

Teaching English in China – The Final Year

Fifth Draft, by Paul MacFarlane



How will you remember it?

1. Tell or retell what was **interesting**.
2. Tell your **own experience** or opinions.
3. Ask **questions**.

The illustration shows various learning activities: a person writing, a person reading, a person speaking, a person listening, a person climbing a rope, a person holding a snake, a person holding a dagger, and a group of people in hard hats around a table.



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Forward

I am not talented in language. But that very ineptitude proved to be my advantage. It made language intriguing for me, beginning in sixth grade, when I tried (but failed) to understand how some girls could talk constantly in class, and even across the room, through silently “mouthed” words. Such language mastery! This fascination then followed me my whole life.



This particular volume began as a journal, which I kept during my final year teaching English to science and engineering graduate students at Tianjin University in China.

The school wanted my students to eventually write and publish scientific papers using technical English. For the vast majority of these students, that was a pipe dream.

Actually, their command of vocabulary, at least written vocabulary, was pretty good, but their command of basic English sentence structures was weak, despite having memorized more grammar rules than almost any native English speaker including this English teacher. More often than not, they wrote word salads instead of coherent messages. A single year’s English course would not suffice to retrain the students’ faults into technical-level competence.

How could this be the case, since they really were masters at their respective science or engineering courses, and they’d studied English longer than most of their other subjects? What could account for the discrepancy? Some might claim that my students were too old to acquire a natural English. But they started studying somewhere between the ages of five and eight, good ages for mastering a second language to native proficiency

And these English defects were not limited to students. In fact there’s an entire cottage industry of native English speakers “correcting” English scientific papers at Chinese universities. I myself occasionally took part in such tasks. Often we “translators” needed an hour or longer just to understand and restate the “English” written on a single page.

So I tried to shore up the students’ missing basic English skills as much as possible, but even more importantly, I wanted them to gain knowledge and experiences that they could follow up in subsequent years, depending upon their own opportunities and interests. So perhaps someday, long after leaving my class, they could finally write acceptable technical English.

All of our English curriculum had to fit within the conceptual constraints imposed by the students’ and the school administration’s beliefs of what language education consisted of in the



first place. Otherwise they would not participate from the heart, and our time together would be mostly wasted.

My journals, which I wrote annually, served as resources, both to help me evaluate and revise the year's curriculum for the following year, and to pass on to others, to stimulate their thinking in developing their own English curricula, particularly if their students' goals were similar to mine.

So I myself studied and developed my teaching methods on my own, just as I hoped my students would study and develop their English skills on their own after leaving my class. Each of my eight years in Tianjin saw substantial revisions to my curriculum, as I came to understand the students more deeply, and as I learned to teach more efficiently.

In fact, my final year's lessons bore little resemblance to the first year's, beyond my walking into a classroom each time to set them up. And I'd figured out how to fit everything important from that first year into the first half of the course, leaving plenty time to explore further. Had I taught another year, the lessons would have evolved even further, in ways that would have been hard to foresee.

The lessons described here (with some small exceptions as noted) all fit into a 27 or 29 – week course, (depending upon holidays) spread over two semesters. Each class section met once each week for 95 minutes, which totaled just under 43 or 46 hours in class altogether – the **2015-2016** academic year.

The first section of the present volume outlines some basic understandings about how natural languages work and how these understandings can guide classroom practice. Obviously, they may be useful for teachers, but also for language students doing self-study. They may be a bit theory heavy, but that theory does clarify where the course's lessons are most worthwhile.

The next section presents a teaching methodology (called “TPRS”). It's the best methodology that I know for teaching beginning and elementary students according to the theoretical underpinnings presented in the first section. My students lacked many beginner-level English skills, but they were not, in fact, beginners. So a flat-out program of TPRS was not appropriate. Nevertheless, its principles guided much of my classroom practice. I include it here for that reason, and so the reader may observe its echoes throughout my curriculum. And also, it should prove helpful to any teacher who deals with beginners and elementary students.

The next section outlines some nuts-and-bolts considerations of classroom organization.

The following several sections, which constitute the bulk of the book, describe most of the lessons that I taught in **2015-2016**.

The first few describe particular skills that we worked on, and the last couple describe the projects that brought all these skills (and others) together. I left out the “cultural presentations,” since these were mainly lectures, and anybody



likely to read this book already know how to deal with those. One hint, though, is worth mentioning. For cultural presentations: *“PowerPoint is your friend.”*

The original journal was organized chronologically. That is, the lessons in the various threads were simply reported in date order, which meant that curricular threads intertwined with other threads over the course of the year. This format, though it's an accurate record, made individual threads hard to follow or search out. A book like this should isolate each thread (as much as possible), to clarify lesson sequences and to avoid leaving anything out. A chart of how the various threads were scheduled together can be found on page 66.

I tried to write enough detail to give the reader a taste of actually visiting my classroom. The inspiration for this writing style came from books by elementary school math teacher and author Marilyn Burns.

The final sections, “Part Two,” describe some of my experiences with Chinese students, colleagues, and culture, to give a taste of how things work at a Chinese University.

I hope that this work, like the yearly journals that preceded it, can prove useful to ESL teachers, especially those in China, but also those in other locations and situations.

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