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Culture, Literacy, and Learning English: Voices From the Chinese Classroom

December 2000 — Volume 4, Number 4

Culture, Literacy, and Learning English: Voices From the Chinese Classroom

Kate Parry (Ed.), with Su Xiaojun (1998)

Portsmouth, NH: Heineman Boynton/Cook Publishers

Pp. xii + 270

ISBN 0-86709-448-6 (paper)

US \$32.00

There is little doubt that the study of English is currently extremely popular in China. Language learning is flourishing in the big cities, Chinese TV and radio have daily English language programs, and English in the country than ever before, and recently Beijing, for the first time, had an international book fair, held on the grounds of the ancient Imperial City, where bookstores had booths showcasing their numerous publications, and by far the most popular language books.

Unfortunately, in spite of this strong national interest in learning English, there still is very little English proficiency among Chinese students. A new book, *Culture, Literacy, and Learning English: Voices From the Chinese Classroom*, edited by Kate Parry and Su Xiaojun, is a collection of essays that explore the challenges of learning English in China.

Parry with the assistance of Su Xiaojin, is now available. The most interesting and remarkable essays in it were written by young Chinese graduates who teach English in Chinese colleges. The book is the result of a long teacher training course taught by Parry at Nanjing University in China. The essays are from the best students of their class. As the subtitle of this book puts it, these are voices from the Chinese classroom about English language teaching in China.

The general topic addressed in the book is the question of the relationship between culture and language. Parry addresses this question by focusing “on a particular set of cultural practices—those involving literacy—through reading—and it describes such practices and behavior in relation to a defined social context.”

The book is broadly divided into 2 parts: “The Culture of Chinese Literacy,” and “The English Language in China.” The first part are divided into three sections. The first contains ten short essays on “Literacy at Home: Literacy in the Chinese family, education at home, and differences between literacy acquisition in rural and urban areas.”

The second section includes six essays on “The Social Context of Schooling.” As Parry notes, “In China, as in Western countries, the major work of acquiring literacy is done in school, with the exception that, more than in the West, this formal training in school literacy has been historically an important mechanism for maintaining that sustain the political structure or promoting a degree of mobility within it” (p. 33).

In this section there are good brief essays by Su Xiaojun on the historical development of literacy in China, and Liangzhe on Confucianism. Including these is important, for any attempt to adequately discuss the development of the (Japanese) educational system needs to start with a good understanding of the lingering influence of Confucianism in the system has historically occupied in this country. Gu Tientxia also gives a very telling analysis of the pressures on Chinese children because of the pressure of constant demands and the severe expectations placed on them.

The third section contains six essays on “Learning the Written Language,” explaining the link between literacy and culture in China. As Parry says, “this set of essays reiterates a theme . . . namely, the powerful way in which the written language and literature that is enshrined in it, connects those who learn it with the past” (p. 65). Among the essays, one gives an account about how Chinese students are taught Chinese characters in primary school through the use of mnemonics, and Wu Lili shows how students are instructed how to read classical Chinese texts in junior high school. Another essay describes an ingenious exercise by which students are shown how to punctuate Classical Chinese.

The second part of the book begins with 8 essays on “The Social Meaning of English.” Liu Xiaomeng discusses how Chinese feel toward English, “based on feelings of superiority and inferiority combined” (p. 95). The book's discussion about Chinese attitudes towards English is actually talking about the nations where the language is spoken and the thoughts it reflects. The language itself does not matter that much” (p. 106).

Among these essays, Zhu Minghui writes about why English is now so popular, Wu Lili talks about her experiences attempting to learn English during the Cultural Revolution, and Yue Yue describes her trying experiences attempting to learn English during the Cultural Revolution.

deep suspicion by Chinese authorities. Du Qunhua discusses the negative aspects of “The students are now forced to study the language even though their future work will have no in mastering the language.

The rest of the second part includes essays divided into three sections: “English in the Chinese,” and “New Directions in English.” Included are papers covering 15 writers’ experience communicative approach is employed in China, and various strategies and techniques the vocabulary, and English in general. Some of the most interesting essays are by Gu Tiexia, a gap between Chinese secondary school and college English language teaching, and Du Qunhua College Entrance Exam (CEE) and the College English Test Band 4 (CET-4). The CET-4 is the take; it measures the English proficiency of university students, and they are required to pass argues that the two exams do not adequately measure listening and speaking ability, and English skills.

A constant sub text that runs through almost all the papers in this book is how the enormous influences of communism and the recent stress on modernization, still exerts a powerful influence on literacy and education in China.

As mentioned earlier, the unique thing about this work is that it opens a rare window upon they really think about literacy issues and the study and purpose of English. An added advantage reading not just for those who teach Chinese students, but also other Asian students such attitudes towards the learning of English and the question of literacy which are similar to those

I found one small drawback in the book: General readers may initially find the numerous of the essayists problematic, but Parry provides many informative footnotes explaining any are clear, precise, and educational. She also provides an excellent eight-page bibliography

In conclusion, this anthology is an excellent general introduction to the Chinese education literacy and English language education in China.

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Editor’s Note: Dashed numbers in square brackets indicate each page for purposes of citation.

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