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College English teaching in China: opportunities, challenges and directions in the context of educational internationalization

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ABSTRACT

This essay, based on an interview with an internationally renowned scholar of language and literacy education, addresses a range of issues that is of current interest and significance to English teachers in China's higher education context.

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In an era of economic globalization and educational internationalization, English has become an increasingly important medium of communication in higher education. College English teaching and English as an international lingua franca are now hot topics of research. Over the past decade, there has been heated debate in China concerning the role and direction of College English (e.g., Cai 2017). College English Teaching Guidelines (2017), a document recently released by Chinese Ministry of Education, lists English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and English for General Purposes (EGP) as two key components of English learning in college. However, many English teachers lack a clear understanding of the relationship between ESP and EGP, the goal and role of College English teaching, instructional designs for College English, professional development for English teachers, and related issues. This interview by Dr. Cuiying Li with Professor Zhihui Fang, an internationally renowned scholar of language and literacy education, aims to help English teachers in China's higher education gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of College English teaching.

1. What do you think is the role of English learning in tertiary education in China and around the world?

There is no doubt that English has become a global language. Globalization has led to increased cross-border student mobility (primarily to English-speaking countries, such as the USA, Britain, and Australia) and international partnership

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(such as satellite campuses, joint degree programs, and research collaboration). This trend contributes to elevating the status of English in international communications. As the main language of academia and transnational research across disciplines, English is a tool for learning disciplinary knowledge and for gaining access to cultural values and capitals around the world.

This situation presents both opportunities and challenges for China's English education at the tertiary level. In post-secondary education, learning becomes much more specialized, with students expected to develop knowledge, skills, and disposition that are specific to the discipline of their interest. Much of the disciplinary knowledge and value is encoded in language (as well as in other semiotic systems, such as mathematics symbolism and visual images), and it is primarily through language that students can gain access to disciplinary knowledge and ideology. As China becomes more of a global power, the need to learn English intensifies. Because much of the business in the world (e.g., academic publishing, political negotiation) is conducted in English, English has become the de facto official language in many parts of the world. This means that if China wants to interact productively with the outside world – both to learn from other countries and cultures and to share Chinese culture and products with the world, it must do so largely through English.

In other parts of the world, English-medium instruction has likewise gained popularity. Many universities have restructured their curricula and programs because of this trend. In Europe, for example, English-medium university courses for bachelor and master's programs have tripled in the last decade, with "around 2,400 English-medium programs running mainly, but not only, in Germany, the Netherlands and Scandinavia" (Smit and Dafouz 2012, 2). In this context, students are expected to learn content at the same time they are learning the language (often English) through which the content is constructed and communicated. They are expected to be able to not only use English to learn, evaluate and renovate knowledge but also develop English proficiency in reading, writing, speaking, listening, thinking, and reasoning so that they can communicate, both orally and in writing, their understanding of content to different audiences and for different purposes.

2. What is the relationship between EAP and disciplinary literacy? What do you think should be the goal of college English teaching in China?

EAP, or English for Academic Purposes, refers to the language skills that are needed for pursuing academic work in English medium higher education (Flowerdew 2016). The term encompasses English for general academic purpose (EGAP) and English for specific academic purpose (ESAP). EGAP refers to English used across academic disciplines. For example, the word "significance" can be used in both science and history. ESAP, on the other hand, refers to English used for specific disciplines. For example, the word "calculus" is a specialized term typically

associated with the discipline of mathematics. In general, EAP focuses on developing English language proficiency in vocabulary, grammar, and discourse so that students can better engage with academic work – both discipline specific and cross disciplines – in college through speaking, listening, reading, and writing. In other words, the goal of EAP is to help people learn key linguistic skills involved in studying academic disciplines in institutions of higher learning.

Disciplinary literacy, on the other hand, is a term used primarily in secondary education (middle and high schools) to refer to "the ability to engage in social, semiotic, and cognitive practices consistent with those of content experts" (Fang 2012; 2011, 19). The concept is grounded in the beliefs that language and literacy are integral to disciplinary practices and that disciplines differ not only in content but also in the ways this content is produced, communicated, and critiqued. From this perspective, teaching disciplinary literacy is not just about teaching a set of generic literacy strategies (e.g., summarizing, visualizing, inferencing, predicting, questioning, monitoring) and basic language skills (e.g., phonics, vocabulary, syntax) to improve students' reading and writing of texts across academic disciplines. It is about teaching students the language and literacy practices – including routines, skills, strategies, and habits of mind – that are integral to the everyday work of disciplinary experts so that students are able to read, write, talk, think, and reason like scientists, historians, mathematicians, economists, lawyers, and so on. Being literate in a discipline means both deep knowledge of disciplinary content and keen understanding of disciplinary ways of making meaning. This means that the term disciplinary literacy focuses on not just the language that construes and communicates disciplinary content, but also habits of mind, content knowledge, reasoning skills, reading/writing strategies, and other literacy practices (e.g., viewing, talking, critiquing) that disciplinary experts engage in. In this sense, disciplinary literacy is a much broader term than EAP, and the goal of disciplinary literacy instruction is to develop students' understanding of how experts produce, communicate, critique and renovate knowledge in their discipline.

3. Since ESP is for specific purposes, it must be very hard to set a common goal across all disciplines. How can ESP teachers go about setting goals for their own students?

ESP refers to English for Specific Purposes. It is an umbrella term that includes EAP, English for Professional Purposes (EPP), and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP). In learning ESP, students are not learning ESP for the sake of learning it; they are learning it in order to use it to advance their personal, academic, and professional goals.

To set the goal of ESP teaching, first of all we (teachers) will need to do a need analysis. In other words, we need to identify what it is that our students want and need in terms of language and literacy practices that would help them fulfill the goals in their personal, academic, and professional pursuits. We can get a sense of

these aims or needs by surveying students, their professors, their prospective employers, and their parents. We can also examine relevant national, provincial, and professional standards. The information gathered from these surveys and examinations can help us specify more precisely the linguistic and literacy requirements that are significant to particular academic or disciplinary contexts and are worthwhile to focus on in teaching.

Once the needs or aims are identified, we need to consider where students are in terms of their language and literacy knowledge, skills, and disposition. These can be measured with formal tests (e.g., IELTS, TOEFEL, China's own Band 4 or 6 College English Test) and/or informal surveys designed by local teachers.

Now that we have information about students' aims or needs and their declarative, as well as working, knowledge of English, we can then identify strengths that can be capitalized on and needs that must be addressed in order to move students to the next level. This is when we set unit and lesson objectives for our teaching. We also select teaching approaches, methods, and materials that help us accomplish these teaching and learning objectives. Our next step is to design and sequence activities in a way that facilitates student learning. Making these pedagogical decisions require that we are knowledgeable about not only the educational policies and practices in the context of our teaching/learning but also how our students learn and develop. Once the course syllabus is designed, we can then implement it as part of the broader curriculum in our respective programs of study.

The next step is to determine whether course objectives are accomplished and whether our students are succeeding in their academic disciplines. The evaluation can be done through teacher-designed assessment tasks and/or tracking student performance in their disciplinary learning. Results from the evaluation provide feedback that can be used to inform subsequent design, refinement, and delivery of ESP courses. In short, the iterative cycle of analyzing student needs – determining where students are in language/literacy proficiency – setting learning goals and objectives – selecting methods and materials – designing and sequencing tasks – evaluating outcome (Gillett, Hammond, and Martala 2009) can serve as a useful heuristic for planning and implementing ESP instruction. Finally, it is important to note that disciplines do share many linguistic features, although the frequency with which these features are used varies across disciplines, genres and contexts.

4. Currently, ESP has already been set as an important part of college English teaching in our new college English curriculum. But to put ESP in real practice, we need qualified teachers. So, what kind of professional development do Chinese English teachers need in order to teach ESP or disciplinary literacy?

To qualify for teaching ESP or disciplinary literacy, college English teachers in China will need to understand the language and literacy practices that are specific to the discipline in which they will be teaching. Because all disciplinary teaching and learning involves extensive use of language, as well as intimate interaction with text, it is imperative that teachers be able to engage students in discussion about text that raises their awareness about the way knowledge and values are construed through language (and other modalities) in academic disciplines. Those who understand language and literacy and their relationship to disciplinary learning will be more effective in working with and supporting students in their academic and professional pursuits.

To this end, college English teachers in China will benefit from professional development work that helps them develop robust knowledge about how language and literacy work in their discipline, strong skills for planning engaging units of instruction that promote integration of language and content, and effective strategies for supporting exploration of language and meaning in daily instruction (Schleppegrell and O'Halloran 2011). More specifically, they may need opportunities that help them develop ways of engaging students' interests that maximize their participation in disciplinary learning and socialization. In this connection, teachers will need to learn strategies for affirming students' linguistic and cultural identities and find ways of building on students' everyday language and funds of knowledge in their disciplinary learning (Cummins 2014). Teachers also need to learn how to promote collaborative inquiry, problem solving, and strategic use of both material and semiotic tools. Most importantly, they need to develop strategies for scaffolding text comprehension and production for authentic purposes and across diverse contexts.

Additionally, college English teachers in China will need to be familiar with the practices and worldviews of specific discourse communities because acquiring ESP or disciplinary literacy is in essence "a social process of enculturation into the values and practices some specialist community" (Lemke 2002, 21). For example, the interpretive work that historians engage in involves such heuristics as sourcing, contextualization, corroboration, and making inferences (Wineburg, Martin, and Monte-Sano 2013). Developing these ways of knowing, along with habits of mind (e.g., textual skepticism, evidence-based argumentation), is key to teaching language and literacy in the discipline of history. Finally, given the fact that most English teachers in China are not content experts outside the language arena, it is important that they develop an interest in, as well as strategies for, collaborating with experts in other academic disciplines when designing units and lessons of

instruction (Fang 2011). It is very important that the concerns and goals of disciplines be foregrounded when orchestrating any unit of language/literacy instruction. This will ensure that the language and literacy work is authentic, meaningful and motivating and at the same time in the service of disciplinary learning and disciplinary literacy development.

5. From the journal articles and reports in the last two international ESP conferences, especially the one in Hong Kong in December 2017, we found that corpus studies are quite prevalent in discussion of ESP. What do you think is the role of corpus in ESP teaching?

Corpus studies are valuable in that they can identify language patterns and text structures that characterize disciplinary discourses. This allows us to compare differences and similarities in the way experts use language. As such, corpus studies give teachers and students a general, or broad, sense of disciplinary discourses, such as what is more or less likely or prevalent in the way a particular discipline uses language to construe and communicate its knowledge and value. They also provide some guidance to teachers and students in terms of what text materials to use and what language or text features to focus on for specific disciplines. For example, Flowerdew (2005) showed how ESP-originated rhetorical structures (i.e., the moves identified by John Swales) can be identified using corpora. These rhetorical structures (or moves) have been used productively in the teaching of disciplinary reading and writing. In reading, teachers can draw on the established rhetorical structures to help students comprehend texts through the use of graphic organizers. In writing, students can follow the conventional rhetorical structures to produce well-formed texts valued by disciplinary insiders. Teachers can also use conventional rhetorical structures to promote critical literacy by engaging students in discussion about how and why an author followed or did not follow the established genre conventions in making meaning.

Another application of corpus studies in ESP is the production of wordlists for materials and test design. A prominent example is the *Academic Word List* compiled by Averil Coxhead. The list consists of some 570 high-incidence and high-utility academic words for secondary school, higher education, and career. Teachers have been using word lists such as this in their literacy instruction. For example, teachers sometimes supply key academic vocabulary words and have students predict and guess at the text. This helps boost student confidence and reduce text comprehension anxiety. Teachers also promote critical reading by having students sort key academic vocabulary words into categories of people, places, processes, etc. This helps students address questions such as what happened, who performed the acts, who was acted upon, what was foregrounded, what was backgrounded, and what was omitted. Key academic vocabulary words can also be used in writing tasks.

Having students generate a text with a list of key academic vocabulary words provides a basis for brainstorming and alleviates students' writing anxiety.

One major problem with corpus studies has to do with selection of corpora, such as how representative or big the corpora are and what analytical tools are used in corpus studies, as these variables can affect the outcome of research (Paltridge and Starfield 2013). For example, Pérez-Paredes (2003) found that Michael Swan's (1995) *Practical English Usage news language wordlist* contains words not common in some natural news texts. For this reason, teachers are advised to be aware of the size and representativeness of the corpora when teaching the language or discourse features derived from those corpora. An alternative, and perhaps more productive, avenue to promoting ESP is to use genre/register analysis (instead of corpus analysis), such as that informed by systemic functional linguistics (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004), to engage students in exploring how language choices make meaning in genre- and discipline-specific ways. This approach, called functional language analysis (Fang 2010; Fang and Schleppegrell 2008; Fang and Wang 2011), provides teachers a set of practical strategies for engaging students in systematically analyzing the language patterns and discussing the meanings of these patterns in text. The analysis and discussion focus on three areas of meaning that are presented in all texts: content (i.e., experiential meaning), organization (i.e., textual and logical meanings), and authorial judgments and perspectives (i.e., interpersonal meaning). Students learn what a text is about (i.e., who does what to whom, how, when, and where) by analyzing the meaning in the patterns of language choices in each clause; they recognize how a text weaves meanings into a coherent message by analyzing what begins each clause, how clauses are combined, and how cohesion is calibrated; and they uncover how the author positions and persuades readers in particular ways by analyzing word choices and other linguistic configurations. In short, the approach foregrounds the role of language in construing and communicating disciplinary knowledge, value, and world view. It has the potential to help students develop an awareness of, as well as proficiency in, discipline-specific language and literacy practices.

6. As university education moves inexorably towards increased online delivery (e.g., MOOCS, Moodle, flipped classrooms etc.), do you think e-teaching and e-learning will be a trend in ESP?

I think e-teaching/learning is already happening, almost everywhere. In my college (College of Education) at the University of Florida, whose online degree programs are consistently ranked among the best in the USA, we have more online students than on campus students. There are universities in the USA (e.g., Walden University, University of Phoenix) that are based solely on online teaching and learning. This trend is also seen in ESP teaching, as the number of

ESP e-learning courses has been growing steadily around the globe. Part of the reason for the popularity of online education has to do with economy and convenience. Many people cannot quit their jobs, leave their family, and physically relocate to a university campus in order to get a degree or receive training there. At the same time, many universities are financially challenged and need to boost their enrollment. These realities have led to the popularity of e-teaching and learning, a trend made possible with the dynamic development of learning management system (LMS) technology, such as Moodle and Canvas. Today, anyone concerned with language and literacy teaching and learning is well advised to become familiar – and comfortable – with the nature of technology-mediated courses.

Online courses are structured differently. In my college, most online courses run for 8 weeks, but some are also 10, 12, 14, or 16 weeks long. Each course is divided into modules (often based on topics), with each module typically lasting one week. In online courses, students develop language and literacy skills through a variety of tasks, including reading materials, watching videos, writing responses to the readings and videos, participating in online discussion forum, listening to teacher lectures, and presenting projects via powerpoint or videos. Teachers interact with students and provide feedback to students on a weekly basis. In online teaching and learning, students take responsibilities for their own learning, with teachers providing timely and ongoing support. Online education gives students the flexibility to study at their own pace and in their own environment. At the same time, it also requires that students take initiatives and demonstrate a high degree of self-discipline and honesty in their work. On the other hand, it requires teachers to be technologically savvy and have a constant "presence" online so as to engage students in ongoing interaction.

Despite its popularity, online education is still equated by many with lower quality education, and online degrees tend to be viewed with more suspicion in graduate admission and work application. At the same time, although flipped classrooms and MOOCS are being tossed around as potentially innovative ways of teaching or providing access to content, they have yet to pick up steam, and their effectiveness has yet to be rigorously investigated. That said, many universities (and funding agencies) across the United States are now investing quite heavily in such emerging areas as personalized learning, precision education, and learning analytics. A possible solution to the current dilemma in the ESP context is to focus on blended learning, which combines online digital media with traditional classroom methods. Blended learning, in my experience, can optimize the learning environment and increase instructional effectiveness by providing students with both access to computer-mediated activities regarding content and delivery and the opportunity for face-to-face classroom interactions.

7. Presently, in teaching ESP many teachers focus on the explanation of disciplinary content; other teachers focus on analysis of long sentences or memorization of technical words. There is also some interest in project-based learning. What suggestions will you give our teachers on the teaching of ESP? How can teachers integrate the three aspects of language learning proposed by Prof. Michael Halliday – teaching language, teaching through language, and teaching about language?

The teaching of ESP should be embedded within broader disciplinary experiences in which students engage in reading, writing, talking, observing, listening, viewing, inquiring, and performing related to the topics and ideas that are significant to the discipline in question. These experiences provide rich, authentic contexts in which language and literacy are used, both orally and in writing. When working with disciplinary texts in ESP teaching, teachers can follow an instructional routine that engages students in the tripartite process of learning through language, learning language, and learning about language. This routine involves four stages – Engage, Examine, Exercise, and Extend (Fang 2016).

In Phase 1 (Engage), teacher engages students in reading, questioning, and discussing topically or thematically related texts that are significant to the discipline in question. Students read the texts on their own. While reading, they take notes of any comments or connections they are making. Teacher can ask students to develop "thick" questions (those dealing with the larger concepts that require inference and synthesis) and "thin" questions (those focusing on specific details in the text). After reading, students get into small groups to discuss their questions and exchange ideas. The class then comes together to share what was discussed in small groups. Students make a list of the questions they were unable to answer in small groups. The class brainstorm ideas for how to seek answers to these questions. This phase provides students with a general understanding of the texts, which subsequent phases will build on to guide students in thinking more deeply and critically about sample excerpts from these texts.

In Phase 2 (Examine), teacher identifies particularly challenging or important segments of text (usually 1–2 paragraphs) for close reading and analysis. Teacher helps students zoom in on these segments, engaging them in reading closely, deconstructing sentences into meaningful chunks, and discussing the functions and meanings of these chunks. This phase allows teacher to model close, attentive reading by explicitly drawing attention to the lexical, grammatical, and discursive features of a text. This helps students expand their linguistic understanding of how meaning is made in specific genres or disciplines. When students understand how meaning is made in a given genre or discipline, they are better equipped to evaluate the content and critique the text.

In Phase 3 (Exercise), teacher designs tasks that highlight or reinforce the key language patterns of the texts discussed in Phase 2. These tasks can focus

on the linguistic resources for construing, for example, technicality, generalization, abstraction, authorial voice, epistemic stance, informational density, discursive flow, and logical–semantic relations. These types of activities give students the opportunity to "play" with the language patterns that may not be familiar to them but are valued by disciplinary insiders.

In Phase 4 (Extend), teacher guides students in developing a new text. Students can first collaborate on a text as a step toward getting them comfortable with developing a new text on their own. They can construct a new text by appropriating or paraphrasing the key or new language resources from the text they have been reading closely. Teacher can encourage imitation and "playful innovation" (Myhill 2013) in language use as students work on communicating their understanding of disciplinary content in genre and discipline-specific ways.

It is worth pointing out that the four phases form an iterative cycle that does not always have to proceed in a linear sequence. This pedagogical routine has the most potential to promote language learning, knowledge building, and metadiscursive awareness when it is embedded in authentic disciplinary inquiries. In other words, when students engage in meaningful disciplinary explorations, the opportunity for them to develop advanced literacy, critical literacy, and disciplinary literacy is maximized.

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