

NEW LANGUAGE LEARNING
& TEACHING ENVIRONMENTS



Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching

The Case of China

Edited by
Hayo Reinders, David Nunan and Bin Zou



New Language Learning and Teaching Environments

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New Language Learning & Teaching Environments

HAYO REINDERS
DAVID NUNAN & BIN ZOU

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1

Innovation in China: An Overview

David Nunan, Hayo Reinders, and Bin Zou

1 Language Education in China: An Historical Overview

Language is fundamental to China and Chinese identity. With many different Chinese languages and dialects as well as minority languages, China is possibly the most linguistically diverse country in the world.

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There was no official language of China until after the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911. The new government, on advice from a committee established for this purpose, named the Beijing dialect as the national language. Rumour has it that Mandarin, or Putonghua, beat Cantonese as the preferred language by a single vote. However, people in most parts of China continued to use their home language or dialect, and Mandarin was acquired as a second language. Originally, it was planned that within 100 years Mandarin would become the first language throughout the country, but even in the 1990s, it was possible to hear people claim that there are no native speakers of Mandarin in China.

The teaching and learning of languages and related policies have a long history in China. From the seventeenth century, European languages were introduced and taught by foreign missionaries. After the communist revolution of 1949, close ties were established between the new government and that of the Soviet Union. Although the relationship did not last, the Soviet Union provided models for various governmental systems including the economy and education, and, not surprisingly, Russian became the major foreign language taught (Gray, 1991). During the Cultural Revolution, English was proscribed, and anyone caught speaking it, or even in possession of a book written in English, was punished.

President Richard Nixon's visit to China in 1972 led to huge changes in China's relationship, not only to the United States, but also to the rest of the world. Nixon, not known for his excessive modesty, proclaimed it "the week that changed the world". Although the Cultural Revolution would not end for another four years, attitudes towards English and its use began to soften.

In her history of language education in China from 1949 to the present, Lam (2005) identifies three principal language policies: the standardization of Chinese, the propagation of English and the development of minority languages (p. 8). In the late 1950s and early 1960s national English syllabi were drafted, first for the school system, and then for universities and colleges. English fell into disrepute during the Cultural Revolution, which did not matter in the long run as most institutes of higher learning were shut down. In the 1970s it regained favour with the visit of Nixon to China and the ending of the Cultural Revolution. It received a further boost in 1978, when Deng Xiaoping

activated the “Four Modernizations” policy announced by Zhou Enlai some 15 years before.

2 The Contemporary Landscape

Making generalizations about any particular language teaching and learning landscape is fraught with difficulty. In the case of China, with its vast and varied landscape, this is particularly true. Those seeking to segment the landscape typically draw a dividing line between the comparatively privileged cities clinging to the eastern seaboard and the less privileged provinces to the west.

At the risk of overgeneralizing, one way of capturing the contemporary landscape would be to compare the language learning experiences of someone being educated in a western or northern province in the immediate aftermath of the Cultural Revolution with someone being educated today. The former learners will have a Chinese dialect as their first language and will be introduced to Putonghua in primary school. In secondary school, they will be taught Russian as a foreign language and will first encounter English at university, if they are lucky enough to get to university. If they happen to go to a school where English is taught, the teacher will be Chinese and their English lesson will be taught almost exclusively in Putonghua. The textbook, if they have a textbook at all, will have been written and produced in China. Access to spoken English will be via tapes played on a reel-to-reel recorder.

Contemporary learners being educated in a public school in a comparatively wealthy coastal city will be introduced to English some time during primary school or in junior high school. Their textbook is likely to be a co-publication between a local and an international publisher. (In the public school system, textbooks require the Ministry of Education approval, and to gain such approval, the book has to have the involvement of a local publisher.) The textbook will be supplemented with brightly coloured wall charts, flashcards, CDs and DVDs and, increasingly, online resources. Lessons will be conducted in a mixture of Chinese and English. In addition to their formal classes, students may have the opportunity of watching English language programmes on CCTV, China’s national

broadcaster. They may also go to a private language institute after school. At university, they may have a native-speaking English teacher, and the class will be conducted exclusively in English. There will be additional opportunities for language exposure and activation through movies, English speaking competitions, English-only areas on campus and so on. Depending on their major, they may have some of their content courses delivered primarily or exclusively in English. The term ‘English-medium subject courses’ can be misleading. Depending on the teacher, while the textbook will be in English, the instruction may be almost exclusively in Chinese.

In her book on language education in China from 1949, Lam (2005) presents four case study histories of learners aged between 45 and 25. She reports that:

The four learning histories reflect changes in policy and variations in policy implementation in different locations even within the same time period. First of all, conditions have definitely improved through the years. Younger learners, like Ling 37 and Hua aged 25, have experienced more favourable learning circumstances such as portable tape recorders, more books, campus radio, foreign movies and more openness to speaking English, for example, at English corners. (p. 109)

There are tensions between official government policy and individual aspiration. While Lam’s case studies and surveys show that government policy in promoting English and emphasizing its importance is reflected in changing attitudes and practices, there was considerable variation in experiences, learning histories and motivation. While passing examinations remained a major motivating factor for learners in all age groups, for the younger learners, being able to communicate in English was also seen as important. In other words, learners were coming to see English as a tool for communication as much as a subject to be studied for the purpose of passing an examination (see, also Benson & Nunan, 2005). As one of her younger informants reported: “When I first went to university, I tried going to the English Corner, but I was too shy. ... So after going twice, I stopped. But as a graduate student, I felt I should go to the English Corner because it was meaningless to

learn English if I could not speak or understand it. So, I went and I spoke (Lam, 2005, p. 109).

The contemporary landscape as seen through the eyes of Western teachers is tellingly and amusingly presented in Stanley's (2013) ethnographic account of English language teaching in China. Stanley looks at the lived experience of a group of 'backpacker' teachers from the United States, the UK and Canada over a three-year period: their pre-service training, classroom practices, personal identity, motivations and local, socially constructed roles. In Stanley's words, these people represent the 'soft underbelly' of the profession. Under- and more often than not, unqualified, they exist to fill a yawning gap for communicatively competent local teachers. Stanley argues that they will continue to exist " ... as long as there is a demand for English, a shortage of communicatively competent local teachers, willing to remain in classrooms teaching for less money than they can make in other jobs, and the dangerous fallacy that proficiency in a language is sufficient qualification to teach." (p. 2).

3 Agents of Change in China

Innovation and change have been a part of the language education literature since the 1980s (see for example, Kennedy, 1987, 1988). Interest in the topic waxes and wanes, although it never disappears completely. It was given a boost several years ago with the appearance of a referred journal devoted to the topics. ('Innovation' and 'change' tend to be yoked together, because innovation necessarily entails change, although not necessarily for the better.) A recent edited collection on the topic (Hyland & Wong, 2013) has generated renewed interest in the topic. In addition to two useful overview chapters by two of the key figures in the field (Kennedy (2013) on models of change and innovation and Markee (2013) on contexts of change), there are useful chapters on a range of important topics such as innovation through teacher education, through action research/teacher-initiated change, and through reflective teaching, innovation through language planning and policy; innovation in various

sectors of the educational pie, and, not surprisingly, technology as a tool for innovation.

In policy terms, at the time of writing this chapter, the educational system was midway through its ten-year (2010–2020) educational reform and development plan. The strategic goal of the plan is

... to develop each student as a ‘whole healthy person’ with mental, physical and social well-being, with an emphasis on values, attitudes, ideology, cognitive, affective and interpersonal skills. The students’ critical thinking skills and creativity are also described as one of the strategic goals. (Gong & Holliday, 2013, p. 45)

The implications for language education in the development plan are clear. Putonghua (Mandarin) was officially announced as the national language by Chinese government in 2000 (National People’s Congress Standing Committee, 2000). English language education can no longer be divorced from other subjects on the school curriculum. Nor can the time spent on second or foreign language learning be seen as an investment in the acquisition of a tool for some far-distant, real-world communicative encounters in the target language. As one of the authors of this chapter argued almost 20 years ago, the real value of acquiring another language is that it “... will foster the development of cognitive, affective, interpersonal, and intercultural skills, knowledge and attitudes” (Nunan, 1999, p. 155).

3.1 Contact with People from Abroad

Thirty years ago, contact with foreigners was a rarity in China, which was very much closed to the outside world. This has changed dramatically. Many thousands of foreigners, particularly westerners, now live and work in China. A good percentage of these are English language teachers, many, if not most, with minimal, if any, formal qualification to teach the language. All that is required to obtain a work visa is to have the status of a native speaker and some form of certification. For many Chinese students in both public and private education at school and university, their English class may be their first encounter with a foreigner. As Stanley (2013) points out, the English class provides a venue for intercultural encounters, although these may not be all positive.

[The contact] may be a warm, positive experience in which both sides' meanings are compared and shared, and everyone leaves the encounter with a greater understanding and appreciation of each other's cultures. But it may not be. ... Instead, the employment of foreign teachers [in Stanley's research site] appears to reinforce existing stereotypes, prejudices, and barrier to understanding, among teachers and students alike. (Stanley, 2013, p. 3)

3.2 The 'Internationalization' of Education

Education in China has been influenced, not only by the influx of foreign teachers, but also by the growth of the private sector. This growth has happened at all levels, from early childhood to adult. Initially, private schools were small, and privately owned, but corporations were soon buying into what they received to be a lucrative and massive market. In 2008, the US entertainment giant Disney Corporation launched Disney English aimed at young learners between the ages of 2 and 12. In the adult field, Pearson, the British media and publishing corporation, bought the Wall Street Institute and began an aggressive campaign of expansion. By the beginning of the decade, there were an estimated 30,000 organizations or companies offering private English language classes and drawing in several billion dollars annually. In addition, to meet the requirements of internationalization, real English-medium institutions have been established in Mainland China in recent years, such as Nottingham Ningbo University, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, Shanghai Nork York University. Some top universities also tend to deliver some courses in English, for example, Tsinghua University.

3.3 The Impact of Technology

The field of CALL has received increasing attention in China in recent years. The China CALL Association was established in 2012 and holds a CALL conference biannually. MOOCs and flipped classrooms in particular are enjoying attention at present, although mobile learning less so (Chen & Wang, 2016). Interestingly, many papers in Chinese EFL journals review previous studies in CALL, both inside and outside China, with fewer reporting original, empirical research. In publications in the main international CALL journals such as *LLT*, *CALL*, *ReCALL* and *IJCALLT*, Chinese

scholars' papers are rare. Another characteristic is the large amount of funding from the government to encourage integration of technology into the EFL classroom. Despite this, it is commonly acknowledged that many EFL teachers still cannot adopt technology efficiently in the classroom due largely to a lack of training (Zhang, Gu, Pan, & Shi, 2016). Perhaps one of the reasons is that CALL has not been implemented as a compulsory course in MA or PhD TESOL degree courses in Chinese universities. As a result it is probably safe to say that technology has not played a key role as an agent of change in China, although it certainly does have the potential to do so.

4 In This Volume

As is clear from the chapters included in this book, EFL teaching in China has in recent years been influenced by the desire and the need to innovate. This is not limited to individual schools or scholars; new national guidelines for College English Teaching (CET) are anticipated to have been launched at the time of writing of this book (2017), which seek to provide advice for teaching EFL at universities across China. These guidelines cover general English teaching, ESP (English for Specific Purposes), including EAP (English for Academic Purposes) and Intercultural communication, for students at three recognised levels (primary, intermediate and advanced) (Wang, 2016). In particular the inclusion of EAP is new and reflects a growing interest in this area. Below we briefly describe these chapters and the innovations reported therein.

The second chapter reports on reforms in EFL testing. Liu and Xu discuss how to use assessment to enhance EFL learning in a variety of contexts in China. They compare national language assessment innovation with the conventional testing based on the Confucius Heritage Culture. They then outline the use of assessment for language learning (AfL), teachers' perceptions of AfL and their practices, and its impact on student learning. They provide a number of suggestions on how to use AfL to develop EFL teaching and learning.

In chapter 3, Snow, Sun and Li report on a study designed to gain a better understanding of how successful English learners in China develop their speaking skills—especially in a context where speaking is not often required and there are limited speaking opportunities in class. One of the

findings was that successful learners engage in a considerable amount of independent learning and actively look for and create opportunities to use English outside of the classroom. Snow, Sun and Li argue about the importance of teachers in encouraging learners to engage in independent learning and in finding ways to better support them in this.

In chapter 4, Ng and Cheung give an overview of 60 empirical studies published from 2005 to 2015 related to innovation in EFL writing instruction in areas as diverse as culture, strategies and motivation in primary, secondary and higher education. They draw a number of lessons from these studies and offer recommendations for writing instructors in China.

The fifth chapter is written by Zhao and Lei and explores blended language learning in tertiary English classes. More specifically, Zhao and Lei discuss how technology-enhanced Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) innovation supports students' EFL learning based on two case studies on the use of Wiki spaces and Knowledge Forum. They draw a number of implications from these studies for other practitioners interested in implementing technology in the language classroom.

Reflecting important developments in the Chinese context, six chapters report on projects in English for Additional Purposes (EAP). Firstly, Cai gives an overview of the history of EFL innovation at the tertiary level in China and in particular the current debate between English for General and EAP. Zhang and Zhang describe the implementation of English-medium instruction (EMI) in one university in China and focus on the teachers' roles and perspectives on the programme. They use a combination of classroom observations, focus groups and interviews to identify the benefits that the teachers experienced in combining content and English language instruction, as well as the challenges they faced.

Jiang and Zhang also discuss EMI and specifically look at roles of teachers in its implementation. They argue for a need to better understand teachers' perceptions and classroom practices in EMI and report on a case study of tertiary teachers at one university. They make a number of practical suggestions for engaging teachers in other contexts in which English is embedded into the curriculum.

Ruan and Chen investigate students' perspectives on writing instruction at an English medium university in China. Based on a case study, their findings suggest that practices in writing for specific disciplines can

help students to reinforce their writing skills. They then provide recommendations on EFL writing within disciplinary practice. Zhao and Yu explore the possibility of teaching EAP at local universities. One objection to the use of EAP in China is that it is only suitable for students at 'elite' universities. Zhao and Yu argue that EAP can and should be implemented for students at local universities too. They identify teacher training as one of the key prerequisites.

Zou and Reinders discuss how to use learner corpora to enhance Chinese EFL learners' English skills. They argue that while the current learner corpora are significant to represent Chinese EFL learners' characteristics in writing and speaking skills, they only emphasize on weaknesses in writing and speaking components. However, the innovation in the EAP trend may improve Chinese EFL learners' English skills and some weaknesses may disappear in the near future. Moreover, these corpora consisted of a variety of levels. Therefore, they suggest building up an EAP corpus specific to the advanced level from Chinese EFL learners.

Intercultural communication has been identified as a key area in EFL teaching in China for a long time. However, it has also encountered addressing a call for innovation in this field recently. Two chapters discuss innovation in intercultural communication. Zheng and Gao conducted action research and aimed to improve the pedagogical model for integrating intercultural communication into EFL teaching. They found that critical reflection in the intercultural communication EFL classroom can significantly develop students' critical thinking and therefore enhance their language and culture competence. Finally, they provide innovative recommendations for the intercultural communication course.

Li also highlights the importance of developing learners' intercultural communication competence in the language classroom and provides an overview based on previous studies on Chinese language teachers' beliefs and practices in intercultural teaching. She focuses on four main themes to elaborate the necessity of emphasizing research into intercultural teaching and implementation of intercultural teaching in the language classroom. She finally offers suggestions on reinforcing teachers' understanding of intercultural teaching as well as solutions to problems in integrating intercultural communication in language teaching.

In the final chapter, Lin and Reinders discuss the development of learner autonomy and lessons learnt from a local university in China. Lin concludes that there is a need to create reliable instruments to help learners to develop their autonomous learning.

5 Conclusion

As is clear from the chapters in this book, EFL teaching in China has been increasingly influenced by the desire and the need to innovate in recent years. This is not limited to individual schools or scholars; new national guidelines for CET were launched at the time of writing of this book, which seek to provide advice for teaching EFL at universities across China. These guidelines cover general English teaching, ESP, including EAP and Intercultural communication, for students at three recognised levels (primary, intermediate and advanced). In particular the inclusion of EAP is new and reflects a growing interest in this area, one that is evident from the contributions in Chaps. 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11 in this book (coverage of general English teaching can be found in Chaps. 2, 3, 4, 5 and 14 and Intercultural communication in Chaps. 12 and 13).

The chapters in this book highlight a number of challenges as well as possible ways forward for EFL teaching in China. One of the key characteristics is the considerable diversity in needs, approaches and innovations across the country, not surprising given the size of its student body. This means that a balance will need to be struck by top-down policies, such as the 2017 CET guidelines, and local implementations and innovations.

Another challenge remains in improving Chinese learners' speaking skills, especially in the face of its reduced importance in the Chinese National English Test. Perhaps as a direct result, speaking and listening are not given (as) much attention in EFL classes. A challenge then for EFL teachers is to find ways to teach subjects that are given more attention in the exams, such as grammar and vocabulary, through oral skills. These specialised skills are likely to increase the need for teacher development, as is the increase in EAP teaching. We estimate that fewer than 1000 EFL teachers in China have been specifically trained in the delivery of EAP by

the end of 2016. Considering that there are over 1000 universities in the country, clearly there is a significant and growing need. Of course in the limited amount of space we have in this book, we have been unable to cover all aspects of innovation in a country of the size of China. Nonetheless, we hope that the 14 chapters in this book will provide inspiration.

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2

Assessment for Learning in English Language Classrooms in China: Contexts, Problems, and Solutions

Jun Liu and Yueting Xu

1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the research on assessment for learning (AfL) in English language education in China. While AfL is not a new term to readers home and abroad (Klenowski, 2009), we believe that it needs some close scrutiny because it has been in use in China for more than two decades yet issues concerning how it is interpreted by educational policies and implemented in practice have remained underexplored. A comprehensive review is thus needed, based on which we can problematize AfL implementation in China and identify lines for further research.

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2 Assessment for Learning: Definition, Key Elements, and Principles of Good Practice

For the purpose of clarity, we use AfL as defined by the *Assessment Reform Group* (ARG). AfL is “the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there” (ARG, 2002, p. 1). This definition suggests the educational purposes of assessment, in which there are four key elements that need to be singled out for achieving such purposes.

First is the essentiality of clarifying achievement goals and sharing assessment criteria (Pedder & James, 2012). Since the teacher’s decision-making of the students’ learning progress is based on a clear perception of what specifically the learning goals are, he/she needs to clarify and understand learning intentions and to share the criteria for success with the students.

Second is the validity of the process of seeking evidence of student learning. Here, validity is used to refer to both the purposes of the assessment, i.e., whether the form of the assessment achieves its purpose; and the use of assessment results, i.e., how the results of an assessment are interpreted and used (Stobart, 2012). Since the assessment process is embedded within classroom talk, questioning and other instructional activities, teachers need to promote and support effective classroom discussions on the one hand; and develop assessment-embedded classroom activities and tasks on the other hand. Teachers need to ensure that these activities be valid so that evidence generated from such a process could be used for their own interpretation and decision-making about student learning.

Third is effective feedback with which students can be assisted to move from their current level to the desired level. Although the relationship between feedback form, timing and effectiveness is complex and variable (Sadler, 2010), it is generally agreed that feedback ought to be carefully crafted by teachers, and meaningfully understood and deliberately acted upon by students if AfL is to be effective (Wiliam, 2011).

Fourth is the important student role in assessment. AfL needs to activate students as pedagogic resources for one another and for themselves, which will empower them to become self-regulated learners (Carless, 2006). Students therefore need to be involved in monitoring and evaluating their own and others' learning through self- and peer assessments, suggesting that the feedback source encompasses not only teachers but also the learners themselves and their peers (ARG, 2002).

According to the ARG, there are ten principles that the AfL approach needs to be based on (ARG, 2002, p. 1). The ARG argues that AfL should:

1. be part of effective planning of teaching and learning;
2. focus on how students learn;
3. be recognized as central to classroom practice;
4. be regarded as a key professional skill for teachers;
5. be sensitive and constructive because any assessment has an emotional impact;
6. take account of the importance of learner motivation;
7. promote commitment to learning goals and a shared understanding of the criteria by which they are assessed;
8. give learners constructive guidance about how to improve;
9. develop learners' capacity for self-assessment so that they can become reflective and self-managing;
10. recognize the full range of achievement of all learners. (p. 1)

While these principles have been widely used as guidelines for ensuring the learning benefits, they have remained at the theoretical level, for which classroom teachers do not know how to operationalize them in their practice. In the foreground of these principles, inherently, are the critical role of assessment in classroom practice, AfL's inextricable relationship to learning through timely and effective feedback, and learners' active engagement in assessment for the purpose of learning enhancement. The principles also present a need for teachers to be professionally prepared in order to turn these visions into classroom realities and to steer students toward their learning goals.

3 Making Sense of the Chinese Contexts for Assessment: Macro-, Meso-, and Micro-Levels

By this point in the chapter, AfL has been introduced in a general sense. Clearly, there are many more contextual issues that have a bearing on practice, policy, and even perception (Gardner, 2012). These issues not only exert a significant influence on the kinds of assessment practices that are feasible (Carless, 2011), but also play an important part in teachers and students' conceptions of assessment (Brown, 2008a). To further explore influences from different levels, we distinguish three dimensions among the contextual issues in China: macro, meso, and micro.

The macro-level issues consist of grander and broader influences from social, cultural, historical and political factors. Basically, these influences have two sources— historical and horizontal. Historically China has a long history of a '*keju*' testing system which offered a level playing field for all students who needed to compete against each other in order to move up along the hierarchical ladder of the society by memorizing and interpreting the classic works (Zeng, 1999). Exams which are valued for their summative purpose continue to influence Chinese education, including English language teaching and learning (L. Cheng & Curtis, 2009). In addition to '*Keju*', some traditional values advocated by Confucianism also carry relevance for contemporary education. These values are the acquisition of skills and seriousness about tasks; hierarchical relations; obligations to family and the group; and giving or preserving 'face' (Bond & Hwang, 1986). These values have exerted an influence on education by emphasizing effort rather than ability, the transmission of knowledge, a pragmatic approach to learning, as well as listening to others but not taking the initiative to speak up in learning.

Horizontally, the contemporary educational policies play an important part in constituting the assessment contexts. Relevant national educational policies covering requirements for English language assessment from primary to tertiary levels include: *Nine-year Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards* (CMoE, 2011), *Full-time High School English Curriculum Requirements* (CMoE, 2003), and *College*

English Curriculum Requirements (CMoE, 2007). All these three policies emphasize the parallel position of learning and accountability purposes of assessment and advise teachers to mind the variety and flexibility of assessment tasks. Although these policies are intended to strike a balance between AfL and assessment of learning (AoL), English assessment in China is still dominated by high-stakes exams, especially at the end of junior and senior high school (*zhongkao* and *gaokao*, respectively). To maximize scores in exams, Chinese students have heavy academic workload to ensure mastery of examination materials.

The meso-level issues mainly refer to those contextual influences outside of the classroom but with direct influences on the classroom (Fulmer, Lee, & Tan, 2015). These issues may include school-level policies, school administrators' support for assessment, as well as requests and expectations from parents and the local community. In China, the meso-level contexts for AfL are complex and even conflicting. First, schools in China are unexceptionally under the pressure of '*gaokao*' (the national entrance examination to colleges) and thus generally have reservations using AfL and its related methods. Second, institutions may appropriate AfL based on their own interpretations, and their interpretations and appropriation of national policies may or may not translate the meaning of national policies precisely. Wang and Wang (2011) reported that the non-key universities in China under investigation prioritize helping students pass *College English Test Band 4/6* (CET4/6) in their curriculum while those key universities sponsored by the central government's 985 and 211 projects do not. Although Carless (2011) observed that AfL in various contexts can range from 'restricted' to 'extended' forms and should allow variations encompassing both ideal practices as prescribed by the international literature and more locally feasible adaptations, cautions need to be exerted over such interpretation and appropriation (Levison, Sutton, & Winstead, 2009). Third, specific institutional policies of assessment and immediate communities' attitudes toward AfL in higher education may vary from institution to institution, largely depending on such sociocultural factors as the specific geographical location of the institution, its socioeconomic status, as well as the teachers' and students' roles and conceptions about English language teaching and learning (Q. Chen, Kettle, Klenowski, & May, 2013).

The micro-level issues encompass the immediate context of the classroom. This may include a wide range of classroom-level influences, such as class size, access to technologies, teacher–student relationship, and teachers’ and students’ perceptions of assessment. Among them, although the relationship of teachers to students has been traditionally presented as hierarchical (Biggs, 1996) with the teacher being considered as the only credible evaluator or assessor of learning (Hu, 2002), there are some changes in the teacher–student relationship in Chinese classrooms. Contemporary Chinese students are more independent and critical in their thinking and thus less likely to be satisfied with whatever their teachers have said (Zhang, 2004). Although research into the micro-level assessment contexts is also rare, the prevalent fact is that the large class size might be one significant negative influence on AfL implementation since smaller class sizes seem to provide more favorable conditions for teacher and peer dialogues which are central to AfL.

Synthesizing the above leads us to infer two main challenges of implementing AfL in China. First, innovations to introduce progressive practices of assessment are unlikely to be fruitful unless there is a corresponding change in the emphasis of high-stakes examinations. Second, there are potentially some risks of misinterpreting and appropriating AfL due to contextual constraints at the meso- and micro-levels.

4 AfL Research in China

4.1 Teachers’ Conceptions of Assessment

From the review of the contextual issues for assessment, we understand the coexistence of two competing assessment discourses constitutes the contemporary contexts for English as a foreign language (EFL) education in China. Despite the long-held dominant examination-oriented traditions, AfL has been included as part of the curriculum reform agendas in educational policies across school levels. This inevitably involves teachers who are agents to implement AfL in their classrooms. Understanding how these teachers perceive AfL and assessment generally is a prerequisite for understanding their practices and the (in)effectiveness of AfL in Chinese EFL classrooms.

Teacher conception of assessment is used here as an umbrella term to refer to an organized belief system that embraces all that a teacher thinks about the nature and purpose of assessment, encompassing beliefs, propositions, attitudes, and preferences (Thompson, 1992). Teachers' conceptions of assessment are formed gradually through their earlier experiences of both being assessed as learners and implementing assessment as teachers, and become a framework which filters, frames, and guides teachers' responses to assessment (Fives & Buehl, 2012). To be specific, conceptions filter information and experience, frame situations and problems, and guide intention and action. Our interpretations of the formation and function of conceptions include three messages. First, teacher conceptions of assessment seem to be independent of assessment training. Brown (2008b) has reported that no statistically significant differences of the mean scores of teacher conception of assessment were found among teachers with different degrees of assessment training experiences. Second, 'apprenticeship of observation' (Lortie, 1975) developed in teachers' own schooling experiences will greatly influence their attitudes toward assessment (L. F. Smith, Hill, Cowie, & Gilmore, 2014). Third, teacher conceptions of assessment seem to be an inextricable part to teacher conceptions of teaching and learning, all of which being guided by one's epistemological beliefs and views of learning (Brown, 2008a).

Due to the fact that research into Chinese EFL teachers' conceptions of assessment is not available in the existing literature, we then turn to research of Chinese teachers' conceptions to make useful inferences. Drawing upon data from a survey of assessment conceptions and practice with 300 teachers from 14 primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong, Brown, Kennedy, Fok, Chan, and Yu's (2009) study concluded that broader Chinese cultural norms concerning examinations are part of school culture, which presented a significant barrier to change of practice to achieve the learning purpose of assessment.

To further understand Chinese teachers' conceptions of assessment, Brown and Gao (2015) synthesized eight interview and survey studies which have examined how diverse samples of practicing teachers in China have described the nature and purpose of assessment. They identified six major common conceptions of assessment among Chinese teachers. Assessment is conceived by these Chinese teachers as

the following: (1) functioning to inspect and control schools, teachers and students; (2) a way of checking whether students have fulfilled the pre-set learning targets; (3) valid information source to diagnose teaching effectiveness and adjust teaching strategies; (4) a means to boost students' learning motivation and to enhance learning abilities; (5) a way of enhancing the all-around quality as humans; and (6) inaccurate or erroneous means of measurement. Spreading along a continuum from positive to negative, these conceptions suggest that teachers may express different conceptions on different occasions or locations, and may have a mixture of conflicting conceptions of assessment at the same time. What is encouraging is that despite the strong macro contexts of using assessment for accountability and selection purposes, these Chinese teachers are still inclined for learning purposes of assessment. Inferences can be made concerning the 'seeds' for promoting AfL in China. Having said this, we cannot be blindly optimistic, as J. Chen and Brown (2013) caution that it is unlikely that reformist views of assessment are to be adopted as long as students are still rewarded for their performance on exams.

To conclude, although Chinese EFL teachers' conceptions of assessment are not known, inferences made from the aforementioned study are that their conceptions are shaped by teachers' own schooling experiences as well as the exam-oriented traditions in China. Thus, their conceptions about assessment need to be regarded "as an indispensable point of departure for any further professional development on the matter" (Remesal, 2011, p. 474).

4.2 Teacher AfL Practice

We concur with K. Smith (2011) that a prerequisite for AfL to be successfully implemented in the classroom is the teachers' assessment practice which again relies on their assessment literacy. Sections 4.2 and 4.3 are, respectively, an overview of research on Chinese EFL teachers' AfL practice and their assessment literacy.

A search for relevant research shows that empirical studies on teacher AfL practices in China are generally lacking. As concluded in H. Wang's (2009)

finding, out of the 2008 national survey of college English teaching and teacher qualities, assessment in college English classrooms in many universities is still dominated by the CET4/6, which suggests an urgent need for more implementation of AfL. In a more recent large-scale national survey among 530 universities about current status of College English teaching, Wang and Wang (2011) reported that most of the universities utilized a wide range of assessment strategies in their curriculum, among which there are classroom performance, homework assignments, quizzes, and online self-regulated learning. Although most of the universities reported that they perceived the 'day-to-day' classroom performance of students as the most important AfL strategy, its actual implementations in the classrooms have remained underexplored.

The general picture of teacher AfL practice is that, for the vast majority of teachers in China, AfL is still not a well-developed aspect of practice. Even in Hong Kong where AfL is one of the top priorities in the English language education reform agenda (CDC, 2004, 2006), the consensus from a number of studies was that there was oftentimes a mismatch between curriculum intensions and school realities, and that teachers were not enthusiastic about AfL due to the deeply-rooted exam-oriented culture (Carless, 2005, 2011; Davison, 2007; Hamp-Lyons, 2007).

Several themes emerge as pertinent in teachers' AfL practices. First is the complexities of teacher assessment practices which are under the influence of their prior experiences, power relations in the workplace, and the particular venues where the assessment activities take place (Y. Xu & Liu, 2009). Under such circumstances, a wide range of variations of AfL implementation are found. For example, Q. Chen et al.'s (2013) study identified major differences in two universities' localized adaptations of AfL. While such practices seem to endorse what Carless (2011) has argued about the locally feasible adaptations of AfL in various contexts, they present challenges for evaluating the value of such adaptations in achieving the ultimate purpose of AfL, that is, student learning enhancement. These various forms of AfL adaptations, however, seem to produce conflicting results concerning how the learning purpose of AfL is achieved. Some observations of teachers' questioning as an AfL strategy (Jiang, 2014) suggested that the learning potential of questioning was well tapped because of the teacher's expertise and experiences,

while others reported that the frequently used questions and tests mostly encourage memorization and superficial learning notwithstanding the teachers' claims that they wish to develop comprehension and deep learning (Wu, 1993). Moreover, deciding where the learners are in their learning and how best to get there has oftentimes been misconceived as an exhortation to teachers to frequently test their students to assess their attainment levels against curriculum standards in order to fix their errors and failures in learning. For instance, Gu's (2014) case study with one Chinese secondary EFL teacher's practice has revealed that the high-stakes examinations defined the content and forms of the teacher's assessment practice and thus constrained her attempt of translating the curriculum visions into classroom realities.

Second is the functions and use of different sources of feedback, among which the review of peer feedback will be deferred until the next section. As the main and traditional source, teacher feedback is often found to serve summative and accountability purposes which overshadow the learning purpose that it should have mainly served (e.g., Lee, 2007). For those teachers who have received professional development in assessment and wished to implement feedback innovations in their classroom, their practices were found to be constrained by a string of factors such as unsupportive environment of their schools and their perceptions and responses of community members (i.e., students) (Lee, Mak, & Burns, 2016). In addition, recent studies have started to explore the effects of automated feedback generated by artificial intelligent essay evaluation software on student learning. Huang and Zhang's (2014) study investigated the extent to which students acted on different sources of feedback (i.e., teacher feedback, peer feedback, and automated feedback) and found different degrees of student revisions based on these types of feedback. Among them, automated feedback was most acted upon due to its focus on mechanic issues that did not touch upon meaning and structures of student writing. To note that much of this bulk of research was conducted in EFL/ESL writing classrooms; oral feedback that teachers utilize in their day-to-day practice is relatively underexplored and thus warrants more research attention (Y. Xu & Carless, 2016).

Third is the involvement of students in AfL. When teachers involved students by means of self- and peer assessments of their work, the

ultimate purpose is by no means less marking responsibility on their part, but rather students' self-regulated learning through acquiring the competence of judging the quality of academic work against certain assessment criteria. Students, therefore, need to be active agents and useful resources in the assessment process rather than merely playing a passive role (Gardner, 2012). Although peer assessment has been widely reported in EFL writing classrooms in China, the general picture is that students' engagement and perceptions of peer assessment tend to be low without the teacher's careful planning of the activity, thoughtful training of students as peer assessors, and sustained support throughout the process (Roskams, 1999; W. Wang, 2014; Zhao, 2014). In addition, Chinese students' use of peer assessment was identified as a problematic task which is closely related to their cultural values. The traditional teacher-centered pedagogy has led them to have their favoritism over teacher feedback (Tsui & Ng, 2000; Yang, Badger, & Yu, 2006), and their concern for face-saving may have refrained them from giving constructively critical comments to avoid tension and disagreement (Carson & Nelson, 2006; W. Cheng & Warren, 2005). In self-assessment studies, although positive motivational beliefs and acceptance levels of rating consistency were reported (J. Xu, Li, & Li, 2010; Zou & Yang, 2014), regrettably these studies did not connect these benefits with learning progression. In other words, the learning gains of self-assessment were not empirically supported and thus remain speculative.

Several inferences can be made from these empirical studies on teacher AfL practice. First, it is complex and situated. Thus, it is not easy to judge the quality of a teacher's AfL practice without a contextual understanding of such practice. Second, to maximize the benefits of various sources of feedback, teachers need to enhance student feedback literacy (i.e., their competencies of understanding, appreciating, generating and acting on feedback). Once the students can understand and are willing to engage with feedback, it is more likely that they will be able to act on it and improve their work. Third, the introduction of self- and peer assessments needs to be cautious, as insufficient preparation may lead to students' negative experiences and misconceptions which bring more harm than good to their learning.

4.3 AfL and Teacher Assessment Literacy

All these aforementioned studies point to the inadequacy of pre- and in-service teacher training in the area of assessment in China. Carless (2011) has pinpointed this problem and attributed it in part to teachers' conception of assessment as a stand-alone addition rather than something integral to teaching and learning. It highlights the critical role played by teacher conceptions of assessment in the implementation of AfL as argued earlier, and at the same time leads us to think about pertinent questions concerning why there are such misconceptions of assessment, who is to blame, and what should be done to help teachers form better informed conceptions of assessment. All these ideas necessitate a full understanding of teacher assessment literacy, with a focus of whether or not teacher development in assessment has prepared teachers for conducting AfL effectively.

Teacher assessment literacy, conventionally defined as knowledge and skills in the educational assessment of students (Popham, 2009; Stiggins, 1995), is redefined to embrace three progressive stages of literacy from a basic mastery of assessment principles through an internalized set of understandings and skills to a self-directed awareness of assessment processes and one's own identity as assessor (Y. Xu & Brown, 2016). Language teacher assessment literacy, in a narrower sense, refers to teachers' familiarity with measurement practices and the application of this knowledge to classroom practices in general and specifically to issues of assessing language (Inbar-Lourie, 2008; Taylor, 2009). As suggested by Principles 1, 3, and 4 of the ten principles of AfL outlined in Sect. 2, AfL needs to be recognized as central to classroom practice, and as a key professional skill for teachers. In other words, teachers are generally expected to be well-versed in both AfL theories and practice.

Most of the contemporary studies on language teacher assessment literacy published in China are review articles that intend to introduce the concept and to suggest possible ways to promote teacher assessment literacy (e.g., Lin & Wu, 2014; Sheng, 2014; Y. Xu & Brown, 2016). Among the limited number of empirical studies (Jin, 2010; Y. Xu, 2016; Y. Xu & Brown, 2017; Y. Xu & Carless, 2016), Jin's (2010) study is the first to investigate the quality of assessment courses

by evaluating various course characteristic factors (e.g., instructors, content, and students) through a nationwide survey with 86 course instructors. It is found that although the language assessment courses adequately covered essential aspects of theory and practice of language testing, they paid significantly less attention to educational and psychological measurement and student classroom practice. Although this study somehow ensured the quality of language assessment courses from the instructors' perspectives, it is not yet known whether language teachers are assessment literate enough to deal with challenges arising from classroom assessment practice. In another example, Y. Xu and Carless' (2016) recent study explored the issue of teacher feedback literacy as part of teacher assessment literacy through a case study of a university English instructor's feedback enabling processes. These important contributions notwithstanding, there is a pressing need for more empirical studies investigating the nuanced dimensions of teacher assessment literacy, including the seven competency dimensions prescribed by the *Standards for Teacher Competence in Educational Assessment of Students* (hereafter the *Standards*) (AFT, NCME, & NEA, 1990).

1. Teachers should be skilled in choosing assessment methods appropriate for instructional decisions.
2. Teachers should be skilled in developing assessment methods appropriate for instructional decisions.
3. Teachers should be skilled in administering, scoring, and interpreting the results of both externally produced and teacher-produced assessment methods.
4. Teachers should be skilled in using assessment results when making decisions about individual students, planning teaching, developing curriculum, and school improvement.
5. Teachers should be skilled in developing valid pupil grading procedures.
6. Teachers should be skilled in communicating assessment results to students, parents, other lay audiences, and other educators.
7. Teachers should be skilled in recognizing unethical, illegal, and inappropriate assessment methods and uses of assessment information.