

*A Brief Introduction to High School Education in China*

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**Introduction**

With the rapid development of economy and the increasingly frequent contact with the outside world, more and more students in China go abroad to pursue their studies. Recently, one noticeable phenomenon is that more and more high school students flow into the English-speaking countries to round their university experience. Generally, these students fall into two categories. Some of them are on the average, or a little bit above the average in study, with hopes of entering an ordinary university instead of a leading one. Considering the cost of a university education for a student in China, which is relatively high, parents would rather pay money for their children to study abroad because they view it as more helpful to their future career. The second category of these students would not qualify to be admitted into a Chinese university or college. This category has hardly any hope of earning the university degree that would open the door to a much higher standard of living. As a result, their parents send them abroad, because it's easier to enter university. However, their parents do not realize that it's difficult to graduate from university in North America. Chinese parents lay great hope on the children, that they can complete a foreign university degree, and master English, by immersing themselves in an English-speaking environment.

In the past year, as a visiting scholar from China, I observed several ESL intensive classes at different levels and of various types at the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies (SLALS) at Carleton University. The majority of ESL students are Chinese, most of whom are planning to undertake their university study at Carleton. Passing the Canadian Academic English Language Assessment (CAEL) is the prerequisite to admittance to Carleton University Program for a student whose first language is not English. Upon entering the intensive courses, the majority of Chinese students view them as an aid to passing the CAEL quickly. But in fact, the new ESL classroom norms are a far cry from their experiences with English language teaching and learning in China. The gap between classroom norms in China and those encountered in Canada leads to the ESL students' dissatisfaction and frustration when the Intensive Program does not meet with their expectations. At the same time, their resistance to the new teaching

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methodology also causes problems and poses a challenge to ESL teaching in Canada.

This paper, mostly based on my own experience and observations, aims to give a brief introduction to China's high school education, (especially English teaching) and to make an analysis of the Chinese students' motivation and learning strategies, in order to help ESL teachers gain an insight into their students' past and thus help their students to make a successful transition to the new classroom norms.

### **High School English Teaching in China**

The three-year High School English Teaching in China uses a uniform National High School English Teaching Syllabus and textbooks (the Syllabus). The Syllabus gives a detailed description of teaching aims, objectives, content and the level of proficiency a student must attain with each year. Textbooks, compiled according to the syllabus, are made up of units, each with four lessons. The first lesson is a situational dialogue. The second lesson is an intensive reading passage. The third lesson is a short passage for extensive reading and exercises. The fourth lesson is grammatical knowledge that is concerned with the intensive reading passage and exercises as well. It's very important for a teacher to make a careful study of the Syllabus and to familiarize herself/himself with the textbooks before teaching in order to build a fundamental progression of the new language. All the teachers are supposed to have a detailed teaching plan for each unit, which should include teaching goals and expectations, allocation of time, teaching procedure, in-class activity arrangements, teaching emphasis, teaching particularly challenging materials and student assignments.

### *Oral English Class*

The first lesson of each unit is situational dialogue which is used as oral English class material and is allocated two hours of class time. A typical oral English class normally proceeds as follows:

- *Input*

The teacher tends to start the lesson with a brief free talk concerned with the topic to be learned. She may ask students to answer some questions in order to elicit the key sentence patterns, which the teacher then writes on the blackboard. After familiarizing students with the key sentence patterns, the teacher will ask the students to listen to the tape of the dialogue twice, with questions given before listening, and then the students attempt to answer the questions based on what they have heard. For the third time listening, the students are expected to do the choral reading following the tape.

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- *Practice Stage*

During this stage, the teacher will ask the students to practice the dialogues in pairs and to exchange roles. Most of the practice is imitation and memorization. While the students are practicing, the teacher will walk around and make sure they are speaking fluently and their pronunciation is correct.

- *Reproduction Stage*

At the end of the class, pairs of students are supposed to retell the dialogue in the first or third person in order to enhance what they have learned.

Obviously, the oral class activities, from the beginning to the end, revolve around the textbook, under the guidance of the teacher. The students won't take the risk of trying new things and most of what they have done is the rehearsal of the dialogue with focus on fluency and accuracy. Due to limitation of time and space (there are about 60 students in a class), the students don't have the opportunity to expand upon what they have learned. Constraints of size and time make it impossible to have more varied classroom activities.

### *Intensive Reading Course*

Intensive reading course is the backbone course of high school English teaching in China. This course puts emphasis not only on getting English language knowledge but also on the development of the students' integrated language use abilities. During this teaching process the teacher integrates the analysis of the text into the teaching of vocabulary and grammatical rules.

The standard practice is as follows: At the beginning of the new lesson, the students will have a quiz on vocabulary appearing in the new lesson. The students are supposed to preview the new lesson at home, which is regarded as most important for participation in the class. Preview should involve, first, memorizing all the new words and the phonetic symbols of each word. The students have already learned International Phonetic Symbols in junior school and these symbols have always been the emphasis of English teaching in China. The students are encouraged to look up a word in a dictionary to find out how to pronounce it correctly according to the phonetic symbols. Another task of preview is to find out the problems that the students have with understanding of the text. They are supposed to attend the class with questions in their mind. If these questions are not addressed during the course of the teacher's lecture then the student may raise them during the remainder of the class or individually, after the class.

The teacher will precede the analysis of the new text with the introduction of cultural background knowledge, which is always found to be a good attention grabber. Language is the carrier of culture. Language learning can't be separated from the understanding of the culture. As a matter

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of fact, the students, to some extent, are more interested in the cultural background knowledge. When the teacher asks the students to tell anything they know about the background knowledge concerned with the text, they are active in presenting what they know to the teacher and the other students. Moreover, they also show great enthusiasm for any additional cultural information that the teacher may provide.

When it comes to the analysis of the text, it will be started from the analysis of discourse and then move to the details of the text. The students are supposed to be able to sum up the main idea of the text; to find out the topic sentence of each paragraph; and to grasp the idea of how the author develops the topic and organizes the article as a whole. The purpose of the analysis of the structure is not only to help the students get a better understanding of the content and to gather information from it, but also to help the students understand the writer's writing process and organization, and thus lay a foundation for the students' own writing. As for the difficult sentences, the teacher will do paraphrasing and sometimes ask the students to translate it into Chinese to make sure that they have understood completely.

Vocabulary teaching is carried out during the analyzing process, i.e. within the language context. How many key words should be mastered in each unit has already been described in the uniform teaching plan. For these words, the students are required to know the meaning, to be able to write, and to be able to use them correctly. Vocabulary teaching involves explanation of meaning, habitual collocation of the words, word formation and guessing the meaning according to the context. Normally the teacher will give some examples of the words and let the students repeat them or translate them into Chinese. The teacher will also ask the students themselves to make sentences using the word that is being taught.

Teaching grammatical rules is still an important part of English teaching in China. In the Chinese context, students don't have many opportunities of exposure to oral and written English, owing to both supply and time constraints. In China students are not encouraged to learn English by trial and error method. The teacher stresses, in fact demands, the correct use of English from the very beginning. This emphasis on learning grammatical rules early on in the acquisition of a new language encourages students by giving them a better understanding of the substance of the text through a more accurate understanding of sentence structure and grammar. Memorizing grammatical rules is just like memorizing math formulae. Knowing and understanding one rule allows it to be applied in many contexts. Also, like math, language acquisition is a building process. In China, teachers try to give students a strong foundation to build upon. As a matter of fact, it's paradoxical that on the one hand students find it boring to memorize grammatical rules, but on the other hand, learning grammatical

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rules leads to success, a student's favorite part of the learning experience. Teachers now try to improve the way they teach grammar. Normally the teacher will write some examples on the blackboard and encourage the students themselves to find out and sum up the rules or compare them with what they have already learned. The teacher tries to help the students master the rules by analyzing and understanding them.

Doing large amount of exercises is regarded as the most important way to enhance the language knowledge the students have gained. In addition to finishing the exercises appearing in the textbook, the students also have a workbook to do as homework. Reciting or retelling the text is another assignment. It's believed that large amounts of reciting can develop language intuition and increase students' understanding of the new language. All the teaching processes take the form of asking and answering questions. Active participation is highly valued in the reading class.

### **The Influence of *Gaokao* (National Entrance Examination to University) on High School Education**

*Gaokao*, in China, is far from *only* an examination. It has had a tremendous influence on high school education, as well as students' lives. July has long been called "Black July" by the parents and the students who are going to take *Gaokao*. No single day in the year is more important and can draw more attention from people across the country than July 7th, 8th, and 9th. On these three days, every year, graduating high school students will sit in a classroom and struggle with the test paper, knowing that the results of this one test will determine their future and their fate. On these three days, *Gaokao* students enjoy many privileges. Most hotels, which are near the testing sites, provide special services for *Gaokao* students. Parents prefer to spend money booking a room in the hotel to ensure their children have a comfortable and quiet place to prepare and make the last spurt for the exam. Some taxi companies provide discount service for the *Gaokao* students and even the thriftiest parents prefer to hire a taxi for their children to commute to the examination in order to save time. Construction sites near testing locations are not allowed to make noise when the students are taking the test in order to ensure that they are not distracted. In some work units, parents whose children are taking the exam are allowed to be absent from work for three days. The most moving scene is that when the students are busy with the test paper inside the classroom, the parents or grandparents, the teachers and the school headmasters all stand outside the testing locations, waiting quietly and anxiously in the scorching sun, without sensing the heat. (In most cities of China, July is the hottest month in a year. Presently, authorities are considering moving the examination dates to June.) *Gaokao* has already become a powerful strength that impacts high school education and the students' life.

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How many students pass *Gaokao* and how many students get high marks in *Gaokao* has become the most important criterion to measure a school's teaching quality and, to a greater extent, this statistic determines the school's reputation and position in society. To pronounce a high school teacher a good teacher usually implies that he/she is rich in experience that can help students succeed in the *Gaokao* examination and that most of his/her students have passed the exam and have gone to universities. It follows that such a teacher enjoys a high reputation and gains the respect of both the school and the students. As a result, striving for high pass rate of the *Gaokao* entrance examination has become the common goal of all schools and teachers. According to the National High School Teaching Syllabus, the textbooks for high school education should be finished within three years. But in fact, almost all high schools compress the three-year teaching task into two and a half years and set aside the final term to prepare the students for *Gaokao*. Throughout the whole teaching process, preparation for *Gaokao* has always been the focus of teaching. Teachers not only teach the students new knowledge, but also teach the skills that are required to pass the examination. In the final term of high school the teacher's main focus is to help the students review what they have learned during the past two and a half years. A major part of this review consists of giving many practice examinations to the students.

Every high school student knows what attending high school means and passing *Gaokao*. It is the only goal of their high school life. From the first day they enter the high school, they should have the preparation that they will give up their hobbies and sacrifice their entertainment time for three years. They will be wound up tightly every day and they won't have weekends and vacations except several days during the Chinese Spring Festival each year. Most families won't make any travel plans during these three years. It seems that the whole emphasis of their life is on helping their children to prepare for and pass the *Gaokao*. The students spend most of their everyday time at school, more than 12 hours in the final term. After going home, they still have to burn the midnight oil. Sleep has become a luxury for them during high school years.

*Gaokao* has come to dominate the teaching of high school and the lives of the teachers, the students and their families.

### **Motivation of high school students**

Whenever I have talked with some of the high school students and asked them what's their motivation of learning English, almost everyone said it's from *Gaokao*. And they also said if there would not be *Gaokao* they believe that at least more than half of the students would give up learning English. Those who want to continue to learn would learn it much better than now. It does reflect most of the students' current psychological state of

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English teaching.

As for high school students, their motivation mostly comes from the external factors rather than internal ones. First, it comes from the expectations of the society. With the development of science and technology, more and more intellects are needed and people increasingly believe that knowledge can change a person's fate. In China, knowledge specifically refers to a person's educational background, which means what University Degree you have. The higher degree you get, the better job you can obtain and the brighter future you have. Thus it has become a self-evident fact that passing *Gaokao* and entering into university is the first step, and perhaps the greatest step, to success. The whole of Chinese society is united in the belief that all students should go to university to pursue their higher education in order to better adjust themselves to the increasingly competitive society. As a result, every student takes it for granted that going to university is the best, or perhaps the only, choice for their future life.

Parents' expectations can serve as another source of their motivation. Parents of the high school students now are the victims of China's Great Cultural Revolution. They were deprived of the chance to go to university, since at that time everything was twisted and knowledge was devalued. As a result, they rest all their hope on their children, hoping that they will receive a better education and pursue their dream. Also, nowadays the high school students are the only child in the family due to China's one child policy. In the face of increasingly intense competition in contemporary Chinese society, every parent hopes that their child may go to university because this level of education is regarded as the requisite to a better life in the future. So parents, on the one hand, try every effort to provide their children with the best living conditions and meet their needs. In daily life they prepare everything for their children and do everything for them, which has led to the children's total dependence on parents. But on the other hand, they put intense pressure on their children to succeed in their study. Parents prefer that their children spend all their time on study. Today, Chinese parents all expect very much of their children academically.

The third motivating factor comes from school and the teachers. Nowadays schools and the teachers seem to be in a dilemma. On the one hand, the whole of society is complaining that now students have too much homework, and are living and studying under great pressure. Their life is called "two dots and one line", which means their life is a line from home to school, and nowhere else. They study all day and all night. It is their life. It seems that school and teachers are responsible for creating this growing pressure upon students and their families. Just the same, parents whose children are going to take *Gaokao* don't think schools and teachers should lessen this pressure in case their children don't devote all their attention to study, which might give rise to failure. Remember, failure is not seen as

limited to the *Gaokao* examination in itself, but as a failure that denies a successful future. They think as long as *Gaokao* exists, such kind of situation can't be changed. They put all their hope on school. The high school teachers work very hard. During these three years, their life is just like the students, they have no time for entertainment. Teachers also go to school very early and return home very late. They don't have time to take care of their own family. Their life focus is on the students and helping them to pass the exam. They also drive students very hard.

Under such circumstances, the students seem to have no choice but to strive for the exam. In the circumstances, students have no other choice but to strive for a university education. They feel tremendous pressure to meet the expectations of their society, their parents, their teachers and their school, not to mention peer pressure.

Learning strategies

Generally speaking, Chinese high school students learn English in a passive way, but in fact the Chinese students are very hardworking. Although the teachers encourage the students to develop their own autonomy, they are still accustomed to sitting there and listening to the teacher. They like taking notes and memorizing what the teacher teaches, they prefer to believe the authority of the teacher rather than raise questions or challenge the teacher's opinions. In China, students expect that their teacher is fully able to tell them what to do, how to do it, and further that they as students will do very well by following the teacher's instruction. Chinese students are very industrious and take full advantage of their time and resources. On the way to school or on the bus students are usually seen reciting the English text or memorizing vocabulary. In the early morning, in the corner of the school building, students are seen reading aloud from their English text. Everyday they have to learn new material, review material previously learned, and cope with a lot of homework and almost daily test papers, staying up very late and without thoughts of putting off until tomorrow because if they did, the accumulated burden would become unbearable.

### **Conclusion**

Due to the difference between the new culture and new teaching methodology and their own cultural and educational background, the Chinese students feel at a loss facing the new cultural and pedagogical shocks of the SLALS program. They are not highly motivated in attending the ESL courses because they can't see any connection between ESL courses and CAEL, which due to their previous school experience, comes to replace the *Gaokao* as the focus of their academic life. How to bridge this academic/cultural gap is a question worth considering. One possible solution could be for the ESL teachers to explain explicitly, at the beginning of their first term, how the teaching-learning methodology works in Canada,



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and exactly what students can expect from the teachers and the university. Another possible approach would be to provide the students with the chance to observe a university class several times as part of their ESL cultural experience. In this way they could gain some insight into the way a North American classroom functions, whether it is an ESL class or any other discipline. It would also give them the opportunity to witness exactly how the ESL teaching method helps them to adjust to North American university classroom norms.