assumptions privilege westernised ontological and epistemological systems in Australian institutions and construct International students in general and Chinese students in particular, no less than Indigenous Australian students, as subjects of education rather than participants in it (McConville, 2002, p. 17). When we enrol Chinese students in our institutions, we are engaging in more than the teaching of a set of what Luke (1991) might question as being 'neutral competencies' (p. 140). This is done as part of education in western countries on a massive scale, not least of which is impelled by pushes for educational institutions to internationalise. The ELICOS industry in Australia alone has positioned itself within market place discourses where it now presents as an important commercial consideration within the

internationalisation of education (Cox, cited in Zeegers, 2002).

Samuelowicz (1987) refers to 'reproducing orientation', evidence of a surface approach to study based on rote learning, memorising facts to be reproduced as demanded by established practices within Asian education systems (p. 123). Within western systems, memorisation and rote learning as surface learning have received bad press from Rousseau (1762) to Dewey (1933) to Freire (1970). Yet applying the same constructs to Chinese systems may not be as valid as it may appear on the surface. A closer examination of this as it applies to Chinese learners serves to illustrate the point. There is a general recognition that the academic achievement of Asian students in western institutions is high (Cortazzi & Lixian, 2001; Ho, 2001; Watkins & Biggs, 2001), a paradox indeed if the purported rote learning deficiency is so distasteful to devoted educators. To look for reasons for this in points of departure from western educational norms is, as Watkins and Biggs (2001) suggest, to be looking in the wrong places (p. 4). Cultural differences in perceptions as to relationships between memorisation and understanding obscure learning practices which, while they might be repetitive and undertaken in large class groups, in Chinese contexts serve to enhance recall about understanding, not just about information, and not memorising at the expense of understanding. Watkins and Biggs (2001) examine research that shows the apparent paradox resolved as Chinese teachers and students utilising memorising and learning as complementary, interlocking processes, actually developing understanding through processes of memorisation (p. 6). This is not characteristic of the surface learning normally ascribed to memorisation at all.

### **Addressing the Problem**

How to address the problem in western institutions is of course, another matter. Reframing and articulation of the problems of Chinese students in Australian educational institutions has its place as a sort of consciousness-raising exercise, but there is an urgency in these problems that does not admit a lack of action. What we are suggesting is pedagogy, and not just teaching. We use the term 'pedagogy' to capture not only the teaching of content, but also how it is taught, how a student learns, and the context(s) of that learning, which implies a multiplicity of pedagogies and epistemologies. Lusted (1986) takes up the issue of pedagogy as 'draw[ing] attention to the process through which knowledge is produced' (p. 2). In spite of his representation of it as 'an ugly word in print and on the tongue' (p. 3), Lusted (1986) represents the concept as part of active engagement on the part of the teacher and the learner, producing knowledge together.

Pedagogy takes issue with notions concerning the construction of knowledge as something that can be transmitted in linear passages from knower to non-knower. It takes issue with notions of discourses that exclude forms of knowing which sit outside mainstream constructs. Pedagogy acknowledges the Chinese student as an active learner. Perhaps we could start by listening to what Chinese teachers have to say about their own education protocols and processes, and start incorporating what is being learned from research in this area. We could learn a lot from the experience of students and teachers working in the field, and apply what we learn.

Kaplan's (1996) work contrasting rhetorical and prosodic forms is especially enlightening in that it does not view non-western or non English-speaking academic work as 'a crash site where different worlds collide' but rather 'a site where background knowledge and cultures are validated' (Taplin, 1996, pp. 11-12). We are by no means arguing that there are not problems within Confucian-, Buddhist-, Romance-, Semitic-, Russian-, Scandinavian-, Tribal- or any other culturally-based forms of teaching and learning, or that reflective engagement with various features of these would not generate growth and development of teaching and learning appropriate for the twenty-first century. What we are suggesting is that these be part of academic discourses of our educational institutions as part of a privileging of diversity, and not descriptions of marginalising differences and their assumed shortcomings.

### **Conclusion**

We would like to finish with a quote which refers specifically to Chinese contexts as to a number of layers involved in teaching and learning (Cortazzi & Lixian, 2001), understanding of what lies beyond these could be applied to our own practices regarding these same students at Australian educational institutions:

There is a third less visible layer which is influential: the interaction between the past in educational, philosophical and cultural traditions and the present in change, development and technological innovation. A fourth layer is the interaction across cultures, between Chinese practices and others from elsewhere. In the spirit of this intercultural dialogue, Chinese teachers strive to learn from others. Those from outside China may also have something to learn from Chinese interaction... (p 133).

Turning from deficit discourses creates spaces where we can make changes rather than presenting unreflective, uncritical practices that exclude or marginalise Chinese students. This means designing and producing textbooks that may be used in Australia by Chinese English-learning students constructed as active, informed and knowledgeable shapers of their own learning, thereby continuing a

process which has begun in their own schools in China.

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