

TO USE OR NOT TO USE CHINESE IN THE COLLEGE ENGLISH CLASSROOM IN  
CHINA'S NON-GOVERNMENTAL UNIVERSITIES

Approved: Yuanyuan Hu Date: May 30, 2019

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A Seminar Paper

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty

University of Wisconsin-Platteville

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirement for the Degree

Master of Science in Education

English Education

By

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2019

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First of all, I would like to express my sincere thanks to my paper advisor Dr. Yuanyuan Hu for her wise advice, insightful feedback, great patience, and encouragement. I am heartily thankful to her for her guidance and support throughout the process.

My sincere thanks also go to all the other teachers in this program who taught me in the past two years. Their lectures have enlarged my understanding of English linguistics and English education, and they have been a great help in my life.

Finally, I would also take this opportunity to thank my mother and my husband who have helped me take care of my newborn baby and given a lot of support to me in this period of time.

## Abstract

# TO USE OR NOT TO USE CHINESE IN THE COLLEGE ENGLISH CLASSROOM IN CHINA'S NON-GOVERNMENTAL UNIVERSITIES

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Whether teachers should use students' mother tongue in foreign language teaching has always been debated. People who insist on using target language only in foreign language teaching believe that using students' mother tongue in teaching may have detrimental effects on students' use of target language. However, more and more scholars believe that using an appropriate amount of mother tongue in the foreign language classroom can be conducive to foreign language learning. In China, whether to use or not to use Chinese in the college English classroom has caused confusion among college English teachers in non-governmental universities. On the basis of a review of empirical studies on teachers' mother tongue use in the foreign language classroom both in China and abroad, this paper shows the possible role of Chinese in the college English classroom in non-governmental universities. Furthermore, the paper offers some suggestions to college English teachers in non-governmental universities regarding when and how to use Chinese in their teaching.

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## Chapter I Introduction

How to effectively improve foreign language teaching has been constantly discussed in the field of language teaching. There have been growing calls for foreign language teachers to use target language only in teaching (Ellis, 1999). However, an increasing number of scholars (e.g., Anton & Dicamilla, 1999; Sharma, 2006) believe that using an appropriate amount of mother tongue in the foreign language classroom can be conducive to foreign language learning. Levine (2012) pointed out that people often compare mother tongue to an “800-pound chimpanzee” hiding in a room. This metaphor vividly illustrates the importance of mother tongue in the foreign language classroom.

In China, college English teachers are confused about whether to use or not to use mother tongue in college English teaching. While teachers are encouraged to use English only in the college English classroom, more and more scholars (e.g., Xu, 2014; Xing, 2015) put forward that using Chinese when needed can improve English learning. According to Sheng and Zhao’s (2005) study, students with advanced English proficiency in governmental universities made use of Chinese when learning English in the classroom. Since students in non-governmental universities typically have lower English proficiency, using English only in the college English classroom at non-governmental universities may not help students learn English but become an obstacle to their learning. Moreover, the emphasis on English only may make teachers feel guilt and shame when using Chinese in the college English classroom (Xu, 2014). The feeling of guilt and shame may affect a teacher’s confidence in teaching.

Thus, to use or not to use Chinese in the college English classroom in China’s non-governmental universities is worth examining. This research paper explores when and how to use

Chinese in the college English classroom. It also provides suggestions on the use of Chinese in the college English classroom in China's non-governmental universities.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Nowadays, college English teachers in China are encouraged to use English only in their classrooms; however, considering students' lower English proficiency in non-governmental universities, is it true that Chinese should be avoided at all costs? To address this issue, this paper explores the following questions:

1. What is the status quo of Chinese in the college English classroom in both governmental universities and non-governmental universities in China?
2. Why can Chinese be used when needed in the college English classroom in China's non-governmental universities?
3. When can college English teachers in non-governmental universities use Chinese to enhance students' learning?
4. How can college English teachers in non-governmental universities make good use of Chinese to enhance students' learning?

### **Definition of Terms**

**Non-governmental Universities:** This term refers to educational institutions funded by enterprises, social organizations, and/or individual citizens in China. Usually, admission requirements and students' learning ability in non-governmental universities are much lower than those in governmental ones. For example, in 2018, the minimum required score for liberal arts students to attend governmental universities is 561 whereas the minimum required score for liberal art students to attend non-governmental ones is 441.

**College English:** College English is a required course for all non-English majors in China in their first two years. Students are usually required to pass the College English Test Band 4 (CET 4) before graduation.

### **Purpose of the Study**

In China's non-governmental universities, many English teachers are at a loss as to whether or not to use Chinese in the college English classroom. This paper aims to find relevant information through library research to show the possible role of Chinese in the college English classroom in non-governmental universities. Furthermore, the paper offers some suggestions to college English teachers in non-governmental universities regarding when and how to use Chinese in their teaching.

### **Significance of the Study**

This paper may reduce college English teachers' feelings of shame and guilt when they use Chinese in class by showing the possible role of Chinese in the college English classroom in non-governmental universities. Furthermore, the suggestions on when and how to use Chinese in the college English classroom may be helpful to college English teachers in non-governmental universities.

### **Methodology**

To answer the research questions above, the researcher has reviewed the relevant literature on the role and use of mother tongue in the foreign language classroom. The researcher has also reviewed the literature on how college English teachers in China have used Chinese to help students with their English learning.

## **Chapter II Review of Literature**

This chapter reviews the literature regarding teachers' use of students' mother tongue in the foreign language classroom and English teachers' use of Chinese in the college English classroom in China. It contains three sections. The first section probes into several empirical studies on what role mother tongue plays in the foreign language classroom. The second section reviews empirical studies, focusing on the amount of mother tongue use, factors influencing teachers' use of mother tongue and teachers' attitudes toward mother tongue use in the foreign language classroom. The last section reviews some empirical studies on the use of Chinese in the college English classroom in China, including when, how and how much Chinese has been used in the college English classroom.

### **The Role of Mother Tongue in the Foreign Language Classroom**

The use of students' mother tongue in foreign language teaching has long been a controversial issue. Although teachers' use of mother tongue is gaining more support from some researchers (e.g., Anton & Dica-milla, 1999; Tang, 2000; Sharma, 2006), many researchers (e.g., Ellis, 1999; Bouangeune, 2009) have argued that the use of mother tongue should be limited in foreign language teaching. They argued that teachers using students' mother tongue in teaching may have detrimental effects on students' use of target language. For example, Turnbull (2001) argued that mother tongue should be minimized as much as possible. Thus, foreign language teachers are usually advised not to use students' mother tongue in their classrooms (Cummins, 2007).

Due to the debate surrounding the use of mother tongue, a number of studies (e.g., Duff & Polio, 1990; Edstrom, 2006; Polio & Duff, 1994; Rolin-Ianzit & Brownlie, 2002) have explored what role mother tongue can play in the foreign language classroom.

**The pedagogical and managerial role.** Macaro (2001) conducted a case study of six student teachers, who taught French to English speakers in secondary schools and their code-switching between mother tongue and target language over the course of 14 foreign language lessons. It was found that mother tongue was used for giving instructions, managing students, and reprimanding them.

Interested in mother tongue use in the foreign language classroom, Levine (2003) conducted an anonymous, internet-based questionnaire study. 163 foreign language instructors completed the questionnaire. The findings revealed that most instructors were inclined to use mother tongue when they talk about grammar, tests and assignments.

More specifically, De la Campa and Nassaji (2009) conducted their study in two sections of a second-year German-as-a-foreign-language course in a university in western Canada. The two sections were taught by two native German-speaking instructors. One was an experienced instructor who has taught German for about 20 years. The other instructor was a novice teacher with little teaching experience. Each section had 18 students aged from 18 to 55. Samples of the two instructors' German classes were videotaped. The two instructors were also interviewed afterwards. The findings revealed that the instructors used mother tongue quite frequently in their classrooms and that they used mother tongue for the following fourteen reasons and purposes. They were, "translation, contrast between mother tongue and target language, evaluation, activity instruction, activity objective, elicitation of student contribution, personal comment, comprehension check, classroom equipment, administrative issues, repetition of students mother tongue utterance, reaction to student question, humor, code-switching" (p. 750).

**The social role.** In addition to the pedagogical and managerial role, mother tongue can play a social role in the foreign language classroom, with which a teacher can relate to students.

For instance, Kaneko (1992) found that in a Japanese secondary EFL classroom, teachers used mother tongue to build rapport with their students.

De la Campa and Nassaji (2009) analyzed the amount of mother tongue use in their study, and found that both of the instructors used a noticeable amount of mother tongue in their classrooms. However, while the novice instructor used mother tongue most often for translation, the experienced instructor used mother tongue more often for personal comments and jokes to create a comfortable classroom atmosphere, which he believed encouraged his students to participate more effectively in the learning process.

The reviewed studies have suggested that mother tongue can play an important role in the foreign language classroom.

### **The Use of Mother Tongue in the Foreign Language Classroom**

In addition to the studies investigating the functions of mother tongue in the foreign language classroom, some studies (e.g., Duff & Polio, 1990; McMillan & Rivers, 2011) have explored the degree to which mother tongue can be used in the foreign language classroom, and the attitudes of teachers concerning the role of mother tongue; other studies (e.g., Macaco, 1995; De la Campa & Nassaji, 2009) have examined factors influencing teachers' use of mother tongue in the foreign language classroom.

**Amount of mother tongue use.** How much mother tongue should be used in the foreign language classroom? Duff and Polio (1990) explored this question by undertaking a qualitative investigation of instructors' use of code-switching in 13 different language classes in the University of California, Los Angeles. The instruments adopted in this study were classroom observation, teacher interviews and students questionnaires. Two 50-minute sessions of 13 classes were recorded. The analysis of the data from classroom observation, questionnaires and

interviews showed that code-switching ranged from 10% to 100%. Similarly, Kaneko (1992) found that instructors' use of mother tongue accounted for 51% to 74% of instructional time in senior classes and 64% to 83% in junior classes in a Japanese secondary school EFL context. Macaro (2001) studied French lessons in secondary schools in the south of England, examining the amount of mother tongue that instructors use. His study found a low amount of mother tongue used by instructors, between 0 and 15.2% of instructional time. Rolin-Ianziti and Brownlie (2002) examined teachers' use of mother tongue at a university in Australia. They found that mother tongue use ranged from 0 to 18.15% of instructional time.

Although it is very difficult to specify the quantity of mother tongue use for effective foreign language teaching, a rule of thumb is that the more advanced students are, the less mother tongue should be used in the foreign language classroom.

**Factors influencing teachers' use of mother tongue.** According to De la Campa and Nassaji (2009), multiple interacting factors can influence teachers' use of mother tongue in the language classroom, for example, "foreign language context, students' low level of language proficiency, setup of classes, class composition, necessity of explaining problem areas, student motivation, and facilitative role of mother tongue use, students objectives for learning the foreign language, acoustic layout of classroom, speed of discourse" (p. 752). McMillan & Rivers (2011) also held the view that learners' proficiency level influenced teachers' use of mother tongue. Macaco (1995) carried out a study on English classrooms in Italy by collecting data from questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Both the students' proficiency and teachers' proficiency in target language were identified as the most influential factors related to teachers' mother tongue use. Stern (1992) and Hawks (2001) suggested that teachers use mother tongue

judiciously and gradually reduce the quantity of mother tongue as their students become more and more proficient in target language.

**Teachers' attitudes towards mother tongue use.** Some teachers feel guilty of using mother tongue in the foreign language classroom (Copland & Neokleous, 2011), while others think that their uses of mother tongue in the foreign language classroom is a sign of their professional incompetence (Cook, 2013).

However, a series of studies (Schweers, 1999; McMillan & Rivers, 2011; Sali, 2014; Shuchi & Islam, 2016) conducted in Spain, Japan, Turkey, Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia respectively revealed that in general, most teachers had a positive attitude towards mother tongue use in foreign language teaching.

Debreli (2016) reported a study for which 54 EFL teachers in Turkey were interviewed. All the 54 teachers clearly stated that mother tongue should be used in their foreign language classrooms; moreover, they mentioned that the use of mother tongue was unavoidable. Many also emphasized the benefits of using mother tongue in their foreign language classrooms.

Janulevicine and Kavaliauskiene (2002) also conducted a study on teachers' attitudes on the use of mother tongue in the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classroom by distributing a questionnaire to 55 colleagues from different universities in different countries. Their results showed that the majority of teachers supported limited use of translation in the ESP classroom because they believed that mother tongue assisted students in learning a foreign language.

### **The Use of Chinese in the College English Classroom**

Many Chinese scholars and teachers have taken an interest in teachers' use of Chinese in the college English classroom, especially since 1980s. More and more studies have been conducted about this issue in China in recent years.

**The general situation of Chinese in the college English classroom.** In the college English classroom, including both governmental and non-governmental universities, most teachers aim to use English as much as possible in their teaching. They also encourage their students to conform to the “English only” rule in class so that the students can practice their English as much as possible. However, many students complained that they could not participate as much as they wished because they were not sure of what the teacher was saying (Huang, 2006). Some empirical studies have found that it is almost impossible for teachers to avoid using mother tongue (Qiao, 2003), especially when the teachers and their students share the same mother tongue (Song, 2009).

**Amount of Chinese in the college English classroom.** Xie (2011) conducted a case study of three college English teachers in a university in Shanghai. 12 instructional hours of each teacher were audio recorded. After analyzing the data from the collected audio materials, the researcher found a total of 10, 9385 English words and a total of 3, 0398 Chinese words in the three teachers’ teacher talk. The three teachers’ Chinese words respectively accounted for 11.4%, 17.6% and 37.1% of teacher talk.

Xing (2015) conducted a study in a non-governmental university in Anhui province, using both qualitative and quantitative research methods, which included classroom observation, questionnaires as well as interviews. A class of 30 English majors and a class of 30 non-English majors were chosen for the study. Before participating in the study, the 30 English majors had all passed the Test for English Majors Band 4 (TEM-4) and those 30 non-English majors had passed the College English Test Band 4 (CET-4). Three English teachers were selected to teach both classes. The study has found that in the English majors’ classroom, the three teachers’ use of Chinese respectively accounted for 13.9%, 9.9% and 8.9% of instructional time whereas in the

non-English majors' classroom, their use of Chinese respectively accounted for 26.9%, 18.9% and 16.1% of instructional time. The result showed that the three teachers used less Chinese in the English major classroom, where the students' English proficiency was higher than the non-English majors'.

Zheng, Hou and Yang (2004) conducted a study including 22 English teachers and 3 classes of freshmen from different majors in a university in Shandong using questionnaires and interviews as instruments. They found that 90.9% of the teachers believed that 10% to 39% of instructional time should be in Chinese. Half of the teachers believed that Chinese use should be less than 20% of instructional time. The result also showed that all the teachers agreed that the amount of Chinese use should not be over 50% of instructional time.

**Functions of Chinese in the college English classroom.** Tang (2002) conducted a study in a university in Beijing, with participants being 100 first-year students whose English was at the intermediate level and 20 teachers whose teaching experience ranged from one year to thirty years. Both qualitative and quantitative research methods, including classroom observation, interviews and questionnaires, were used in this study. Three randomly-selected first year reading classes taught by three teachers were recorded to find out on what occasions Chinese was used by the teachers. Afterwards, the teachers were interviewed, and a questionnaire was distributed to the 100 students and another questionnaire to the 20 teachers. It was found out that Chinese was most commonly used to explain meaning of words, complex ideas, and complex grammar rules as well as give instructions.

In addition, Gao (2010) carried out a study in Yulin University and Yan'an University in China, examining the functions of Chinese in college English teaching. This study involved 40 teachers and 400 students, and the research methods were questionnaires, classroom observation

and interviews. Questionnaires respectively designed for the teachers and students were distributed. Classroom observations were carried out in four classes; 8 periods were recorded. Each period lasted for 50 minutes. Teacher interviews were conducted after classroom observations. The teachers were interviewed individually, and each interview lasted for about 30 minutes. After analyzing all these data, the researcher found that the teachers used Chinese to clarify English expressions, improve effectiveness, highlight key points and save time.

### **Factors influencing teachers' use of Chinese in the college English classroom.**

According to Gao's (2010) study, Chinese was used due to several influencing factors. Gao's study revealed that 97.5% of teacher participants claimed that students' language proficiency was the leading factor influencing their use of Chinese in English class. Moreover, teachers' English proficiency came to be the second factor contributing to the use of Chinese in the college English classroom. 77.5% of the teachers confessed that their own oral proficiency was also one of the key factors influencing their use of Chinese to some extent. They thought their professional competence was sometimes limited to teach classes in English only. Other influencing factors were teachers' perception of teaching, China's testing system, and institutional policies and requirements.

Yuan (2005) also undertook a study to find out reasons why college English teachers use Chinese in the classroom. 145 college English teachers at Jilin University participated in the study. Among them, 13 were interviewed after classroom observation. The teachers had different educational backgrounds and teaching experiences. The department had no policy on what teaching method should be used or what instructional language was appropriate. The analysis of the data from both classroom observation and interviews identified the students' English ability as the most significant factor influencing teachers' language use. Another important factor

appeared to be teachers' English efficiency. More than half of the participants reported that their English proficiency would affect their language use in the classroom.

**Teachers' attitudes towards Chinese in the college English classroom.** Huang (2006) conducted a study in Jingling Institute of Technology, a vocational college, whose students usually achieved low scores in the national university entrance examination. 260 students and 20 teachers took part in this study. Data were collected from two self-devised questionnaires, classroom observation, and follow-up interviews with selected teachers and students. The selected teachers and students were asked for their personal explanations of some of their behavior in class and their views regarding the role of Chinese in the English classroom. The findings showed that the majority of the teachers held a positive attitude towards teachers' use of Chinese in the college English classroom. About 90% of the teachers agreed on teachers using Chinese to some extent in the college English classroom. The study also showed that the teachers preferred to use Chinese in class.

Xiao (2007) conducted a study on college English teachers' use of Chinese in class in an art university. 10 English teachers and 252 students participated in surveys. Unlike students in a comprehensive university, students' proficiency in the art university was lower and more polarized. The analysis of the survey showed that most teachers agreed that teachers' use of Chinese played a supportive and facilitating role in the English classroom. Xiao also put forward that teachers should adjust the use of target language and Chinese in accordance with the English proficiency of their students.

## **Summary**

These reviewed empirical studies on teachers' mother tongue use in the foreign language classroom both in China and abroad have shown that teachers' use of mother tongue plays an

important role in foreign language teaching. Appropriate amount use of mother tongue can be conducive to foreign language teaching. The main factors that influence teachers' use of mother tongue are teachers' target language proficiency and their students' target language proficiency.

### **Chapter III Conclusions and Recommendations**

This paper aims to find relevant information through library research to show the possible role of Chinese in the college English classroom in non-governmental universities in China. This chapter offers some suggestions to help college English teachers in non-governmental universities in China regarding when and how to use Chinese in their teaching, as well as presents directions for further research.

#### **Conclusions**

The following conclusions can be drawn from these empirical studies. To begin with, all these studies have shown that mother tongue is commonly used in the foreign language classroom and that the majority of teachers hold a positive attitude towards mother tongue use in the foreign language classroom. In the Chinese context, Chinese is widely used in the college English classroom in some universities. However, some teachers still consider using English exclusively as high quality teaching.

Secondly, teachers have acknowledged that mother tongue use can play an important role in the foreign language classroom. The main functions of mother tongue use in the foreign language classroom include giving instructions, facilitating students' comprehension of the teaching content, managing the classroom, improving effectiveness, and saving time and so on.

Thirdly, mother tongue may be more appropriate in some specific contexts in the foreign language classroom. For example, mother tongue is used more frequently to explain meaning of words, giving instructions, explain complex ideas, explain complex grammar rules, clarify English expressions, and highlight key points.

Lastly, the factors affecting teachers' language choice in class mainly lie in students' target language proficiency. Students' language proficiency is of great concern when teachers decide which language to use. Especially in non-governmental universities, where the English proficiency of non-English majors is usually at a lower level, college English teachers tend to use more mother tongue in the classroom. However, teachers should also realize that Chinese plays a supportive and facilitating role only in teaching and that English is the target language to be mainly used in the classroom. In other words, college English teachers should not overuse Chinese in their teaching.

### **Pedagogical Implications for College English Teaching in Non-governmental Universities**

The findings of those reviewed studies can provide some implications for teachers' use of mother tongue in the college English classroom in non-governmental universities. The implications are presented as follows:

Firstly, the perception of using English only in the college English classroom should be changed. In many English classes in China, mother tongue has been regarded as a taboo in teaching by many educators. This perception has misled and confused college English teachers, especially new ones. In fact, mother tongue can play an important role in the college English classroom. Therefore, mother tongue should not be forbidden blindly and mechanically.

Secondly, appropriate amount of Chinese can be used in the college English classroom in non-governmental universities. However, even those who argue for mother tongue use in the foreign language classroom warn that mother tongue use should be controlled and limited because in China, classroom is almost the only environment in which exposure to English is available, especially for non-English majors in the non-governmental universities.

With regard to English teachers' "appropriate" use of mother tongue in college English teaching, here are some tips. First, English use has the priority over Chinese use in an English class. Next, the amount of Chinese should be reduced to a minimum in line with students' English proficiency. Last but not the least, teachers should adjust the amount of Chinese by taking into consideration their students' English ability.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The empirical studies reviewed in this paper have several limitations. The first limitation is that in all the empirical studies conducted on the college English classroom in China, the participants were mostly from governmental universities, with the exception of a vocational university and an art university. No study has been conducted regarding college English teachers' use of mother tongue in their teaching in non-governmental universities. Future studies on teachers' use of Chinese in the college English classroom in non-governmental universities are needed.

Additionally, the participants of these empirical studies were both teachers and students. Few studies examined college English teachers' instructional language at great length. In China, English classes in non-governmental universities are still mainly teacher-dominated with limited students' discussions and interactions. English teachers are usually the main source of English and knowledge. Thus, more thorough research on classroom language use of college English teachers in non-governmental universities' is needed.

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