

A Critical Hermeneutic Analysis of Foreign Language Teaching: Implications for Teachers in the People's Republic of China

- Interpersonal relationships are established among teachers and students in educational settings. This phenomenon takes on special meaning in a foreign language classroom, particularly for overseas teachers. Learning a new language brings new knowledge and new possibilities into students' lives. Understandings experienced and gained in these classrooms go beyond linguistic comprehension and social activity to the very being of the person. Understanding is not something grasped or possessed. Rather it is a mode of our existence in the world. This dynamic aspect of foreign language teaching is of critical importance when Western teachers work in a country that follows a very different ideology from their own. The students in China bring their own history and worldview to the learning of English. It is the foreign teacher's responsibility to not only help a student learn new concepts and language but also learn how to live out a meaningful life in a country that places expectations on students arising from very different political beliefs.

During the last few years, a flow of Western values, attitudes and obsessions has penetrated Chinese society. With foreign language teachers, students, business people, and tourists visiting the People's Republic of China, the Chinese people in many cities and in much of the countryside have been exposed to the West's priorities along with the hope for the "good life." Thousands of Chinese studying overseas, when they return or write back home, confirm that, indeed, life in the West is best. Perhaps, of all the people in contact with the Chinese in their homeland, it is the foreign language teacher who has the most influence. The curriculum we use, our demeanor in the classroom, the relationships we develop, and the conversations we engage in all tend to situate Chinese students, to a certain extent, in a foreign tradition from which they examine their own lives. Upon such an examination, Chinese students and faculty members naturally consider the lives they might have had in another country or

their own under changed conditions. When Chinese students reflect upon new ideas, they do so from a very different framework—not from the tradition of making up their own minds about the value of a particular way of life led by an individual, such as an American probably would do, but from a tradition that holds family, society, and authority in high regard. When this tradition is disturbed in any way, it can create a volatile situation—most dramatically exemplified in June, 1989 at Tiananmen Square.

There is some truth in the Chinese government's recent charge against foreign language teachers of influencing the intelligentsia with "bourgeois" ideals resulting in "counterrevolutionary" behavior. The communist revolution in China has to do with society and the duty an individual has toward society, not toward himself. It does not have to do with individual rights. In China the emphasis is on society. The role of the individual is different in the United States, where individuals can revolt with significant freedom against ideas and actions. Chinese traditionally have been obedient to leaders and rulers. There are exceptions (mostly in the business arena), but there is generally very low tolerance of individual rights when these rights play center stage. In China today, counterrevolutionary behavior is the worst possible charge one can make against another.

Within such a context in China, the actual role of the teacher of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) moves far beyond the teacher-learner relationship established with students in other types of classrooms. In many classrooms, interpersonal relations are established among the foreign teacher and students, and learning a new language brings new knowledge and new possibilities into students' lives. These understandings experienced and gained by students go beyond the element of linguistic comprehension to the very being of the person. Heidegger (1962) maintains that understanding is not something grasped or possessed but rather a mode of our existence in the world. This dynamic aspect of foreign language teaching rarely receives attention.

In order to set the stage for an interpretive analysis of EFL teaching in China, this article includes an overview of the nature of language from the perspective of hermeneutics and recent research in natural science. In addition, it includes a brief overview of the recent history and traditions that Chinese students bring to their foreign language classrooms. When we pose this background against the realities of the 1980s, we can better see what worlds have been opened up to Chinese students in their experiences with learning a new language and how these new understandings affect their lives.

A Hermeneutic View of the Nature of Language

Traditionally, hermeneutics has been the study of a written text, usually classical or biblical writings. In recent discussions, hermeneu-

tics has included both written documents as texts for study and social action as well as texts for investigation. Initially, the idea that a social action can be a text seems incongruous. However, when we record our social actions, they become fixed in language—to the extent that we tell stories or record history. In many languages (though not in English) the word *history* itself preserves the "rich ambiguity of designating both the course of recounted events and the narrative that we construct" (Ricoeur, 1982, p. 294). Our discussion and/or research of social activity is thus both history and narrative. To capture the dynamic nature of any social activity, including teaching, history needs to be included. There is no line that separates the past from the present. More specifically, our current activities take place within a history and within a tradition. Gadamer's (1976) phrase *always already* acknowledges the intimate relationship between present activities and their past in the very nature of language itself, the medium of all understanding and all tradition (pp.59-68). By fixing our conversations and our research activities in the written word, we open for interpretation, understanding, and application our history, our analyses of everyday problems, and our ideas.

Heidegger (1971) writes that language names the world within which we live. It sets the limits and the horizons for personal and social change. "If it is true that man finds the proper abode of his existence in language—whether he is aware of it or not—then an experience we undergo with language will touch the innermost nexus of our existence" (p. 57). Ricoeur (1982) following the Heideggerian concept of language, writes that understanding is more than a way of knowing something. It is a mode of being in the world. Additionally, Ricoeur, also influenced by Wittgenstein (1953, 1974) and Austin (1962), believes that the meaning of an expression is connected to its usage and that language as a process is intimately connected to human action. Further, speaking language is an activity or form of life.

Gadamer (1976) argues that language "is the reservoir of tradition and the medium in and through which we exist and perceive our world," (p. 29). As mentioned above, he says that we are always already in a tradition, even though in the West we rarely value the past since we often equate progress with distancing ourselves from the past. Actually, posits Gadamer, our effective historical consciousness links us to our past and provides us with an evaluative framework in which we can judge what we want to retain or change in our present. Tradition helps shape who we are and who we can become. That we are grounded in our own tradition means we have our own horizon of understanding. EFL language teachers come to the classroom in China with their own traditions and the question is: How does the horizon of the EFL language teacher fuse, that is, enlarge or become enriched? Gadamer says there occurs a fusion of horizons not when two people somehow blend two different lifeworlds or

histories (for example, an American and a Chinese), but when we are open to understanding whereby we risk and test our prejudices. The language we speak is essentially open to understanding different cultures or alien horizons. It is through the fusion of horizons, which are finite but not limited, that we risk and test our prejudices.

Language is the key element in understanding our historical situation. Habermas (1973, 1979, 1984) asserts that language is central in the formation of consciousness and is the primary medium we have for understanding. It has the potential to provide us with a foundation for understanding and critiquing our world.

Thomas McCarthy (1978) notes, "... since speech is the distinctive and pervasive medium of life at the human level, the theory of communication is the foundational study for the human sciences; it discloses the universal infrastructure of sociocultural life" (p. 282). We need to incorporate these ideas about the fundamental quality of language in teaching, whether we teach a foreign language or any other subject. However, in teaching a foreign language, the teacher needs to develop the role of learning a language to move beyond merely comprehending a new linguistic code—the technical aspect of communicating in another language—to engaging students in learning in a medium that ultimately calls for understanding. Language lies at the basis of all of our ideas and theories about reality; it is what enables individuals to organize data, their surroundings, and their relationships with others.

Traditionally, teaching a foreign language has been guided by the rationalistic tradition that views language as a tool of expression. This view hides the social and creative aspects of language. We need to understand the dynamics of language and realize that it is the constituting ground of individuals, communities, and societies.

While it could be said that the above statements on language merely reflect an arbitrary philosophical position, it is noteworthy that natural scientists also recognize the sociolinguistic nature of humans. Biologist Maturana (1978) states, for example, "The central feature of human existence is its occurrence in a linguistic cognitive domain. This domain is constitutively social" (p. 44). Maturana and Verela (1980), in their development of a theory of the organization of living systems, base their ideas on Maturana's (1960) earlier research on perception which showed that properties of the nervous system generate phenomena instead of acting as filters mapping reality. The basis of generation is social interaction among individuals linked in a network of social connections.¹ In the process of using and sharing language with others, each individual is actively engaged within that language, as part of a language community, or as Heidegger (1962) asserts, the feature of all language activity (the process of both saying and listening) is the engagement of the person within language—a concept he refers to as the "thrownness of the person with language" (p. 174-177, 203-211).

Another way of looking at this analysis is to say that the world is always organized around fundamental concerns (such as human understanding, prejudices, and interests) that derive from or are expressed through language, and the world depends, for its continued existence, upon these projects which give it being and organization. Within this dynamic system, which is always in the process of being created, meaning is continually created through a mutual interchange involving active listening and speaking. This process, in turn, provokes interpretation. Meaning derives through our engagement in and commitment to the world and our interaction with others.

When we encounter the world, we do so as something which has already been lived in and acted upon. In our own encounter, we act upon it, and the process by which we act on it develops out of our own understanding. This orients us to the world both as it exists and as it has the potential to become.

The Chinese Perspective

Chinese students bring a history to the classroom that is different in several respects from that of the Western teacher. They bring, for example, the idea of a state-dominated country rather than an individual-dominated society. In addition, Chinese in the cities are beginning to buy, or were buying prior to the June, 1989 incident, many products such as refrigerators, televisions, tape players, and designer clothes, which are taken for granted in the West. The economic changes that China itself has undergone have put the ordinary Chinese through many changes, especially the emphasis on entrepreneurship. Now this emphasis is being played down in the effort to bring the people into the party line of developing a communist state. The people now live in fear of what to say, how to act, and what may happen next.

When students are exposed to new ideas, a new language, and an opportunity to evaluate their lives, they are placed in an unsettling situation. The EFL teacher has the responsibility to not only teach a language but to understand where the students are coming from historically and philosophically since one is always embedded in a tradition within a particular framework. The present situation for students in China will make sense only as long as the resources in their own language and in the language they are learning make sense enough to absorb the changes and challenges. When things do not fit into a world view confusion or a sense of powerlessness can take place.

The history, traditions, and sociopolitical milieu of the people in a classroom must be a requisite part of EFL curriculum planning for the teacher working in the PRC or any other country. This knowledge prior to entering the classroom can help a foreign language teacher know more about the students and help establish the classroom community.

Messerschmitt (1987) posits that language is the central feature of understanding and communication which, in turn, are crucial for the development of dialogue and community. Only through language can people understand each other. Thus, foreign teachers need to focus on an expanded concept of language and the role language plays in understanding based on the establishment of interpersonal relationships. Language entails communication which, without understanding, is merely a transfer of information and technique. We forget the critical role that language plays in reconstructing or transmitting a past and a possible future to interlocutors when they step into a conversation.

If we ask language teachers about the role language has in transforming a student's world view and being, or their own, they might answer that this is not what they mean to do and claim that their job is only to teach a new language to students. However as Gadamer (1988) explains, by "learning a foreign language [people] do not alter their relationship to the world, [rather] they extend and enrich it by the world of the foreign language...To have language involves a mode of being..." (p. 411). When a person learns a new language, his being changes, he becomes a different person. Most teachers probably do not plan for this to happen. However, it is not what teachers intend to have happen that matters. Rather, it is what actually happens that brings us to realize that language teaching is both a structural undertaking and a philosophical and political phenomenon. Specifically, language teaching is not only a pedagogical activity but the transmission of history and ideas that involves an expanded sense of discourse.

Applying a Critical Hermeneutic Model to Foreign Language Teaching

How do we define discourse? It may be viewed as a spontaneous flow of questions, answers, and discussions. This concept of discourse reflects a structural view of foreign language teaching. Another idea of discourse, drawn from the field of hermeneutics, describes a social act, which displays not only structure and form but, more importantly, new understandings.

Referring to semiological models, Ricoeur brings to light two characterizations of discourse. Semiological models, applied to the theory of the narrative, borrow from the domain of language by extension from units smaller than a sentence to units larger than sentences, such as poems and narratives. In such models, discourse is not placed under the category of writing but under the category of a work which pertains to praxis, or labor. Discourse as work, even more than discourse as writing, enables it to be read under conditions that are always new (Ricoeur, 1982). Discourse as simple conversation is something quite different from discourse as a work that takes hold

in structures calling for a description and an explanation that mediate understanding. A parallel to this model in EFL teaching rests in the difference between the technical and sociological aspects of teaching a foreign language on the one hand, and the respective histories and cultures of teacher and students on the other hand. While the same curriculum may be successfully carried out in several cultural settings, what is learned will be new in each case, because of not only the creative process of language but also the traditions and histories of the teacher and students. Understanding the activity of teaching a foreign language involves both the formal and sociological account of a teaching curriculum and the opening up of new ways of thinking for both teachers and students.

In foreign language teaching it is the work of teaching that opens up new worlds for students and teachers. To fully understand the act of teaching a foreign language is to understand how the worlds that are opened up to students and teachers come to be and what role and responsibility each person may play in those worlds whose formal arrangements are initially found in pedagogical activities. In view of the summer of 1989 in China, English language teachers need to understand not only their charge of formally teaching the new language but also the critical role they play in bringing forth new ways of thinking and being. This is especially important to realize when they teach in a country with limited individual rights. Moreover, the role of the EFL language instructor in the lives of students is grounded in the history of those students (as well as the teacher). This makes foreign language teaching a form of teaching with perhaps more implications to consider than other forms of teaching. However, in any analysis of teaching the most important point is that the nature of language itself—as a creative medium of social reality, not merely a tool to represent the world or to transmit information—holds the potential for transforming both teacher and student and for critical reflection upon such transformations. It is important that we note in any discussion that centers on language, social, and individual change that tradition is the stream in which any of these processes take place.

The youth of China perhaps are the most vulnerable to the changes in their country. The dramatic changes in merely a few years' time are mingled with the hope and imagination that traditionally belong to youth in any culture. Their story of recent events and the story told by a foreign language teacher from another country would be two different readings of history. The interpretation of the history is part of the analysis of teaching. Reflection on our history begins to lay out our prejudices, or preunderstandings, that they may be risked and tested. This may result in a fusion of our horizons.

China's Recent History— The Tradition Students Bring to Class

In 1978 Deng Xiaoping launched four modernizations in an attempt to bring China into the modern world.² Shortly after these modernizations were introduced, I began to visit, lecture, and work in China both in the business and education sectors. Since the early 1980s, I have made over 15 trips into China and have seen major changes in most aspects of Chinese society. One of my trips to China was in July, 1989 shortly after the Tiananmen Square incident.

Throughout the '80s, the south of China changed more quickly than the northern part, but in general most of the people in the cities and many in the countryside changed their lifestyles, their clothing styles, and their dreams. My impressions of China over this last decade have been shaped by hundreds of hours of conversations and interviews with students, professors, university administrators, factory workers, factory managers, business people, government workers spanning various levels, medical professionals, communist party members of various rankings, retired people, employed people (associated with hotels, schools, taxis, trains, street vending, retail stores, wholesale factories, etc.) and unemployed people.

While China declined to include either education or democracy in its modernization drive, it was influenced by an unexpected component, namely, an obsession for material products, products that most notably characterize an industrialized, modern society. Along with the modernization efforts of the Chinese government came a rise in the standard of living, a belief in the possibility of succeeding on one's own, and a radical increase in corruption and moral laxity. China has boasted that its society has been free from the evils of capitalism. This is no longer the case. The communist doctrine that man is morally perfectable has lost credibility in the face of rapid deterioration of China's social values and moral standards.

There is a void in the lives of the Chinese, who believed first that the iron rice bowl (a popular metaphor for guaranteed food and shelter) would never be empty, then that industrialization would be a cure-all for economic ills, and finally that entrepreneurial practices and increased freedom could provide the life they had been promised. While not all, or even a small part, of China can be considered modern, the country has made dramatic steps toward modernization. However, this modernization drive, accompanied by inflation, immorality, corruption, crime, and political polarization, has created a context in which students are highly receptive to ideas and ideals that promote a different life.

Most nations look with shock and disbelief at the events of the summer of 1989 in China. On June 4, 1989, the octogenarian hardliners believed that the image of the nation was at risk and the time had come to show the world that the bottom line for China was not

the restructuring of a society but a restoration of the legacy of authoritarian rule. In 72 years, since the beginning of the Leninist party, no party had relinquished power. As important as centralism is to the Chinese Communist Party, more important is the order needed to prevent a divided country plagued by chaos and dissent. Nobody over 40 in China can forget the disorder brought about by the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution.

Students, under age 40, having been influenced by Western teachers, media, and ideals, forged ahead with emotional and sentimental platforms and seemingly unruly techniques, not knowing that they pushed too far in a country led by a tradition of authoritarianism expressed today by a collective of men who still know what it means to lose face. Over time, this government facade wears thin, though, and people give up on the government; they act in secret as they can, while in public they act as the government orders. For example, factory workers sell black market goods on the side. Taxi drivers make extra money by working long hours, overcharging foreigners and carrying out questionable activities. Teachers and civil servants, on the other hand, are usually not allowed second jobs and, therefore, receive much less pay for their endeavors than do workers, farmers, or service people. A taxi driver told me he and his coworkers can earn \$1500 US a month or more. From my work in universities, I know the average teacher earns less than \$30 US a month. This obvious discrepancy in wage-earning power has resulted in many young people either not going on to postsecondary schools or leaving the university to enter the business world. If this trend continues, there will be a great shortage of educated people in China. Now, with the 1989 revolt, not all students will be allowed to return to school. Only those with clean records and successful completion of reeducation courses will be permitted to study. These trends, accompanied by the brain drain to the West, pose a serious threat to the future of China. At the time of this writing, most students in Beijing are not motivated to study since it was through diligent study that young people have a chance of going abroad. Especially in Beijing, there is apathy. In south China it is somewhat more business as usual. Many students in the northern regions are leaving the university, trying to migrate south to engage in small entrepreneurial enterprises.

Today, the West is still welcome in China. While the government voices strong concern with visiting teachers and students, from the United States in particular, they are still inviting English teachers to come to work immediately. They are most eager to welcome back the foreign investors who left. With its capital under government scrutiny, the economy in shreds, and a nation silent in fear, the Party is attempting to convince the outside world that all is business as usual. Tourism is encouraged. "Bourgeois liberalism," namely Western principles of democracy and freedom, is a crime, but the door

is open wide to capitalist dollars. It is unclear how the communist leaders will be able to sustain a contradictory policy of purging the country of democratic ideals while pursuing economic reform.

Students living in China face incredible challenges. The EFL teacher faces obligations beyond pedagogy in view of these recent historical events.

Implications for Teacher Education

Bowers (1988), in discussing a teacher's responsibility to students, describes a teacher as one who plays "a unique gatekeeper role that can have a powerful influence on the development of the student's conceptual map (ability to interpret and make one's way through or around the cultural patterns within which everyday experience is organized), self-concept, and life chances within the political-economic system" (p. 97). While the role of the classroom teacher in one's own country is significant, the role of the EFL teacher in a developing country is even more complex because of the additional considerations of the differences in history and the politics of the culture, economy, and society.

Specifically, the role of the foreign language teacher is a critical one in the lives of students not only from a pedagogical point of view but also from an individual and philosophical perspective. The pedagogical aspect of teaching a foreign language is well-documented. However, the interpretive and political implications of teaching a foreign language have not received much attention. While the implications of language use in the classroom from a cultural framework and the sociology of knowledge theory have been well-researched (Bowers, 1984, 1987), we have not yet considered the study of foreign language teaching as a discourse calling for philosophical and political analysis. This lack of academic attention to critical issues of foreign language teaching places additional professional obligations upon the teacher to be sensitive to the necessity of teaching from a critical stance—teaching students how to use and reinterpret their history so that they may be able to "project concretely [their] interest in emancipation" (Ricoeur, 1982, p. 97). Implications of this professional obligation require foreign language teachers to take a different stance toward their work than one involving simply technical or sociological activities.

While those who plan to teach in another country should be educated in foreign language teaching methodologies, they also need to be introduced to the history and culture of the students who will receive their instruction. An overemphasis on the technical aspects of language teaching can give the foreign language teacher a false sense of professional preparation. In addition to understanding requisite historical and cultural knowledge, teachers also need to know how language, conversations, and communication can represent vari-

ous forms of authority, present possibilities for critiquing basic assumptions, and create new domains of understanding. With China, as a particular case, it is important to understand the differences in Western and Eastern concepts of power, authority, and self.

As language teaching involves classroom discourse among students and teacher, so it involves creating a work of discourse that entails living a narrative and a history that is grounded in a tradition that the foreign language teacher steps into. EFL teachers need to carry out research, particularly from a collaborative and participatory perspective, to further understand the histories created in the foreign language classroom and their role in such histories. These accounts will help prepare future EFL teachers to better meet the complex and responsible challenges of their profession.

Students are eager to accept new ideas of the West introduced into their framework of thinking and being, but problems arise on several fronts. One is the lack of language available to students to understand and evaluate changes. The hermeneutic task becomes explicit when one is aware of confronting an alien tradition. When students learn ideas and words that do not seem to belong or fit, the teacher then has the opportunity and responsibility to teach about interpretation, understanding, and the appropriation of new meanings. Understanding here means more than the recreation of someone else's meaning. It means engaging students in a critical analysis of their traditions, instilling in them the idea that they have a responsibility for their actions, and helping them project a future. Whether it is classroom drama or political confrontation, grasping experience in a language (Gadamer, 1988) moves far beyond being able to identify new words; it means living in a different world. As the Chinese continue to reflect upon, interpret, and act upon the events of 1989, they move from living in one world to living in a new world, still connected, however, to their past. At the same time, they are rethinking their future.

EFL teachers face different responsibilities depending on the politics of the country they work in. It is important to realize that when new ideas or experiences do not fit into one's existing meaning system one cannot simply teach new words or engage in discourse with the student to create a new world for the learner. Beliefs, traditions, institutions, and current society all play a critical role in how one understands and how one lives out a meaningful life. To teach a student to be critical of one's surroundings (which is often what happens either directly or by comparison of ideals, experiences, or possessions of things) is not the same as teaching truth, progress, goodness, or loyalty. The student is often left with knowing what is not wanted, what is not believed in. How do we leave the student with something to hang onto? We need to teach students how to understand their role in assuming responsibility for sharing norms, establishing a moral character, and being trustworthy. While this role

is critical for students in any country, it is particularly vital in countries where governments face a legitimization crisis (Habermas, 1973).

When we look at language from a hermeneutic perspective, we can more easily understand the relationship between language and our existence. The situation in China gives us an opportunity to see how, in this expanded understanding of language, we also have a different responsibility as teachers than if we see language only as a technical and sociological phenomenon. These considerations are important for EFL teachers now going to China as this country struggles with geopolitical, social, and moral challenges in its attempt to become part of the international economic community. ■

Footnotes

¹Many physicists, biologists, chemists, and neurophysiologists no longer hold the view that the universe is like a machine with interacting parts, nor do they believe that theories are changed by objective criteria. Starting with the book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, written for the general public, T. S. Kuhn began the modern legacy that scientific paradigm shifts are influenced more by social and communal considerations than by cause and effect relationships. Neils Bohr, David Bohm, Ilya Prigogine, Eric Jantsch, Jay Gould, Niles Eldredge, and Lyall Watson, along with Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, are some of the scientists whose research supports the idea that our positioned views, our history, and our interactions play a far more critical role in understanding ourselves and our world than do predictions, objectivity, and separate entities.

²An excellent book documenting the political history of China since 1949 is *The People's Republic of China/A Concise Political History* by Witold Rodzinski.

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