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**Understanding Society  
Using Digital Spaces and Resources:  
Teaching and Learning Paths  
in Higher Education**

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# The Impact of COVID-19 on English Language Teaching in Higher Education Chinese System. Emergency Remote Teaching in Neoliberal Universities in China

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**ABSTRACT:** *China is the second largest economy in the world. One of the fastest growing industries in China is English Language Teaching for youth and adults. English is the most widely learned foreign language in China. COVID-19 has taken hold of all industries and brought them to their knees. In China, the government has introduced the education policy of suspending classes without interrupting learning. This study aims to describe the challenges faced by ELT teachers in China during the pandemic.*

**KEYWORDS:** *ELT, China, COVID-19, e-Learning, ERT*

## Introduction

Globalization is not only an economic issue, but also affects many other aspects of human life. In particular, globalization has attracted the interest of one of the largest countries in the world, the People's Republic of China (PRC, hereafter China), in the last twenty years. China is the second largest market in the world for imports and holds the first place for exports (IMF, 2017), which in the last twenty-five years has produced a number of enormous financial capitals that are both economically prosperous and diverse (IMF, 2017). According to official statistics, an estimated 40,000 foreign enterprises were established in China in 2009 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2009). In just eight years, in 2017, the number of foreign companies in China has increased to 122,391 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2017). One of the fastest growing sectors of industry in China is undoubtedly English Language Teaching (ELT) for young and adult native Chinese speakers. Today, English is the most studied foreign language in China (Kirkpatrick, 2016). China has the largest English-learning population in the world and the number is increasing every year (Bolton, 2003; Crystal, 2008; Jenkins, 2003; Jiang, 2002: 5; He, Li, 2009).

Globalisation not only affects the economy, as noted above, but also favours and accelerates the spread of disease, as was the case with COVID-19 in 2020, which some scholars read as a side effect of globalisation itself (Farzanegan *et al.*, 2021). The phenomenon of the pandemic has affected and brought to its knees all industries and has greatly affected the daily lives of the people.

In fact, due to the COVID-19 outbreak, approximately 90% of students worldwide, more than 1.5 billion learners at all levels, have been affected by school and university closures (Bozkurt, Sharma, 2020). In China, the first country to experience the COVID-19 outbreak in January 2020, the government introduced the policy of 'suspending classes without stop learning' (Zhang *et al.* 2020). The solution that has been unconditionally adopted in almost every country in the world is the introduction of certain type of distance learning designed to answer to the emergency.

This study aims to describe the challenges faced by ELT teachers in China during the pandemic.

## **1. English as a global language in China: a state of art before COVID-19 pandemic**

From the 1980s onwards, it became something of a statement to regard English as a global language (Crystal, 2003).

The world of large scale commerce, industry, technology, and banking, like the world of certain human sciences and professions, is an international world and it is linguistically dominated by English almost everywhere, regardless of how well-established and well-protected local cultures, languages, and identities may otherwise be (Fishman 1996, 628).

In China, the globalization of language, especially English, has considerably influenced Chinese educational policy and teaching and learning of foreign languages (Coupland, 2010; Kirkpatrick, 2016). With the onset of the 'Chinese reform era' from 1978 onwards, English gradually came to be seen as an essential tool for modernization (Lo Bianco *et al.*, 2009; Han, 2017). China «has sought to equip its population with English language proficiency in order to accomplish its domestic and international goals» (Kirkpatrick 2016, 50). The national survey shows that of those with a secondary education or higher in China, 67.4% have learned at least one foreign language (SGO, 2006). The fifth national census in 2000 shows that about 48.7% of the national population (about 1.27 billion in total) have completed lower secondary education or higher, so about 32.86% of the national population, 415.95 million in total, in China have learned one or more foreign languages, including 93.8% English, 7.1% Russian, 2.5% Japanese, and 0.3% another foreign language (Wei, Su, 2012). Of the 415.95 million foreign language learners

in China, about 390.16 million Chinese are English language learners, accounting for one-third of the country's population (China Daily, 2010; Bolton, Graddol, 2012; Wei, Su, 2012), but many of them are not proficient speakers. In fact, English is «a principal foreign language of trade partners, academics, technical experts, advisers, tourists, and popular culture» (Adamson 2002, 231) in China. English has become an extremely important language and symbolic resource for the citizens of China. English is especially important at the university level, and the goal of the English major in Chinese universities is «developing students' language proficiency to an advanced/sophisticated level» (Wang, 2006, 5).

English courses from beginner to advanced are available in every Chinese school and university, and since January 2001, with China's Reform Guidelines for Vigorously Promoting the Teaching of English in Primary School, English has been compulsory in all primary schools from Grade 3 (ages 6-7) (Kirkpatrick, 2016), «although in several large cities and in the private and non-formal sectors English studies begin earlier» (Lo Bianco et al., 2009, 192). The range of ELT in China is vast and extensive: in addition to the Chinese public education system, hundreds of parallel educational institutions have emerged in the last decade, promoting ELT in a different light and with different teaching methods. Many international ELT schools have been established: American, Australian, Canadian, English primary schools, colleges or universities, all offering courses in English in different and diverse fields. In 2010, more than 30,000 companies were reported to all offer private English classes in China, but such a figure, taken out of context, does not convey the incredible growth the industry continues to experience: in the last five years alone, the market for English classes in China has doubled and is now estimated at RMB 30 billion (US\$4.5 billion) annually (Bolton, Graddol 2012, 3). Some analysts predict that this market will continue to grow at a rate of 12-15% over the next few years. In China, about 1,000 new English teachers are hired every month and this number is likely to double in the coming years.

In total, there are about 1.6 million foreign workers in China. Of these, foreign teachers account for a highly significant 82%: over 100,000 ELT native English speakers and 150,000 non-native English speakers. ELT 1,000,000 Chinese teachers, most of whom are themselves unable to produce intelligible English orally or in writing, or to teach in the target language (Wolff, 2010).

Every year, the demand for ELT teachers exceeds the supply, and Chinese institutions, in turn, face a constant shortage of resources and qualified teachers (ELT). Numerous fraudulent agencies or unlicensed schools recruit foreign teachers without giving them a regular employment contract or assurance. Such teachers are consequently underpaid in the ELT market, where the teaching profession is underappreciated anyway.

The average salary for professional foreigners is 52,000 yuan per month. Currently, foreign teachers are the lowest paid foreigners in



China, with an average salary of 16,500 yuan per month. The cost of a six-hour course in a Beijing language school is 300 RMB (US\$47) (Bolton, Graddol, 2012). For casual classes in Beijing, RMB 120-180/hour (US\$18-27) is common. A local who teaches Chinese under similar conditions is lucky to earn 50 RMB/hour (US\$7) (China's Ministry of Labor and Social Security 2015).

As part of its ongoing crackdown on the scourge of unskilled teachers, China is attempting to gradually remove non-native English teachers from its schools (Moussu, Llorca, 2008; Ruecker, Ives, 2015). In October 2016, China infamously began testing a brand new work permit system that neatly divides foreign workers into three distinct categories: 'A, B, and C expats'. This system was first introduced in Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin and other places before being further expanded from April 2017. Apparently, part of this new system is a rule that requires all foreign English teachers to be native English speakers, along with a bachelor's degree in their home country and two years of teaching experience.

Now that the Chinese government has tightened the requirements for ELT teachers, there are not enough qualified teachers to fill all the teaching positions available in China. Data from SAFEA (2013) suggest that the Chinese market needs at least 100,000 foreign teachers, while there are only 30,000 foreign experts legally recognized by Mainland China. In addition, native speakers with teaching qualifications, university degrees and experience often command higher salaries than many schools can afford.

The latter is becoming a major problem in China, with inefficient review and assessment practices in the Chinese education system completing the framework: ELT quality is falling while demand continues to rise (Lo Bianco, 2009; Han, 2017).

This situation has caused an urgency in training and recruiting new foreign language teachers for ELT Chinese market with a state of emergency of various and complex processes to legitimize professionalism in ELT and consequently regulation in professional recognition of ELT teachers.

On top of this situation, the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 added others challenges to the situation described below. This study aims to describe these challenges

## **2. Emergency Remote Teaching and COVID-19 pandemic**

The term of Emergency Remote Teaching has been operationalized since 2020 as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In China, the first country to experience the COVID-19 outbreak in January 2020, the government introduced the policy of 'suspending classes without stop learning' (Zhang *et al.*, 2020). This policy aims to support the transition to online teaching by providing rich and high-quality teaching materials and resources. To improve the practice of ERT, the government implemented

approaches such as ‘integrating national resources and planning at the top-level’, ‘training teachers’ and ‘enabling local authorities and schools to carry out online teaching in line with local conditions’ (Zhang et al. 2020). Under the guideline of this policy, most schools and universities have conducted ERT since the spring semester of 2020 in February, offering 24.000 online courses through 22 platforms (Sun *et al.*, 2020), with more than 100 million students registered in online courses (Wang, Zhao, 2020). Opting for distance learning during the pandemic allows time and location flexibility for teachers and students. However, this type of teaching differs from quality online learning because teachers may not be adequately trained to teach online courses in addition to standard online courses. In typical online courses, interactions among students, learners, and teachers are among the most important features of technology-based learning (Eom *et al.*, 2006; Kuo *et al.*, 2014). Careful design of curriculum and instructional activities that include social interactions support learning productivity.

Affouneh et al. (2020) defines the ERT as a teaching method that is «not usually planned in advance and involves a sudden shift from traditional teaching into a remote one in view of emergency situations like the outbreak of Coronavirus in different countries» (Affouneh et al. 2020, 1). Hodge et al. (2020) define ERT as a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances.

The ERT involves both the concept of emergency and the use of technologies for teaching and learning. The ERT is based on three aspects:

- an imposed distance learning setting which cannot be changed unless the emergency over to the emergency is over.
- a sudden transfer of content that has been designed to be delivered on a face-to-face basis into an online setting.
- a general audience who initially did not choose to follow courses online.

ERT is

a temporary shift in instructional delivery to an alternative delivery mode due to crisis circumstances. ERT involves the use of fully remote teaching solutions for instruction or education that would otherwise be delivered face-to-face or as blended or hybrid courses and that will ‘return to that format once the crisis or emergency has abated’ (Hodges *et al.*, 2020, 6).

This instructional approach, which differs from normal online courses, is an alternative mode of instructional delivery of instructional materials, content, and activities intended for physical delivery that occurs only during times of disaster and calamity in the digital age (Bozkurt, Sharma, 2020; Mohmmed *et al.*, 2020).

Research studies have examined the potential impact of ERT on student academic achievement and the major issues in implementing

ERT. One research study examined the impact of the pandemic on the performance of Grade 12 students in Zambia (Sintema, 2020). Due to the lack of distance learning opportunities, students had difficulty connecting and interacting with teachers or peers. In a collective autoethnography of post-secondary students (Peters *et al.*, 2020), researchers indicated that some teachers and students were immediately able to accept online instruction despite the emerging shift to online instruction. Zhang (2020) discussed potential problems with the implementation of ERT in China. The network was unstable and inadequate in some areas; overloading of instructional platforms led to crashes; teachers adopted offline instructional content and resources directly into online instruction with minor adjustments.

Pace *et al.* (2020) offered suggestions for teachers. For example, teachers can improve student learning outcomes by building rapport with students, such as answering students' questions in a timely manner, providing immediate feedback, and engaging them in online discussions. Similarly, Zayapragassarazan (2020) proposed flexible learning strategies to improve student engagement in times of crisis. They proposed a learner-centered approach where flexible learning options are provided to students. In relation to higher education in China, the researchers also offered teaching strategies for online classes. Bao (2020) offered suggestions for a smooth transition to online learning based on observations of online classes during an ERT: creating contingency plans in advance, breaking content into smaller sections, slowing down voice output to help students understand, working with teaching assistants to help with activities, etc. A survey study of students' insights into online courses at a university in China showed that students had low concentration and retention, implying that they need to improve their concentration and self-management skills (Sun *et al.*, 2020).

Despite the existing literature on the impact of ERT on students' academic performance and insights into online learning, there are few empirical studies examining learners' experiences at Chinese universities College English in using online platforms for learning at a university in China during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Conclusion**

Among all subjects in universities, English is an essential course that students take from elementary school or even kindergarten to university. China is the country with the highest number of English learners in the world and hosts about half of all English learners in the world (Liu *et al.*, 2016). College English is a required course for university students for freshmen and sophomores with non-English majors (Ministry of Education, 2007).

This means that English teaching in China is now part of the planning Chinese Ministry of education. The indispensability of English teaching

leads to a profound reflection on the status and working conditions of English teachers in China and on the negative consequences of the pandemic on learning and teaching processes and their development.

Therefore, we believe that English teachers in China face very difficult and dangerous challenges.

The challenges faced by ELT Teachers in China during COVID-19:

- Personal challenges: out of campus and out of China for many of them due to the fact that the outbreak happened during the Spring Festival holidays (usually one month and more of holidays)- time difference.
- Technical challenges: technology-related challenges in terms of mastery of new tools/ continuous adjustments and adaptation.
- Pedagogical challenges: contingency plan/ choice of assessment plagiarism.
- Techno-pedagogical challenges: teacher-centred approach (easier online) vs student centred approach (interaction in the foreign language – group work) adjustment to the different constraints of students (availability of internet/ computer/ students in quarantine).

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