

Perspectives

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This section features: (1) reactions of readers to articles and reviews published in the *Journal* and the replies of authors to whom the comments are addressed (if forthcoming) and (2) viewpoints and opinions expressed in the form of a report, commentary, or interview on issues or topics of current interest.

Cette section sera consacrée à deux types d'articles:

1. La réaction des lecteurs aux articles parus dans la revue et la réponse de leurs auteurs, s'il y a lieu.

2. Les points de vue et les opinions, présentés sous forme de comptes rendus, de commentaires, de chroniques ou d'entrevues, sur des sujets d'actualité ou d'intérêt général.

CANADA-CHINA LANGUAGE LINK

David Swanson in conversation with David Cooke

David Swanson from Nanaimo, B.C., is the Head Teacher of the Canada-China Language Training Centre in Beijing, People's Republic of China. The Centre is part of the Canada-China Language & Cultural Project, headed by Dr. Mary Sun of St. Mary's University in Halifax. Currently the Centre has seven Canadian teachers and eight Chinese colleagues teaching English to thirty-year-old Chinese scientists and technicians who will later come to Canada for further study and on-the-job experience.

David Cooke teaches English and Education at Glendon College, York University, Toronto. He interviewed David Swanson in December 1983 during his brief return to Canada to select teachers for the centre.

Would you describe the Centre briefly?

The Centre is at the Beijing Institute for Foreign Trade on the third floor of one building, with a language lab on the second floor. There are six classes of about 12 or 13 students each, whose abilities in speaking and listening range from beginners to intermediate. We're offering a communicative programme for which we're trying to write a curriculum that tightens up the definition. Our major practical problem is that we lack information about the students' language needs once they get to Canada.

But you know what their tasks will be when they come to Canada?

We don't. This probably sounds unbelievable to you because the Centre has been running for more than one semester. We're only able to match students to their placements in Canada in a very general way. For example, with a student who will be working for B.C. Hydro, we can make some inferences if he's some sort of switching technician in chip technology, and we can draw conclusions about his work situation. It'll have to be better defined for effective teaching.

What are the occupations of your students?

There's a range. CIDA has funded several projects: in agriculture, hydro-power, mining, firefighting. And a "human resources" or "awards programme," whose students, on returning to China, are supposedly selected to take part in teaching or team-work involving a multiplier effect of their skills. In fact, it's been used as a catch-all category by the Ministry to include people they want to send to Canada without looking at the criteria very carefully. This semester, we have a commitment from the Ministry that the selection will occur more effectively and that all applicants will be matched with projects before we interview them in January.

What resources do you have to support the Project?

The resources are probably the best in China. We have one functioning 36-seat Tanberg language lab, and another is being installed. We have overhead projectors, a xerox machine, and a portable tape recorder for each class. We've been making tapes like crazy, probably 70 since September 1983. We have various textbooks: We don't use a particular textbook, we cut-and-paste, and xerox a lot.

How do you go about devising curriculum and producing materials?

The team didn't in the Project's first semester of operation, April to July 1983. In one case, one teacher arrived on the midnight plane and was interviewing at 8 the next morning with a 16-hour jet-lag, and it didn't stop for four months. In that term, the team did a very successful job of keeping the thing together. They didn't have time for long-range curriculum development. But they've provided a good basis for curriculum development this semester because they all kept binders of what they offered. In September, we began by submitting objectives for the first eight weeks of the term to a curriculum committee consisting of three Canadian and three Chinese teachers. We then assigned work-tasks of three kinds to teams of Chinese and Canadians. One is curriculum development, looking at what people are doing and setting learner objectives for next semester. The second is testing: developing a communicative test to measure what we're actually teaching. The third is to write materials or at least collate existing materials and to develop systems of access to them.

What are the main problems and solutions in devising your curriculum?

The major problem is that there's a wide range of students' abilities. And the second problem is that there's a wide range of ESP needs—there are 100 students going to 40-45 different occupations in Canada. We are instituting three levels. Level one will define functional objectives that are primarily job-related, with some social-language functions. Levels two and three will have more social functions. In short, a lot of identifying, explaining, describing functions at the beginning, and maintained throughout, and a social dimension that will be increased. We'll group people by their performance on a communicative test, trying to test against the functions we're going to teach. It's all still being developed.

Regarding job-directions, we'll try to have a component of about four hours out of twenty that groups people according to ESP needs, to do more specific work grouping people occupationally.

Have you been able to tackle the notion of a common core in the curriculum?

I suppose our Level One is our common core: and we're hoping that most people in our population will need these functions a lot of the time. We've used structural complexity as a criterion for selecting Level One functions. Intuitive judgment plays a part here. We were not aware of objective assessments of utility, which is really what we're trying to measure, so we've relied on our own experience as language teachers, selecting what we think is most important. And also the pass-mark will vary according to the situation the Chinese student is headed for in Canada. Some of the students going into a less demanding language situation will probably get a passing criteria, even if their performance is lower than others. In other words, if the score they get indicates they can function a certain way in a certain situation, they could pass; whereas other people with considerably better ability might not get a passing score, because the situations they are heading towards are considerably more complex and demanding. So our assessment is going to be geared to the individual needs. We certainly hope we get more specific information than just "B.C. Hydro" about the language needs of each individual before we do the final assessment at the end of each semester.

Are the students themselves able to tell you their own needs or the kind of course they need?

To some extent, although I'm not sure they have the language to talk about language. And of course they can say what they think the job is going to be in Canada. But for various reasons it's not particularly reliable to use their information. Other groups might have other ideas: CIDA, or the Canadian host agency, or most importantly, their own unit in China.

A person who hopes to do a B.Sc. in agriculture may actually be headed for training as a tractor mechanic.

What is the effect on the materials you're producing? What shape are they taking?

The buzz-word is communicative. We are stealing a lot from textbooks, xeroxing units and activities. And at the same time, we're replacing British culture with Canadian content. We have a lot of British books that we use for the shape of a lesson rather than for lesson activities themselves. They're very useful for giving a model dialogue, or problems to solve, or listening practice.

Are you trying to produce materials in the four language skills?

We will probably group skills within the materials. A major concern of some of the teachers is individualized learning: developing materials that students have direct access to, which conflicts with the Chinese concept of control over learning materials.

Do I take it from that, then, that you are working quite closely with your Chinese colleagues?

In most cases we do. That's the exciting and challenging part of the job.

What's the ultimate effect of working with your Chinese teachers?

Ultimately we're sceptical that we're going to quickly change the Chinese attitude to education after we leave. I think there's a genuine interest on the part of about three-quarters of the Chinese teachers in what we're doing, and they will try to implement what they understand to be our methods. We have workshops, for example an excellent half-day session on lesson-plans; also one on sociocultural problems and one on communicative teaching.

But I think what has more effect is the weekly conferencing of the teams, made up of a Chinese teacher and the Canadian colleague. They agree on lesson-plans and divide the work; e.g., the Canadian teacher might do an authentic tape or arrange to have one done for the Chinese teacher. Most of the Chinese teachers say they're excited by the teaching and most of them, contrary to rumour, are willing to give a communicative approach a go. They admit, and we realize, that it's considerably more difficult for a non-native speaker to introduce communicative teaching in a classroom.

What sort of testing do you find is appropriate to your programme?

The tests that impress us the most are the Oxford and RSA communicative tests. We'll try to adapt them to our needs. We do role-playing, such as directions to get from one place to another, or introductions between people. And we conduct interviews, discuss pictures, ask people to des-

cribe locations. We're not going to test structures because we don't teach that way. At present, we're not giving essays, because until now very few have needed that skill. But some may in the future, so next semester we're likely to have an option in English for Academic Purposes.

Do you do any tests of reading or speaking comprehension?

We have a holistic oral assessment at the beginning. We measure various aspects of a person's speech, such as repetition and pronunciation, and try to come up with a score that is a mean between three judges. We also have reading cloze tests, and there'll probably be a listening cloze as well.

Do you enjoy your work?

It's crazy, frustrating, and wonderful. I'm working far more closely with my Chinese colleagues than I did last year in a regular foreign experts teaching job in a regular Chinese university. It's a complex mixture of things and they're all dynamic, which means we haven't defined them all yet. Probably if we're teaching a good programme, we will define something for each set of needs and modify it each semester.

FOREIGN EXPERTISE IN THE CHINESE CONTEXT

James Patrie*

In March of 1983, the TESL Canada China Committee negotiated with visiting representatives of the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China with respect to direct TESL Canada involvement in the hiring of EFL teachers for China. These negotiations were successfully completed and a memorandum of agreement was signed whereby TESL Canada would formally recruit approximately 12 Canadian EFL teachers each year. These individuals would be recommended to the Chinese Ministry of Education who would have final authority with respect to hiring and placement.

This memorandum of agreement was regarded by TESL Canada to be of major significance for two reasons. First, there continue to be numerous cases of Canadians employed to teach EFL in China who lack the necessary personal and professional qualifications to do so, and thus there are some very embarrassing results for Canada. Second, Canadians who

* The author of this article is the past chairman of the TESL Canada China Committee. All opinions expressed in this article, however, are the personal opinions of the author and must not be construed as official representations of TESL Canada.