

ELT Research Papers 13–07

Portraits of inspiring English teachers in China and Indonesia

Martin Wedell and Martin Lamb

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- Ronggan Zhang, Senior Lecturer in English at Yuexiu Centre for Educational Development, Guangzhou, China.
- Ibu Nilawati Hadisantosa, Senior Lecturer in English, Faculty of Education, Universitas Atma Jaya, Jakarta, Indonesia.

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Abstract

The first report on our English Language Learning and Teaching Research Award (ELTRP) funded research project presented the data from a short survey (n = 279) which asked learners aged 14–22 to nominate and then describe state school teachers who had inspired them. The names of 168 different teachers were proposed, of whom 20 received two or more nominations.

Here we report on following up a subset of eight of the nominated teachers. Through visiting them in their schools, observing one of their classes and talking to them about their teaching principles, we aimed to obtain snapshots of what inspiring teaching looked like in context, and of some of the thinking that underpinned such teaching.

As can be seen in the observed lessons below (and the accompanying video extracts), inspiring teaching looked very different in different classrooms. Discrete reasons for such differences are inevitably extremely complicated to untangle, but we suggest several features of the political and social contexts within which English is taught in the two countries, which we feel may help account for many of the differences we observed.

The inspiring teachers had things in common too, most notably they really cared about their profession and their subject, and about how to convey their own enthusiasm to their learners in ways that would encourage them to begin to care about learning it too. However, we also realised that the visible expression of each teachers' care, as demonstrated through their in and out of class behaviour, was different and that it was bound to be so, since it had been shaped by their individual experiences of negotiating the norms and values of their particular school and classroom contexts over time.

Introduction

It is well recognised that motivation is a key ingredient in good educational practice: ideally people come to classes motivated to learn, and teachers build on that foundation. In the field of language education, there is a growing awareness of what constitutes motivational pedagogy (Dörnyei, 2001), informed by increasing numbers of research studies (e.g. Moskovsky et al., 2013; Guilloteaux, 2013). Our particular interest is in the kind of motivational teaching that anticipates the time when teaching is over; that is, teaching that inspires learners not only to do the teacher's bidding in the class but to study independently, of their own volition, over many years, through the vicissitudes of adolescent or young adult life. Especially in global contexts where formal education is circumscribed in time and resources, this is the only way that foreign language competence is reliably achieved.

This is the second part of a report on a research project which aimed to identify and describe a number of state school English teachers in Guangzhou, China and Jakarta, Indonesia who had inspired learners, changed the way they felt about the subject and persuaded them to invest time and effort in studying the language beyond the classroom. In this report we first briefly describe the mechanics of the visits, then present portraits of four teachers, two from China, two from Indonesia, including short video extracts from their lessons. We have chosen these teachers because of the contrasts they present to their compatriots and to the teachers in the other country. We believe they illustrate some of the diverse ways in which language teachers can inspire learners, and we hope their example may inspire other teachers to continue searching for their own unique form of inspirational pedagogy.

Visiting the teachers

Apart from having multiple nominations, the teachers we wanted to visit needed to be still currently working in the Guangzhou or Jakarta area, in a regular state school. We also wanted to include teachers from both junior and senior high schools. Once we had identified teachers who met these criteria, our intention was for our research assistants to send them a letter which described the research briefly, explained that they had been nominated as an inspiring English teacher, asked permission to visit, observe and interview them in their schools, and gained their consent for the audio/video recording. In reality, the research procedure in each country differed.

In China

School visits stretched over a month. They would have been impossible without the help of our research assistant who is an Educational Researcher/Teacher Trainer working in one of the District Education offices in Guangzhou. Three schools (two junior secondary and one primary) were accessed through his obtaining permission to visit and film in advance from district- and then school-level leaders. At each school the visit was a fairly formal event, with at least one senior member of the school staff (the Head, Deputy Head or Head of English) welcoming us with refreshments prior to the observation and then being present at the interview. Two of the three observed lessons were in normal classrooms and one in a special room used for observations. (The primary school lesson data was not analysed since the teacher was ill on the day, and what was seen did not do her justice). The lessons were all revision lessons, and it is impossible to judge the degree to which they were normal lessons, though they were clearly lessons that the teacher believed to be potentially inspiring.

Access to the fourth school (senior secondary) was through the research assistant's personal connections. At this school there was no formal welcome and we met no member of the school staff apart from the nominated teacher. The lesson here took place in a 'model lesson' classroom, which had banked rows of cinema-like seats looking onto the classroom.

In Indonesia

In Indonesia, our research assistant, a senior lecturer in a prestigious higher-education (HE) institution in Jakarta who has been involved in teacher development and curriculum projects over many years, recognised some of the names on the list of nominated teachers and confirmed that they had a good reputation; by contrast, the teacher who received the most nominations was not known to her. We selected the latter teacher plus three of the others for possible visits. The research assistant approached the head teacher in each school by letter, briefly describing the research project and explaining that we would like to invite the nominated teacher to participate further in the study. In all cases the head teachers had no objection and either passed on the letter to the teacher concerned, who then contacted the research assistant directly, or the research assistant made a follow-up phone call and contacted the teacher that way.

The visits themselves were all low key, involving only a brief stop to pay compliments to the head teacher or his/her deputy before the teachers themselves took over responsibility for our visit. All the lessons took place in the teacher's regular classrooms, and at least three of the lessons were clearly what was going to happen anyway – the teacher did not prepare a lesson especially for the observation – while the fourth (Kartika) was partly revision, partly new. The informality of the Indonesian observations may reflect these Jakartan schools' relatively relaxed attitude towards foreign visitors, as well as the relatively high status of these particular English teachers in the schools' hierarchy.

Indonesian portraits

Ibu (Mrs) Kartika

Kartika has been an English teacher at Junior High School (JHS) 157, East Jakarta, for ten years, having previously worked at another school on the outskirts of Jakarta for ten years. She never intended to become a teacher – it was suggested to her by her husband as a job that would allow her to spend plenty of time with her three growing children – though now she really enjoys it.

Training

Kartika has a Teaching Diploma from Universitas Islam in Bekasi; this was a one-year programme that included a practicum, and she began teaching immediately afterwards. Working in regular state schools, she gets occasional opportunities for in-service government training courses but these are usually just one-day events. Her main chance for self-development, she believes, comes through the inter-school student competitions in which she often represents JHS 157; for example, taking a group of students on a residential long weekend for an English language speech contest, or a story-telling competition.

Learner comments

Kartika had a very high number of nominations (27) though almost all were from students currently in her junior high school who had been taught by her the previous year. Respondents praised both her personal character and her teaching skill. Running through the comments though was an apparent contradiction: she was kind and yet strict, her teaching was great fun but also disciplined. She was also praised for her energy and fighting spirit, and evidently was more than a teacher to some pupils – they felt they knew her as a person. Her lessons were enjoyable and full of humour, yet pupils also claimed they learned a lot.

Teaching principles*

According to Kartika there is a pervasive view among Indonesians that English is difficult to learn: 'you know that English is such a terrible thing for most of our people, our students, yeah, they don't like English very much, they hate English, so I can change their point of view about English, English is very, very fun, so I'm teaching them, I always strive to make my lessons fun, so they don't feel stressed.' She became aware early in her teaching career of the challenge this attitude presents to teachers, and resolved to overcome it. Her first step, she said, was to change her relationship with the learners: 'They like my style of teaching because I make myself as a student so I see things

from their perspective.' She allows her students to become 'friends' with her on Facebook, and to send her emails. Her sense of humour and liking for friendly banter was very evident in the observed lesson, though things never get out of hand, and she urges the learners to concentrate and work hard: 'I'm very strict about discipline.'

Another of her priorities is to demonstrate that English is not as difficult as they think. In her grammar explanations she always stresses how simple it is, and points out the similarities with Bahasa Indonesia. When giving a writing task, she tells them 'you can write, it's easy, it's not difficult to write in English, but I tell them how to do it first, so they can then practise right away with me.' Likewise, she encourages learners to practise speaking as much as possible: 'Forget about the mistakes in grammar ... I say to them I understand what you say, you understand what I say.'

She believes students are motivated by working in groups. She regularly gives them tasks to do, a recent one being 'how to make a pizza'. The groups had to find out using the internet or by asking family members and then present their findings in front of the class. The same strategy can be used to teach grammar. If the next week's topic is 'adverbs of manner', she says, she asks groups to use the internet or other sources to find out about them and then report back: 'If a student finds by themselves, they will understand easier than if I tell them about it.' Her class textbook is *English on Sky* (sic), but she doesn't have to use it. She chooses whatever materials are suitable to the curriculum themes: something to make the students active.

She admits that her very energetic style of teaching, in a non-air-conditioned classroom of 40 students, can be wearying and she occasionally loses control: 'Sometimes I get angry with them, sometimes ... then they don't feel relaxed any more, and so I feel really guilty, so later I just get them laughing again, joking.'

*some quotations are translated from Bahasa Indonesia

Observed lesson

This was a Year 9 class of 40 students, aged 14–15, seated in the standard Indonesian format of paired tables – five columns of eight students across. The first 50 minutes of a regular 90-minute class was observed. Kartika led the lesson energetically throughout, finding time to relax when students were working on exercises. At these times she sat at her desk at the front, occasionally going to help students who put their hands up for assistance. Students

naturally worked in pairs, with the person seated next to them, and occasionally the pairs co-operated with the pair sitting in front or behind them.

Outline

The teacher (T) introduces lesson (in English) telling students that they'll sing together the song *Beauty and the Beast* (Celine Dion version), which they've done before. She first tries to elicit the gist of the story from students though only one student contributes. [five minutes]

1. T plays song (2x) while students do a gap-fill exercise in their worksheets. [ten minutes]
2. T puts up PowerPoint (PPT) slide showing a poster of aspirational aphorisms (e.g. 'I CHOOSE ... to live by choice, not by chance; to make changes, not excuses...') T says this poster is the theme of the lesson and explains each line; she then translates each line into Bahasa Indonesia and checks that students understand, elaborating on the message of the poster. She gets noticeably more response from students now she's mixing English and Indonesian. [eight minutes]
3. T goes through gap-fill answers using an answer key projected on the board. [seven minutes]
4. Now all students have complete lyrics, T plays the song again and some students sing softly as they listen. [five minutes]
5. T goes through students' photocopied worksheet 'Let's learn to construct texts' (a topic from the genre-based national curriculum). As with the poster, T narrates sentence by sentence, immediately translating to Indonesian and giving further explanation. She often elicits answers from class, and sometimes the whole class gives a choral response, sometimes just a handful of students. Occasional joking and joshing, mainly on the theme of love. [five minutes]
6. T asks the students to tell the story of *Beauty and the Beast* from memory, but it seems most have forgotten it, so T tells it herself, while relating it to principles of text construction (e.g. including components like 'orientation', 'complications', 'resolution'). Again she regularly pauses in mid-sentence to elicit key words or phrases and students respond as one. [ten minutes]
7. T explains a grammar point about action verbs and elicits some examples. [four minutes]
8. T gives task (in photocopied materials) – students read and identify the structural components of a new text and look for action verbs. Students work individually but sometimes consult with partner. [ongoing]

Video extract



This is a three-minute section, 32 minutes into the lesson (the beginning of Stage 7), where Kartika is mediating the story that learners have just read (and previously heard in the Celine Dion song), bringing out the important learning points; that is, the generic components of a narrative, such as ‘protagonists’, ‘orientation’ and ‘complications’. Most of the time she uses Bahasa Indonesia, occasionally slipping in English words and phrases. Earlier in the lesson she had asked the Indonesian research assistant, a senior academic, whether it was OK to use Indonesian in the observed lesson. There are strong professional pressures on teachers to use the target language at all times, but she believed that many learners would not be able to participate fully in the lesson if she used English. This extract showcases Kartika’s passionate style of teaching, which holds the learners’ attention for long periods. It also demonstrates her friendly and humorous manner – towards the end of the clip, she indulges in some self-mockery by asking the learners whether she is more like the beauty or the beast, to their obvious amusement.

Ibu Endah

Endah is an English teacher in a middle-ranking senior high school in East Jakarta, and she has worked there for 29 years, enjoying the relatively peaceful environment, the colleagues and the support she gets from the head teacher. She has worked in other institutions, including a large private language school in the city where she met her English husband, but for the past seven years she has concentrated on her work at this school. She says she has never been interested in moving into administration or management, as it would distract her from her regular teaching.

Training

She studied for a degree in English Language and Literature, a course that included some practical teacher training. She feels she learned a great deal by working at other schools: ‘If I just teach here I don’t improve because I do not meet other people but because I taught in other places that improved me a lot, especially in [private language school], I had to take international certificates, FCE, also CPE, that improved me a lot and I taught higher levels of English and that make me learn more.’ She is a British Council virtual teacher, co-operating with other teachers and using materials provided by the British Council to make lesson plans together. She also attends workshops regularly at the American Regional English Language Office (RELO). She says she offered this opportunity to other English teachers in the school but they told her they didn’t have time to attend: ‘Well I don’t have time too, but I try to make time!’

Learner comments

Endah was nominated by five students, who had a range of compliments for her. Three mentioned her patience/kindness, and ability to keep a disciplined class, and explain language points in full, while remaining cheerful. She was a ‘teacher who can make their children laugh, yet still serious in the class’. All said she made them more interested in the language, while three of them said they feel more confident having had her as a teacher, mentioning the way she praised them for their ability to use the language. Two students mentioned her excellent English and one went on to praise her for her extensive cultural knowledge of the UK.

Teaching principles

Endah thinks that students come to her school with a low motivation to learn English: ‘Maybe because their school before they were not well, or [they] didn’t get enough, like that, so I try to motivate them by giving good materials, interesting materials, it is closer to the nature of language.’ She never has any difficulty finding new materials, which she can adapt for her teaching: ‘Oh there are lots, especially the British Council ... I’ve got a lot of listening from them, the internet. I’ve also bought a lot of books, I’ve had a lot of training so I can open more websites, addresses, so at home I mostly use my laptop to browse, “I’m going to teach this, what is it?”’. She also invites students to bring materials to class, which they do, especially English language songs which they like and which they enjoy translating into Indonesian.

As for the new students entering her school, she says ‘I don’t want to make it difficult for them, so that they can perform, the most important thing is that they have ... self-confidence to talk in English, in a simple way.’ This sometimes means giving them praise or even rewards for their good work. By contrast with some other teachers, she wants her students to be active in class: ‘I don’t like it if the classes are without spirit at all, what can I do there?’ By enabling the students to enjoy her classes – ‘I can see the expression on their faces’ – she enjoys teaching them. However she feels she is not always able to give them the experience they deserve: ‘I don’t have enough time ... too many classes, and administration is very demanding, also marking so much, preparation’s a lot, everything takes time, I feel so sorry for them, you know, but I try to make a great time in class.’

Endah also makes sure the students know how important English can be for their future, especially in the capital city where even small children can speak some English: ‘I said “make use of your ability, and

improve it more and more, because you can feel it, that it will help you later on, you can contact anyone around the world, or you can get access to people around the world, you can get kind of scholarship from anywhere, so make use of that.” Of course another way English is important is as an assessed school subject. The Year 12 students in the observed lesson will face a high-stakes national exam at the end of the academic year. Endah says the students do want to score highly, but she does not appear too concerned about it at this stage, and very few students mentioned assessment in their comments. Since there is no speaking assessment, the topic of the observed lesson was completely unrelated to the national exam.

Observed lesson

This was a Year 12 class (ages 17–18), and the first half of a regular 90-minute session was observed. Approximately 32 students were seated in paired tables facing the front (the standard school layout). The teacher stressed that this was a lesson they were going to do anyway, to practise students’ oral debating skills, and that we would not see much teaching going on. At the end of the lesson (which we did not witness), the teacher gave feedback to the students on aspects of their performance (e.g. use of PPT, language errors).

Outline

The lesson starts with the teacher very calmly asking the students to perform as well as they can, suggesting they take deep breaths if they feel nervous. She asks other students to pay attention and give support to those who are speaking. She invites the first pair to the front, and then she sits at her desk to the side, where she remains for the rest of the lesson, occasionally making notes on things that the learners did or said. [two minutes]

1. The first pair give a presentation, giving opposing views on the issue of ‘national exams’; first ‘pro’ then ‘against’. [all approximately five minutes]
2. The second pair – topic: ‘dating in high school students’. Other students mostly pay attention, though they are free to make occasional comments to each other, or even to call out to the student presenters.
3. The third pair – topic: ‘national exams’ again. Other students start to chat among themselves. T occasionally ‘shushes’ them but is generally tolerant of the low buzz of student chatter. This pair includes a rehearsed dialogue as part of their presentation.
4. The fourth pair – topic: ‘is homework necessary?’ When one of the students falters in his presentation, he switches to Indonesian. Other students call out the English words/phrases that he needs.
5. Fifth pair – topic: ‘dating’.
6. Sixth pair – topic: ‘homework’
7. Seventh pair – topic: ‘dating’
8. Eighth pair – topic: ‘homework’ [ongoing]

Video extract



The extract is from the very beginning of the lesson (Introduction and Stage 1). The students know they are going to give their oral presentations and Endah gives them some encouragement. The first pair then debates whether the national exam is a good thing or not. The relaxed atmosphere in the class is very evident as the two boys are gently teased. The teacher does not intervene however, and the boys are able to continue to put their case forward without further interruption. This sets the pattern for the whole lesson; the teacher only speaks when there is a breakdown in communication among the students, or when she reminds them to pay attention to the speakers.

Chinese portraits

Ms Wang

Ms Wang has been a teacher for 20 years and currently teaches at a senior middle school in a fairly affluent suburb of the city. She started 'teaching' when young: 'I liked to teach what I know especially about English to the younger children in our neighbourhood.' She also remembers having a good English teacher herself: 'My first English teacher is a middle-aged woman who can speak excellent English so I think she laid a very solid foundation for my English learning.'

Training

She graduated from a four-year English Teacher Education programme at Yunnan Normal University. Most of the training was theoretical but she 'practised teaching for two times for altogether over three months, about four months maybe, I think it was really very helpful for me.' Her only In-service Educational Training (INSET) experience since graduation has been one month at Bourneville College in the UK: 'That was really very happy, and also professionally useful, some parts of it is interesting and also practical here in China where I'm teaching.'

Learner comments

Ms Wang was nominated by four former students. They emphasised her personal characteristics more than specific aspects of her teaching. She teaches at a school where most students are weekly boarders and nominators highlighted her role as a 'mother' to those far from home, a 'friend' at times of illness, and her patience and encouragement, ('she taught me to persist and not give up'; 'she made me feel good about myself').

Teaching principles

Ms Wang believes that good 'teachers normally have some common quality, they are kind, ready to help, positive, warm hearted maybe.' (These were many of the things that her students said about her.)

She saw preparing students for their future lives beyond school as an important feature of her role. 'I say that learning English is not only about learning English. [...] In class I will take every opportunity to teach them some of the qualities that they need very much when they get into the society. [...] For example, I said I'm trying to be a POP teacher, P refers to positive, O of course to optimistic and the other P refers to persevering. I think these are the qualities I'm trying to make all my students to have. [...] Sometimes I think they will not need the knowledge of English that I taught them, but they will always need these qualities.'

She also believed that it is important to show learners, especially weaker learners, that they can learn by themselves, in order to make them interested in English. 'I'm not just telling them the answers. I want them to know that if they think carefully, if they try, they can find something out for themselves. [...] English learning is not that difficult. [...] I am trying to do this to make them interested, if they are interested they can make progress.'

When asked, Ms Wang explained that not all classes were purely grammar focused in the way the observed lesson had been. 'Usually our English classes are divided into classes for words and expressions, reading, writing, something like this, so they are different, but in every unit there will be a grammar class.' However, the content and format of the university entrance exam, which learners will be taking in two years' time, did influence her teaching: 'Of course, that's what we are doing every day.'

She viewed competition between student groups as normal as 'all the classes in our school were divided into groups.' Teachers are responsible for deciding how to reward top-performing groups. 'I would give them some prize of course for the winners and of course the prizes are prepared by myself.' Some of Ms Wang's prizes had the potential to support learning, for example 'very small notebooks [...] students can write down the words that they cannot remember [...] and I ask them to take that notebook with them whenever there is time.'

Observed lesson

The focus was attributive clauses (AC). Some 50 Year 10 learners, wearing uniforms, and seated in groups of four to six around desks. They worked with a photocopied handout containing exercises and/or examples and with the accompanying PPT. Ms Wang was smiling and approachable (students asked her questions) throughout, and provided positive feedback: 'very good', etc. Groups of students were numbered and competed to answer questions, and marks for correct answers were noted down against their number on the blackboard. Ms Wang used Chinese extensively to repeat instructions (previously given in English), to help students when checking progress on tasks and to respond to student answers. English language use by students was limited to responding to questions, often at the same time. They too used Chinese for some responses, questions to the teacher and discussion within the group. During Activity 2 below, the teacher worked separately at the front of the class with one group of weaker boys for a short time.

Outline

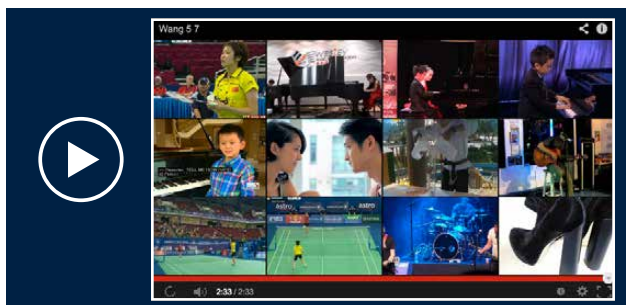
Introduction: quiet classical music in the background, students spending several minutes rubbing their eyes and temples before rising to greet the teacher. (This is the normal procedure for the first lesson of the afternoon.)

1. Questions. 'Attributive clauses (ACs) are used to qualify what kind of thing?' 'What are relative pronouns and relative adverbs?' Simultaneous answers to complete gaps on PPT presentation (2). Students work in groups to find answers to questions on PPT and to complete the chart on the handout.
The teacher works at the front with group of boys, then circulates, helping as needed.
2. Student responses to (2). The teacher answers some questions for them.
3. 'Same as' versus 'same that'. The teacher tries to give examples to illustrate the difference. Students orally answer questions on PPT to show understanding. The teacher asks if there are any questions about content so far. There is a chorused 'no'.

4. When to use 'which', 'that' or 'who'? Questions on PPT. Groups answer. The teacher asks if there are any questions. There is a chorused 'no'.
5. The use of 'very' +N 'The very book', etc. The teacher gives examples in the context of friends arguing, 'I want the very apple I gave you yesterday'. It is used to mean something very definite. Oral answers to complete PPT.
6. Appropriate prepositions for ACs. Explanations and questions in Chinese. Students copy notes from the board.
7. Identifying the differences between ACs and other sentence structures using groups of sentences in a handout. (Some had already been done for homework). Further discussion in groups. The teacher circulates and helps: 'If you have any questions put up your hand.'

Homework: more exercises from handout/book.

Video extract



The extract from Stage 2 of lesson plan above begins with the teacher at the front of the class giving instructions in English, and then Chinese, for learners to work in their groups (five to six learners around a table) to complete a chart that is on the PPT. While most learners do this, the teacher takes a group of (weaker) boys to the front of the class and explains grammatical points to them (in Chinese). The teacher-learner relationship is relaxed and familiar. While there is serious teaching taking place, there is also a great deal of humour and laughter. The teacher then returns to the body of the class to work with any groups that may need help. However, individual learners also seem comfortable with approaching her for help if needed.

Ms Cai

Ms Cai has been a teacher for four years and currently teaches at junior middle level at a school in the centre of Guangzhou. She began 'teaching' when she was very young. 'At primary school my English teacher impressed me most. She was a very young and beautiful lady; she behaved very well and taught us in an interesting way. [...] She always asked me to help other students because I had better grades in this class. Also I had two sisters and a brother. I always had a blackboard at my home and I loved to teach them all.' The learners that she currently teaches are the same age as her brother, so she feels she understands them well.

Training

Ms Cai completed a four-year English Teaching BA at Guangzhou University. Most of the taught courses were theoretical 'but I had many chances to teach in some schools. We always used the time such as summer and winter holidays. I went to the countryside to help underdeveloped areas.' She felt that the months she spent in the classroom were 'a good experience for me and very necessary for me to grow up for the job.' Since graduating she has had access to online CPD: 'but I think that's not enough for me. I want to have further.' As a class teacher, she does not think she has time at present.

Learner comments

Ms Cai had the largest number of nominations (24) in China. Learners appreciated her use of varied classroom materials (songs, stories and films), her excellent language ability and use of English in the classroom almost all the time, and her ability to explain meanings clearly and to develop her learners' language learning skills and learning strategies. Personally, they admired her sense of humour, her sense of responsibility, her kindness and the manner in which she encouraged learners, told them they had potential and treated them as a friend.

Teaching principles

Ms Cai felt that making classes interesting for students was extremely important for their learning. She thinks that English teachers, who can use enjoyable songs, films and games with learners, have more opportunity to make classes interesting than teachers of other subjects, who have to 'speak and write on the blackboard all the time and the students listen, think and take notes.'

The teacher-learner relationship also plays an important role in making students interested in learning a subject. Ms Cai has a blog through which she communicates with students out of class. 'My students always say because I love you and want to be your good friend I love English, if you assign something to me I will do it. They always say this to me in my blog, every night.' This out-of-class relationship is 'just like friends, very important I think.'

She remains keen to keep on learning about teaching and likes to 'read books about actual teaching written by Chinese teachers who are so famous in a certain place [that] publishers will ask them to write about what they are doing.'

Ms Cai explained that all activities in the lesson were focused on the textbook unit because 'it's very important for the exam (mid term), because we have to compete with others, other schools, other teachers, so we have the pressure.' She did not agree with burdening children with so much work: 'If I had a child I wouldn't like to burden him/her with so much homework, I would send them abroad.'

Asked about the purpose of the various activities in which learners were asked to translate or recite words and phrases (Activities 2 and 4 above), she said 'I want most of them to have the chance to speak out loudly and practise and because they are Chinese they always have this way to speak out, and at this age they always still need the experience of success so I give them this chance to have success.'

When asked about inter-group competition she explained that grouping learners was part of a research project trying to investigate how 'to let each student make progress. Each group chooses one better student as group leader and other students will study with them, and each lesson they will learn something with others. After class they can study with others and the group leader can teach them.' Participation in the group and the competition marks 'are part of the overall assessment of the students so that if, for example, a girl does not study very well but is helpful and gets on well with others, so she should get some marks for this too.'

Observed lesson

This was the first lesson of the day (08.00) with a class of 57 Year 8 students in four double rows across the classroom. All wore uniforms. The lesson was presented almost entirely through a series of PPTs, and was a revision lesson of Unit 4 from the middle-school textbook, *Historical Scenes*. The teacher wore a microphone and stood at the front of the class throughout. She radiated enthusiasm and spoke English almost all the time, using Chinese briefly when explaining grammatical points and giving homework. Learners' oral language use was controlled for all activities except (7) below. They were attentive and participative throughout. Learners worked in groups, with correct responses to questions getting marks for the group recorded on the blackboard.

Outline

The class began and ended with classical music (Für Elise) and all students rose to exchange 'good mornings' with the teacher.

1. 'Who am I?' The teacher called a learner to the front and whispered an identity. Students asked a very limited range of questions to identify.
2. Students read out words and phrases from the PPT and translated English to Chinese and Chinese to English.
3. Students in groups were asked to retell a story (from the textbook) using words and phrases given on the PPT.
4. Students chorused recitation of the completed story from PPT.
5. Grammar exercises from handout. MCQs of present perfect versus simple past (the teacher reminded them of the differences in Chinese). This exercise was chosen because it is part of the senior middle school entrance exam. Learners completed individually and then checked answers with each other.
6. Present boxes. PPT with wrapped boxes. Learner groups chose a box – inside were three grammar/translation questions for them to answer. Students became very involved here; keen to answer. The teacher varied marks according to their performance.
7. Students in pairs retold a story (from the textbook) using cue words on the board. Some 'free' language use here.
8. Recap: what have we learned? Words and phrases and grammar and retelling of the story from the textbook using words on the board.

Homework: revise again and write a story.

Video extracts



The first extract shows the formal start to the class and the outline of what is to come. The second shows some of stages 4–6 above. It begins with a chorused repetition of the reading text from the unit (to give the learners a sense of successful speaking), then a brief recap of past simple and present perfect (in Chinese) and ten multiple-choice grammar exercises on a handout for individual completion. The teacher moves round the class helping as necessary. Answers are then given orally with points for correct answers put on the board next to the speaker's group number. The beginning of Stage 6 (present boxes) looks as if it is going to be something quite different, however when the boxes are opened...!

Similarities and differences between observed classes

The Chinese and Indonesian learner survey responses reported on previously (see Lamb and Wedell, British Council Report #1) suggested that learner exposure to inspiring teachers with similar characteristics resulted in similar changed feelings about learning English and similar personal efforts to learn English outside the classroom. We thus initially assumed that we would see teachers and learners behaving in broadly similar ways in inspiring teachers' classrooms in Guangzhou and Jakarta. This was categorically not so.

In contrast to Indonesian classrooms, classes in China were more teacher-fronted, more teacher-controlled, more competitive and more grammar-focused. The activities in Chinese classes were based around a narrower range of materials and provided fewer opportunities for learners to make personal choices about their use of language. Even the most nominated Chinese teacher, while a very able classroom and activity manager and clearly a dedicated teacher who had good relationships with learners, strictly controlled all learner behaviour and language use within her classroom. While the atmosphere in all the classes we visited was warm and positive, the Indonesian classrooms were much more relaxed; for example, students could come and go almost at will, and they could make comments without putting up their hands. The teachers clearly felt the need to make their lessons entertaining, and one important way to do that was through developing learners' ability to use the language in communication.

Reasons for these differences are complex. However, we believe that many of them derive from the different political and social contexts within which English is taught in the two countries. China is an ethnically and socially more homogenous nation than Indonesia and the Chinese education system remains more centralised. Both of these lead to a more unitary set of educational norms and expectations. As a country where most urban dwellers have only one child, Chinese parents have high aspirations, and competition among learners is intense. English today has a major role in the education system, and within economically and socially developed areas like Guangzhou English exams have huge influence over a learner's educational progression from primary to junior secondary to senior secondary to university. The learners take externally devised exams once or twice each term, and their results are closely scrutinised by learners, parents, school heads, and district educational administrators. Teachers are of course aware of the importance of exam

success – for their learners, their schools, and their own professional progress. Thus, despite national curriculum reforms which promote task-based approaches to the teaching of English at secondary level, and the provision of supporting textbooks, the fact that exams throughout schooling still focus largely on reading comprehension, grammar and vocabulary means that most of the limited teaching time available continues to focus on what is likely to be assessed (Hu, 2005; Qi, 2004 and 2005; Wei, 2010).

By contrast, the recent decentralisation of the Indonesian education system (Björk, 2004) has handed greater autonomy to schools, and Indonesian teachers confident of their head teacher's approval feel free to innovate with new methods, including passing on more autonomy to learners. Indonesian teachers in the capital city have also probably had much more exposure to Western educational ideas than their counterparts in Guangzhou, through books, in-service training and more recently the internet. In fact the general openness of Indonesia to outside influence may help explain the strong emphasis on skills development, especially speaking, which the teachers believe to be an important motivator – in reality, young Indonesians may have no more opportunities to use English in daily communication than young Chinese, but they may more readily identify with global youth cultures for which competence in English is an important criterion of membership in the global community (Lamb, 2004).

The teachers did have some features in common. They were all conspicuous for their enthusiasm about their job. They also shared a number of teaching principles. For example, all considered developing and maintaining good, personal relationships with their learners, both in and outside the classroom, to be a critical feature of their role. Teachers in two portraits referred to frequent out-of-class interactions with their learners through social media. Most teachers mentioned the importance of enabling learners to become interested in English: they believed that providing multiple opportunities for learners to celebrate success could support the formation and consolidation of learners' realisation that learning English is both possible and interesting. Grouping learners together was also common to all teachers, though while Indonesian teachers emphasised the motivational benefits of working together, those in China stressed the more tangible benefits for learning of encouraging learners to collaborate in mixed ability groups.

Conclusions

Given these similarities and differences, is it possible to make any broad generalisations about the nature of inspiring language teaching which might be useful for teachers and their trainers? We believe the findings of this phase of our research project, building on those from Phase 1 (see Lamb and Wedell, 2013), allow us to assert with reasonable confidence that:

1. Inspiring teachers are themselves inspired. Despite their many differences, what our seven observed teachers had in common was a strong personal commitment to teaching. Their interviews and lessons demonstrated to us that they cared about doing their job well: they cared about their subject, and about how to convey it to their learners so that they cared too. Of course teachers will show this care in many ways – in the video extracts we see Ms Wang explaining the finer points of attributive clauses to her learners in the same animated way as a basketball coach might talk to his players during a ‘time out; in another extract we see Ibu Endah sitting calmly at her desk while a pair of students present to the rest of the class, making notes on their performance so she could give feedback later. As Csikszentmihalyi (1997) writes, ‘If a teacher does not believe in his job, does not enjoy the learning he is trying to transmit, the student will sense this and derive the entirely rational conclusion that the particular subject matter is not worth mastering for its own sake.’ (p. 77).
2. Inspiring teaching will always be shaped by its particular context. This is because, contra to popular belief, inspiring teachers are usually made, not born, and their skills will be honed through many years of deep reflection on experience in particular classrooms and institutions. All our teachers talked knowledgeably about their learners, yet also gave the strong impression that they were still learning about them too. Of course inspiration will always be unpredictable – individuals can be inspired by any kind of experience, even a negative one. But in order to maximise the chances of the greatest number of pupils being inspired over a course, teaching has to be crafted to suit those particular learners.
3. Teacher education courses, both pre-service and in-service, should pay more attention to the social aspects of classroom learning, especially the importance of establishing good personal relations. That language learners judge a good language teacher as much by their personal as their professional characteristics has been noted in the East Asian region previously – through research with Chinese learners (Cortazzi and Jin 1996) and those in Korea (Barnes and Lock 2013) – as well as in Europe (Borg, 2006), and for Dörnyei (2001), ‘appropriate teacher behaviours and a good relationship with students’, along with healthy class dynamics, are essential ‘preconditions [that] must be in place before any further attempts to generate motivation can be effective’ (p. 31). As an aspect of their care, our observed teachers all stressed the importance of treating learners well and seeing the person behind the learner, and perhaps language classrooms afford greater opportunities than other subject classrooms for the kind of communicative interaction that leads to positive class relationships and mutually affirmed identities (Ushioda, 2011). But even then we must acknowledge possible cultural differences in what a positive relationship is: our own evidence suggests that a Chinese teacher might express their care through attending closely to students’ grammatical output, for example, while an Indonesian teacher may win their learners’ hearts through their sense of humour. Contextually sensitive teacher educators will be aware of what matters in their own setting. Such awareness needs to be reflected in the design of their own courses, to emphasise the personal qualities and social relationships that underlie effective teaching as well as the professionally recognised pedagogic knowledge and skills.

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