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Translations and Paradoxes of 'Western' Pedagogy: Perspectives of English Language Teachers in a Chinese College

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This paper engages the perspectives of teachers working in an English language department of a vocational college in China. It takes a transdisciplinary approach, applying constructs from the fields of comparative education, postcolonial theories in education, and critical applied linguistics to a case study of English language teaching; while the study assumes somewhat one-way flows of 'best practices' from 'West' to 'East,' it maintains a postcolonial skepticism of the East-West binary and of essentialist notions of culture and progressive education. Specifically, it situates the shifting conditions and practices of so-called Western pedagogies in China under heightened transnationalism and illuminates how these pedagogies are interpreted and translated by six English language instructors at a third tier college. It finds that the pressure to adopt Western, progressive approaches is both top-down and bottom up, that Chinese teachers have fairly consistent understandings of progressive modes, that they adopt Western approaches somewhat sporadically, and that, in practice, Western pedagogy presents a set of paradoxes for teachers and learners.

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INTRODUCTION

In a globalizing world, the internationalization of education has intensified, particularly in the domain of higher education (Knight, 2004; Tarc, 2013). Educational policies and practices have been traveling across borders for centuries under shifting geopolitical conditions (Bereday, 1964). Given the current dominance of English as the language of business, science, and technology in a world where the Anglo-American/Eurocentric view remains the referent of modernization and progress (Appadurai, 1990; Bhabha, 1994), it is not surprising that many 'developing' countries are highly invested in English education. China is a prominent example. Since the early 1980s, Chinese students wishing to enroll in first class universities for both undergraduate and graduate education and to gain preference for government scholarships have been required to know English. English language familiarity is a necessity for white-collar jobs, higher salaries, and socially elevated positions. Accordingly to data from 2013, over 7,000,000 university students had continuously (and often painfully) studied English since kindergarten (Neubauer & Zhang, 2015).

Along with the demands for English come notions of how it should be taught, with instructional methods again informed by the dominance of the West[1] in the global knowledge economy. Here forms of Western or progressive pedagogy and conceptions of the learner have been closely associated with the production of self-governing modern subjects (Popkewitz, 2012) and, more instrumentally, with the development of human capital (Malik, 2012). Thus English language education in developing countries has also been confronted with visions and models of Western pedagogy that favor child-centered learning and inquiry-based learning (Schweisfurth, 2011). While Western 'progressive pedagogies,' if we can use this broad label, may have been proven to be useful in particular contexts (often with significant debate), the danger here is twofold. As particular modes or methods are taken up as best contemporary practices, there is a tendency to confuse means with ends. For example, 'student voice' can become associated with giving turns to students, as opposed to supporting movements toward autonomy in expression. Second, there is the ongoing risk that the 'modern,' donor nation prescribes 'best practices' not well suited to the host context and that these are adopted nonetheless under relations of dependency, which are further advanced in the process.

Guided by postcolonial theory's skepticism of essentialist notions of culture, the empirical study described in this paper aimed to understand how English language instructors at one Chinese college understood so-called Western pedagogy and how they adopted and/or adapted it in their classroom practices. The study also investigated the existence and source of pressures to adopt Western pedagogies. Further, the study explored how, according to these teachers, students responded to Western pedagogies. In this paper, we give particular attention to the ways in which the Chinese college teachers conceive of Western pedagogy—analyzing some paradoxical effects of their interpretations of and engagement with this imported pedagogy—in relation to what might be seen as 'Chinese' or 'traditional' instructional methods.

The paper has five sections. We first describe the background context of the study—English language education under globalization. We then discuss the transdisciplinary framing that we bring to this empirical study in order to clarify our interpretive priorities and analytic inclinations when drawing significance from the data. The third section describes the case site and our methodological approaches. We then present findings. The final section relates our findings to the previous literature and discusses implications of this study for educators and researchers.

CONTEXT AND REVIEW OF TRANSFER OF WESTERN PEDAGOGY

In recent decades, globalization has given particular visibility to education, which is linked into the flow of knowledge, technology, and cultures (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Spring, 2008). Second language teaching figures prominently in these global educational flows (Block & Cameron, 2002). Via textbooks, academic journals, teacher training

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[1] In our paper, we use the term 'West' as a shorthand form, acknowledging that the West is a construct. Regarding geographical entities, the Western countries include Western Europe and the settler colony countries of Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand (Deng, 2011; Kachru, 1992). The 'East' in this paper refers to developing countries in Asia, specifically China.

programs, professional organizations, and high-tech facilities, Western pedagogies have become more readily available to less developed regions (Canagarajah, 2002). In the process, developing countries in the third world tend to assimilate towards Western worldview(s), values, and knowledge (Yang, Zhang, & Wang, 2006). Kubota (2002) maintains that while globalization embraces diversity, it also implies cultural homogenization influenced by global standardization and a flow of cultural goods from the center to the peripheries.

Though its economy is growing very rapidly, China remains a developing country (World Bank Group, 2014). In China, English is positioned as a global language, critical to the cultivation of "global citizens" who can accelerate foreign trade and promote economic growth (Chang, 2006). Additionally, since the opening up policies in 1978, educational theories have mostly been selected from developed countries—such as the US, the UK, and Canada—and have been adapted in accordance with the Chinese government's educational planning reforms (Deng, 2011). Western pedagogies emphasize teachers' professionalism and autonomy, student-centered learning, active learning, and the promotion of equity (Spring, 2008). Zuhai (2012) and Spada (2007) claim that Western pedagogies focus on students' learning needs, responsibilities, and practical communicative English skills. In light of Western approaches, the Chinese government has modified its pedagogy to be more student-centered and has shifted its focus from knowledge transmission to knowledge construction (Liu & Fang, 2009).

The engagement with Western pedagogies is structured by a key tension. By absorbing and utilizing Western teaching methods, on the one hand, Chinese teachers and students can experience new interactive and heuristic teaching methods (Xie, Hou, & Li, 2011, p. 52). On the other hand, a number of Chinese scholars (e.g., Kubota, 2002) acknowledge the historical baggage that comes with this adoption: "[T]he Western educational system that accompanied Western knowledge became the only legitimate system of study and schooling" (Wu, 2011, p. 570).

Indeed, hundreds of thousands of teachers and students in higher education in China have experienced and continue to live the manifestations of the tension inherent to the adoption of Western pedagogies. In this sense, there is insufficient research into how Western pedagogies might be adapted or re-contextualized to optimize student learning in specific Chinese educational contexts. If careful considerations are not given to the local context in English language teaching, undesirable effects are likely. Ouyang (2004) outlines a number of potential negative outcomes, which include student confusion in attempting to understand content, student criticism of teachers' (apparent) irresponsibility in class activities, and student resistance to participate in 'active' methods due to a lack of interest or anxiety.

For Wei (2007) the effects of importing Western pedagogies are typically less than desirable for students because of the following interconnected factors: Chinese students' diverse levels of English proficiency, their insufficient motivations to learn English given their present academic and future career and life needs, their varied socio-economic and geographical backgrounds, and their (language) learning histories under dominant instructional modes and learning habits (see also Lu, 2011). For example, Chinese students are influenced by the dominant traditional Confucian values of modesty and implicitness; some Chinese students often prefer to observe silently and privilege passive obedience to teachers over speaking out in class, questioning the teacher, or engaging in discussions with their classmates (Lu, 2011). Ouyang (2004) and

Hu (2003) both emphasize the pronounced hierarchical relationship between Asian teachers and students, which means that students are accustomed to the teacher's role as the authority or master in English language classes. Ouyang also highlights how Chinese university students prefer serious and systematic language learning modes rather than Western liberal approaches, like games, which are seen as condescending.

Additionally, scholars such as Hu (2003), Wu (2010), and Hayhoe and Mundy (2008) have highlighted the differences in Chinese students' English proficiencies and access to Western pedagogies along socio-economic class lines—differentiating students from wealthy, developed areas and their counterparts from low income and rural and distant areas. Generally speaking, learning strategies may also differ from student to student according to their personal and community-based style of learning. Thus, great sensitivity must be given to the local *context* in language teaching pedagogy (Canagarajah, 2002; ; Byrd Clark, 2009). We further suggest that in-service professional development activities need to foreground the challenge of recontextualization, educators' search for productive adaptations of Western pedagogy.

With the growth of China's economy and greater openness to the Western world, it is also likely that educators in China are becoming more critically reflective in their modification and application of Western pedagogies in an effort to better meet the learning needs of their students (Deng, 2011; Ouyang, 2004). Our paper addresses the English teachers' understandings of and engagements with Western pedagogy in one college as woven into the larger conditions of educational transfer, top-down notions of 'best practices' (Niyosov & Tarc, 2015), and the day-to-day interactions with diverse students participating in English language courses.

FRAMING

We want to describe our understanding of transdisciplinarity, as a key theme of this special issue, and make explicit the transdisciplinary character of our paper. We do not here rehearse the '*inter*disciplinary' versus '*trans*disciplinary' debates; and we suggest that *effectively* the distinction between interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity may be more a difference of degree than kind, given the performative nature of language, writing, and scholarship. For us, the *trans*disciplinary is more an outcome, rather than a goal. It privileges a broader, more pragmatic search for the relevant conceptual resources to bring to our study of real-world phenomena. In contrast, a *multi*disciplinary approach is more attentive to the disciplinary sources of conceptual arguments and the way in which their combination can offer new insights for all of the disciplinary traditions involved. So, it is our understanding that a transdisciplinary approach assembles and employs constructs from multiple theoretical traditions to engage with a given phenomenon. Insights are generated on the phenomenon and the constructs under investigation, but not necessarily on the (arguments of the) theoretical traditions or the way in which they connect with other theoretical traditions.

In this study, we began by exploring the educational transfer of Western pedagogy in English departments in Chinese colleges. Clearly certain relevant disciplinary fields such as comparative education and critical applied linguistics shaped the way we understood and investigated this topic. Nevertheless, our approach has been to use theoretical constructs and insights to analyze and theorize the phenomenon—how Western

pedagogy was understood and enacted by our participants—with much less attention to how we were contributing or advancing core arguments (or the bridging) of particular disciplinary fields. Additionally, two characteristics of this Western transfer—as *transnational* and as concerning *pedagogy*—further invoke a transdisciplinary approach. The 'trans' of transdisciplinary also implies a transgressing or 'going beyond' certain limitations of the disciplinary. Here, the issue is not about abandoning the precision and depth that disciplinarity can afford, but concerns the way the disciplinary, given its own 'locatedness,'[2] breaks apart under certain kinds of border crossing and transgressing conditions. Clearly, transnationality challenges disciplinarity or invokes new transdisciplinary fields (e.g., 'postcolonial theory'), which we find relevant to our study. Further, given its inherent translations and multimodalities, pedagogy also tends to exceed disciplinary boundaries, being transdisciplinary by nature. Pedagogy can be defined narrowly and taken up within particular disciplines; however, the ubiquity of pedagogy—as dynamics (and fantasies) of teaching and learning—coupled with its existential character and force tend to constitute fertile conditions for a transdisciplinary approach.

Our examination of pedagogical transfer from the West to Chinese classrooms draws upon postcolonial theory. We present a few insights of postcolonial theory and illustrate how this framework informs our study. First, by postcolonial theory we are referring to poststructural and postmodern analyses of key categories of postcoloniality (e.g., culture, subjectivity, difference, translations, and origins), rather than a temporal period after but contiguous with colonialism (Andreotti, 2011; Crossley & Tikly, 2004). Postcolonial theory disrupts the centrality and inherent stability of Western ways of thinking and acting (Hall, 1996). Andreotti (2011) further emphasizes that research on postcolonialism creates possibilities "of imagining relationships beyond coercion, subjugation, and epistemic violence" (p. 17). In education systems worldwide, the resistance to Western dominance and marginalization of 'local' cultures represents the prevailing "struggle over power, over what counts as knowledge and intellectual pursuit, over what is taught and how it is taught" (Brady, 1997, p. 416). An examination of dynamic power relations, hierarchies, and global flows is important in this paper given our focus on the educational effects of privileging Western knowledge in China.

Although postcolonial theory challenges Western dominance and unsettles the binary between the East and West (Said, 1978), its deployment always risks re-affirming binaries such as the superiority of the West and the inferiority of the East. It also risks simplifying the historical and ongoing relationships and transfer between societies. Bhabha (1994) and Andreotti (2011) encourage postcolonial analysis that recognizes hybridity as its necessary starting point. With Whatmore (2009), we understand that:

> [H]ybridity is a condition describing those things and processes that transgress or disconcert binary terms that draw distinctions […] In the case of post-colonial studies, hybridity is associated with the interrogation of those contact spaces in which cultural differences are contingently and conflictually negotiated. (p. 361)

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[2] Disciplinarity is 'located,' and in this way has typically advanced theoretical and methodological 'nationalisms' that transnational studies illuminate/trouble. In this way 'disciplinarity' can become problematic in transnational studies.

Chinese educators' use of Western pedagogy produces multiple, examinable contact spaces and sites of postcolonial struggle. In the first place, notions of Western pedagogy will multiply as both teachers and students translate them in different ways. For this reason, our first research question centers on the educators' own representations of Western pedagogy. While the teachers were the windows to this site, we recognize that we are indeed missing the perspectives of the students.

We also intend *not* to ascribe to an essentialist view of either progressive pedagogy or the Chinese learner, albeit the very terrain of the study makes this difficult. Whereas educators did express more essentialist thinking in the early interviews, they sometimes offered up more nuanced accounts in follow up interviews. Nor can we separate out our own distinct biases and preferences constructed, again, in a Western-centric milieu. We elaborate more on this tension in the conclusion of the paper.

THE CASE SITE AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The research was undertaken in a technical and vocational college that is located in Suzhou, a major and highly developed internationalized city in the southeast of Jiangsu province in eastern China. This college is not a top tier academic university; it caters to students who hope to become vocational personnel in China's technical and business sectors. Students at this college, who range in age from 17 to 23 years old, are recruited from distant rural and urban regions across multiple provinces in China, which means that their social, living, and academic backgrounds are diverse. Most of them have studied English for at least eight years, though their level of English proficiency varies according to differences in past exposure and access to English both at home and at school. A very small proportion of the students has had the experience of studying, training, or even temporarily traveling in Western countries. Their English foundations are generally weaker than students in academic universities. In order to graduate, students majoring in science and business need to pass the Practical English Test for Colleges (PRECTO) Level A or B. Business English major students are required to pass the College English Test (CET) with a satisfactory score. The operationalization of these testing regimes also impacts how English language learning is understood and approached by students and teachers.

The study, conducted during the 2013-14 school year, employed qualitative methodology. In the first phase, one of the authors conducted in-depth interviews. Six teachers who had taught English for more than five years in the English language department of the college participated. One of the participants was an administrator at the time of the interviews. In order to maintain their anonymity, the participants are labeled as A, B, C, D, E, and F. Further, all participants are referred to as 'she' to reduce the possibility that anyone could be identified (with such a small number). All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese. While the participants were competent in English, they still felt more comfortable responding to the questions in their first language. Three rounds of interviews were conducted with each participant via Skype, and conversations became progressively more individualized. The first round involved informal conversation with no predetermined questions (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 413). Conversations focused on the present situation of English education in China, participants' own educational background and pedagogical training, and the successes and challenges they perceived in their daily teaching practices. Semi-structured interviews were employed in the second and third round. The third round of interviews explored the key issues and striking differences between

participants that had surfaced in analyses of the previous interviews. The final interview questions were designed to elicit responses directly related to the three main research questions of the study: (1) What are the dominant representations of Western pedagogies in Chinese higher education? (2) Do teachers and administrators understand and interpret Western pedagogies as external pressures? If yes, how do these pressures impact teachers' practices and students' learning? (3) What forms of Western pedagogies are most productive for students from diverse backgrounds after they enter higher education?

Based on the interviews, we developed a survey, which was completed by the remaining teachers in the department (See Appendix A). For the most part, the interviews represent the richest data, whereas the survey responses allow for triangulation and to get some sense of how our six participants' viewpoints compared to the department as a whole. English language teachers in the department who did not participate in the interviews completed the survey via email. Given the small study sample, all the data were analyzed qualitatively rather than quantitatively.

The teacher-participants were informed subjects with first-hand understanding of English language teaching and the learning characteristics of Chinese college students. Some participants completed master-level degrees in Chinese universities. Some of the participants, who had studied or trained abroad for a long period, had more direct experience with Western knowledge and pedagogies. The teachers who had participated in trainings abroad for only a few days or weeks, had little direct contact with teaching and learning in Western countries.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed for close readings and deeper comparative analysis. Transcriptions were fully contextualized, with attention to the social, interactive, fluid dynamics of the conversations (Cohen et al., 2011). Data were compared repeatedly until little variation occurred, resonating with the objective of triangulation (Cohen et al., 2011). Through constant comparisons, core variables were identified which "account for most of the data" (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 601). The small survey in the second phase was intended to check on how representative the participants perspectives were of the department as a whole.

FINDINGS

Our data analysis reveals that, generally speaking, teachers and students, in different ways, both desire and resist Western pedagogy. Further, pressures to take up Western pedagogy are both top-down and bottom-up. We find that teachers fairly consistently represent Western pedagogy as student-centered and active, in contrast to teachers' traditional delivery of the prescribed content. However, we also observe that participants hold different understandings of the purposes of Western pedagogy. Specifically, some teachers view the primary aim of instruction as increasing motivation, while others understand it as enhancing learning itself. Another point of tension centers on the participants' perceptions of students' autonomy/dependency; while Western pedagogy encourages the promotion of student autonomy in learning, many of the teacher-participants view the students as too dependent on direct teacher instruction. Paradoxically, Western pedagogy arrives too early (students are not yet ready to be self-directed) and too late (their familiarity with traditional methods in past schooling means that they cannot adapt). Before exploring other tensions, limitations, and possibilities associated with the adoption and adaptation of Western pedagogy, we first

present how participants conceive 'Western pedagogy.'

Teachers' Conceptions of Western Pedagogy

Though they disagreed somewhat about the aims of Western pedagogy and the conditions needed to realize them, for the most part, teachers viewed this pedagogy as progressive and student-centered. In the interviews and surveys, many teachers claimed that Western pedagogies are student-centered, which signifies that students' learning needs, motivations, and interests are emphasized. For example, teacher B reported, "I like to use some Western class activities, such as storytelling, games and brainstorming activities to set up an entertaining learning environment to raise students' motivation and peak their interests in learning." However, almost all teachers admitted that students' learning needs vary, influenced by the test requirements and their economic and socio-cultural contexts. More specifically, teacher C noted, "If my students' learning motivations are more driven by test or career requirements, some relaxing class activities may not motivate their learning." In this way, teachers' representations of Western pedagogy were often tied to the capacities of their students and the challenge to support the development of these abilities in the local context.

Some participants explained that in a Western approach, teachers adapt the curriculum and classroom activities in a flexible way according to their own professional knowledge and classroom observations, rather than rigidly adhering to the syllabus and lesson plan. In our study, Teacher F stated:

> When I use interactive and communicative Western pedagogy, I always modify my lesson plans according to students' class response. For example, if they are tired, I will employ some fun activities that also allow them to apply what they have learned. If students are in excellent status to learn, I sometimes transmit language knowledge that they are interested in.

In contrast, teachers B and F, given their more prescriptive teaching methods, stated that it is too demanding to make constant modifications based on class observation.

Additionally, teachers saw Western pedagogy as more egalitarian, with a relationship of equality and respect between teachers and students. Teacher A said:

> In Western pedagogy, teachers show respect, love, and care for their students and their academic and professional development. The equal relationship and respect signify that students can argue with teachers and refuse teachers' requests. Students are allowed to use teachers' first names and explore issues and questions together. If they find teachers' mistakes, they can call them out.

Further, enacting equality, from the perspective of our participants, also means that teachers ought to treat each student, including students from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with weak foundations in English, equally.

Another aspect of Western pedagogy that teachers raised was the increase in responsibilities and capacities demanded of students, namely: class preparation and

participation, knowledge application, and practical English competencies. In an interview, Teacher D commented, "Western pedagogies not only demand students' abundant reading and other preparations before class discussions, presentations, and other activities, but also require students' review and reflections after classes." According to many teachers in this study, these extra demands and requisite capacities exert significant pressure on Chinese college students who habitually rely on teachers' instructions as the main channel of knowledge acquisition.

In line with the focus on 'hybridity' in postcolonial theory, it is also worth noting that a few teachers challenged distinctions between Western and Chinese pedagogy, arguing that some of the "new" aspects of learning are already emphasized in Chinese approaches. For example, teacher A contended that traditional Chinese language pedagogy can also be seen as student-centered in the sense that teachers raise questions and make instructional accommodations, frequently adapting to students' learning interests, progress, and needs. She further stated that contemporary Chinese lectures incorporate constant teacher-student interaction and student discussion with teachers.

Paradoxes of Engagement with Western Pedagogy

Pedagogy is a transdisciplinary construct and our focus on Western pedagogy in China further complicated the category. The transdisciplinary character of pedagogy surfaced in the teachers' understandings of Western pedagogies' aims, uses, barriers and agendas. One of the paradoxes of the adoption of Western pedagogy arises due to two distinct notions of pedagogy's fundamental purpose. On the one hand, some teachers regarded Western pedagogy as a mode of learning that substantively contributes to language acquisition; whereas others conceived of it as a supplement to *real* learning. For example, teachers C and E reported that Western pedagogy is primarily used to motivate students; it provides a break or even entertainment in contrast to the "boring lecture." Some interviewees explained that Western teaching methods are seen as a bridge to *real* learning, to be accomplished by more direct, traditional methods. For instance, teacher C said that some students who are weak in English need more explanations from teachers to lay basic foundations. Teacher A stressed that competent Chinese learners also hold high expectations for abundant knowledge transmission. Consequently, for these students, teacher lectures are regarded as the most helpful instructional practices. Teachers C and E also observed that some students don't take knowledge application activities seriously. These students do not realize that Western language-application activities, though they may not transmit significant knowledge, can also significantly contribute to students' language competencies. Teacher A claimed that some students have complained that teachers who used Western pedagogy were irresponsible for not pressing for solid and tangible achievement. It is evident here that the teachers' understandings of the limitations and possibilities of Western pedagogy are reflexively tied to their perceptions of the students' background, learning expectations, and abilities.

In contrast, teachers B and F stressed that using Western pedagogy provides more opportunities for students' deep learning of the English language. Here, deep learning implies that through significant knowledge application activities, students are able to *use* English in a more flexible and appropriate way. Some survey participants also claimed

that by engaging in activities that demand knowledge application, students can better understand how the language is used in different contexts and begin to internalize what they have learned. Interview data revealed that teachers at times resist using Western pedagogies, citing obstacles such as students' weak English foundations and the students' preference for teacher-dominant pedagogy. Finally, teachers' perceptions of the aims of Western pedagogy affect their teaching practice. For example, if a teacher only uses Western pedagogy as a kind of 'seasoning' rather than the 'real food,' they may superficially enact the adopted activity. Thus, the first paradox here suggests that Western approaches can ultimately signify nothing more than a set of approaches or methods that are far removed from the underlying vision of progressive education.[3] Thus, without a close reading of so-called Western/progressive pedagogy, educators may have fundamentally different ways of using and judging Western pedagogy. And therefore as comparative educational researchers, we may be attempting to lump approaches together under the banner of Western pedagogy in unsound ways.

The second paradox centers on whether or not Western pedagogies are regarded as predominantly Western impositions. In general, the ideology of Western superiority still exists in Chinese higher education, with many research participants using words like "advanced" and "modern" to describe Western pedagogy. Teachers do face pressures to use Western pedagogy. However, our findings are somewhat mixed with regard to the degree and effects of top-down external pressures.

Most participants claimed that the main pressure comes from their students and the changing nature of society rather than from school administrators or the government.[4] Global advances in transportation, communication, and information technology have accelerated global flows of ideas and practices (Spring, 2008). University and college students can access Western knowledge and pedagogies through the Internet, which has prompted many students to expand expectations for instruction; today's Chinese college students press their teachers to employ diverse forms of pedagogy. For instance, teachers A and D believe that contemporary students are influenced by the ideology of Western freedom and liberty that they encounter both in and out of school; it may be then that at least some of the younger generations lack enthusiasm for traditional authoritarian Chinese modes of instruction. Teacher F explained that, after suffering so many years of boring and tedious teacher-dominant instructions, students prefer a relaxing class atmosphere, which she associates with Western pedagogies.

Although the most explicit push for the use of Western pedagogy may originate from students,[5] there are also top-down institutional pressures informed by the Chinese state's modernizing visions. When we began this study, we were surprised to hear little about institutional pressures to use Western pedagogy. However, in subsequent interviews, the teacher-participants did confirm that school administrators privilege Western pedagogies, for example when showcasing examples of student-centered learning in staff meetings and in school events. Participants also noted a number of

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[3] We see this same tension with progressive education in the West. Again, the contestations and struggles around what eventually gets elevated to a globally circulating 'best practice' are absent. Unsurprisingly, they reappear in the host context as agents grapple with the inherent, if distinctly contextually inflected, challenges of enacting progressive education.

[4] These more 'bottom-up' pressures are outside of formal institutional/state policy but nevertheless embedded in transnational, asymmetric cultural flows.

[5] Again, what 'Western pedagogy' means here remains somewhat ambiguous.

pilot programs for the implementation of Western pedagogy initiated by the administration. Additionally, most interviewees emphasized that if they do not make use of a large amount of interaction or employ Western flexible and engaging class activities in demonstration lessons or school inspections, their teaching may be negatively evaluated by the dean, influential colleagues, and/or school administrators. Nevertheless, these pressures seem more symbolic than material, as no hard consequences result as long as a teacher's students generally accept her teaching methods, regardless of how traditional they are.

The very existence of the English language program in the focal institution speaks to the dominance of English and Anglo-Western countries in a globalizing context (Crossley & Tikly, 2004). Following Bourdieu (1991), language itself is a form of symbolic power. Teacher B and D argued that the significant position of English also makes Western knowledge and pedagogies favorable in English language programs in China. Teacher B added that if we taught Chinese as a global language, the same power/knowledge asymmetries would emerge.

A third paradox, related to the first, emerges from the demand for, and practices of, student participation. Although Western pedagogies are supposed to foster greater participation, some teachers find that the opposite sometimes results. Many interviewees (e.g., teacher E) asserted that Western pedagogy is used as an incentive for students' participation and initiative. However, in real class activities, all interviewees agreed that students participate unevenly in Western modes of learning. In some cases, Western pedagogy seems to restrict students' class participation. Teachers B and C argued that only highly motivated students with enough English foundations participate actively. These students not only want to practice their language skills, but also hope to gain a sense of accomplishment through the recognition and appraisal of teachers and classmates. In contrast, students with less competence in English are not confident to express themselves and keep silent most of the time. Teacher B mentioned that some students with less developed English abilities remain silent during group work or other activities due to anxiety and uneasiness. These students feel less vulnerable during teacher lectures, as their competence in English is not exposed. Responses by teachers A, D, and F allege that Chinese students are modest and prefer that teachers do the talking. Students are afraid to participate in front of the whole class, and their sense of insecurity drives them to conceal themselves in different ways.

Fourth, notwithstanding the intention to adjust the class atmosphere to support all students' ability to use or apply knowledge, Western pedagogy can ironically amplify achievement gaps between more competent and less competent language users. Teachers C and D commented that some students with less competence in English lack interest and confidence in learning and take on a more passive role in their classes. Interviewees emphasized that students from rural and distant regions have had less access to Western pedagogy and language learning resources in the years prior to college. Their overreliance on teachers, modest personalities, and limited English background represent the main barriers to their participation in Western class modes. In some cases, teachers and classmates perceive these students as a homogeneous group of weak students rather than as individuals with complex life histories and experiences. Disadvantaged students may face added challenges in English learning. Teacher B indicated that these students are extremely sensitive and are afraid of being labeled as 'incompetent learners' or treated unequally by teachers and classmates. Efforts to

provide extra support for these learners are complicated by the students' desires not to be identified as less competent and treated differently. If students lack confidence and do not actively engage in learning, the gaps in English competence between them and other students are likely to widen.

A fifth paradox that emerges from participant narratives centers on understanding independent learning either as a necessary starting point for progressive approaches or as a desired outcome of progressive education. It seems that to be successful, Western pedagogy requires sufficient independent English learning abilities, which is the very capacity that many Chinese students are alleged to be lacking. Teachers C and D highlighted that in some cases, Western pedagogy is ineffective due to students' reliance on their teachers. Teachers A, C, and D commented that in Western pedagogical models, students need to prepare before class and reflect after classes. In comparison, in traditional Chinese pedagogy, students rely on teachers' knowledge transmission in class and seldom learn on their own. Teacher C asserted that if students are required to do abundant independent learning after classes (e.g., summarizing class content, completing additional reading, or producing critical reflections), some of them may just drop the course. Almost all participants indicated that some students are less capable of disciplining themselves, in part as a result of past learning experiences. In China, the instructor's dominance and role as a 'commander in the army' (Teacher A) are also supported by large class sizes and a lack of modern facilities.

All interviewees asserted that it is impossible to maintain a fully equal relationship with students. We are reminded that context should be a serious consideration when designing, adopting, and adapting Western pedagogies in China. No curriculum or pedagogy can be universal because context and demographics must be accounted for. For instance, teachers B, C, and D claimed that they constantly experienced chaos when using Western pedagogy in big classes with around 60 students. They asserted that they have to dominate the class or set up strict class rules in order to ensure that the class proceeds in a smooth and efficient way. As a consequence of their control, the students' independent learning abilities are restricted.

Sixth, almost all interviewees indicated that Western "best" or "advanced" (i.e., flexible, liberal, communicative, interactive) practices run counter to a dominant culture of testing (with term exams, PRECTO, IELTS, TOFEL, etc.). In China, test results are closely tied to students' academic and career development. In test-oriented training, Western pedagogy is not deemed as efficient as teacher-dominant explanations of vocabulary and grammar. Although some interviewees dislike the test culture, they have little agency in changing national policy.

Nevertheless, if teachers only use lectures in test-oriented training, will students be more motivated in English language learning? Many interviewees (e.g., teachers B and D) were opposed to teaching to the test given that, after passing the exams, students may completely lose interest in English learning. They regard tests as terminal in English learning, exercises through which students seldom experience pleasure. For this reason, teacher D still insists on the necessity of using interesting and engaging class activities to keep students' learning enthusiasm. Students have complicated learning motivations, which involve personal preferences, academic success, and career goals, etc. How to maintain students' love of learning in a culture of testing is an issue with which many teachers grapple throughout their careers.

It appears then that tests restrict teachers' use of Western class modes in English language teaching. However, from the teachers' perspectives tests still need to exist given certain realities in China. As teacher A mentioned, the test is an efficient way to assess students' English competencies. Without the college entrance examination or college english test, students from disadvantaged families may forego the opportunity to learn English. Further, some schools in rural or distant regions would likely cancel English language lessons. In turn, students from these areas may lose career and academic opportunities in the future seeing as English is deemed an essential language for workers in China. If disadvantaged students lose opportunities to learn English, social inequality may be further exacerbated. Under current conditions, it appears that teachers leverage tests as one way to maintain students' motivation for English language learning.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Given these paradoxes, the extent of Western educational transfer in Chinese higher education is not an easy process to understand, particularly at the level of practices. Clearly, complex local (socio-cultural, economic, and geographical factors) shape how Western knowledge and pedagogy is "accepted, rejected, or creolized" (Ouyang, 2004, p. 139). Our paper surfaces transdisciplinarity in the pedagogical transfer between East and West. Analytically the research started with a linguistic and comparative focus, but moved to a socio-cultural and pedagogical one. Given our analysis of tensions arising when Western pedagogies are adopted for English language education in China, a number of implications and recommendations for researchers and educators are discussed.

First, a postcolonial perspective aspires to a non-coercive relationship between East and West. In this transdisciplinary frame, broad social, cultural, linguistic and historical contexts need to be taken into consideration. China has experienced semi-colonial relations so that Western superiority still exists in the area of culture and knowledge (He, 2010). Many interviewees (e.g., teachers A and C) claimed that in the late 1970s, China began to implement a policy of 'reform and opening up' to improve its economy. Since then, many educators and policymakers have advocated for Western educational modes of instruction and knowledge to improve the quality of education in China. The economic and political hegemonic power of Western countries has advanced Western educational models as significant features of world culture (Anderson-Levitt, 2012).

In some contexts, Western knowledge and pedagogies can indeed stimulate students' interest in and enthusiasm for English. Chinese university and college students who have long endured tedious learning atmospheres can acquire some sense of balance and progress through contact with Western pedagogy. However, all interviewees and survey participants maintained that the use of Western knowledge and instructional methods is not straightforward due to local conditions, such as the test culture and established approaches to teaching and learning. For instance, Carney (2008) argued, "[T]eacher-centered schooling represents a powerful cultural transmission system that is not easily broken by global or even national edicts" (p. 82). Adopting Western pedagogy may have negative effects; for example, Chinese students and educators may feel pushed to accept methods that are ill suited to their local context. Chinese students who are not accustomed to learning independently may resist inquiry-based forms of learning in

different ways. Further, students may feel pressured and anxious when called upon to participate due to their introverted personality and/or a lack of confidence in English. In this sense, despite its orientation to 'student-centeredness,' Western pedagogy enacts its own set of impositions upon students.

Consequently, a non-coercive relationship between East and West—adoption as informed choice rather than imposition—needs to be emphasized in the internationalization of the English language curriculum. A non-coercive relationship emphasizes non-imposition in the adaptation of ideas from elsewhere. This approach challenges the maintenance of hierarchies and dependencies in international educational transfer. Albeit,[6] from a postcolonial-analytic perspective "informed choice" for the adopting institution will be formed within the larger socio-historical context. Indeed, the paradoxes that surface in the previous section are not to be read as an exact iteration of the tensions of progressive pedagogy articulated elsewhere, but are to be considered in the case of China's educational system as embedded in China's wider historical and political conditions. For example, whether progressive education magnifies inequality between privileged and unprivileged students has been debated for a long time. Yet, in raising such critiques of Western pedagogy in their own contexts, these Chinese teachers may be implicitly critiquing a larger Western hegemonic ideal of individualistic meritocratic liberalism rather than reflecting on events of their classroom. Further, not singling out the unprivileged student might represent less a pedagogical choice than an alternative ontology of equality or education—the notion that the child must adapt to what is in front of him or her. The point here is that with our recommendations for supporting teachers in a reflective practice that engages the tensions of translation and adaptation, there ought to be an attendant (postcolonial) theorization (by and with teachers) of the conditions forming and informing teachers' practices and reflections. Otherwise, we fall back into the problem of a universalizing, decontextualized 'best practices,' this time focused on 'how to reflect on teaching' rather than 'how to teach.'

International educational transfer is a sensitive and ongoing process that ought to prioritize teacher autonomy and students' learning motivations, interests, and capabilities. More reflexivity and constant modifications are needed so that English language teaching and learning become a recursive process. Western pedagogy focuses on teaching based on the real situations in the classroom (Spring, 2008). *Enforcing* 'best practices' actually runs counter to the advocated spirit of Western/progressive pedagogy. According to the teachers interviewed and surveyed, the biggest challenge for educational transfer between East and West is that the transfer is not attuned to the learning motivations of students (and, we would add, *teachers*) in their local/national contexts. The pressures from national and provincial standardized tests restrict students' interests in flexible and liberal Western activities. As long as students are highly motivated, many instructional methods can work quite well. Teacher A noted that students do indeed concentrate on those tedious teacher-dominant lectures in order to pass the tests that are useful for their future careers. However, it is important to reiterate that after students pass their exams, they may lose their motivation for further English learning. Therefore, Western approaches may help maintain students'

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[6] We would like to acknowledge and thank one blind reviewer for suggesting we speak to this important consideration.

enthusiasm for learning. In carrying out activities, teachers need to attend to students' silence or inactive learning and adjust strategies accordingly.

International educational transfer is never a straightforward process, which means that good strategies can only be constructed through teachers' constant observation, reflection, and communication with students. Almost all interviewees claimed that in staff meetings and professional development programs, school administrators always introduce 'advanced' and 'best' practices as coming from the West. In the professional development programs that one author has attended in China, hundreds of teachers listen attentively and silently, taking notes on so-called experts' presentations of 'effective' Western pedagogy. These experts are usually governors of national educational systems (e.g., the Ministry of Education) or professors at top universities in China. Some of them have not taught English for many years; some are experts in fields outside of language teaching. English language instructors, as front-line workers in the classroom, are seldom given the opportunity to share their own teaching challenges explicitly so as to explore how to appropriately adapt Western pedagogies. In order to establish a non-coercive West-East relationship in Chinese institutions, teachers' voices must be heard and valued. Their voices reflect the pedagogical conditions of the language classrooms and the needs of English language learners with diverse backgrounds, motivations, and degrees of contact with English. Teachers can collaborate on how Western pedagogies can be adapted to local contexts as a key component of professional development.

Second, as Chinese and Western knowledge and ideology influence each other in our globalized world, the divisions between the West and East, although heightened in rhetoric, are actually becoming more blurred. In postcolonial studies, Bhabha (1994) has maintained that culture and knowledge are already hybrid. In accordance with this notion, most interviewees insisted that Western pedagogy might better be termed 'modern' pedagogy. Research participants believe that Western pedagogy and contemporary Chinese pedagogy share common characteristics. For instance, constant interaction is also an essential aspect present in effective Chinese lectures and other teacher-dominant instruction. In this regard, we agree that the first concern for educators is to work with pedagogies and curriculum based not on their origins but on their suitability for both the conditions of schooling and the students—with their diverse learning motivations, habits, and interests.

Third, the Chinese teacher-student relationship has changed significantly, though the old tradition still appears to exist. Interviewees mentioned that, influenced by Western ideology, the present hierarchical relationship also evidences shifts in the following features: expanded student freedom to express criticisms, a harmonious class atmosphere, friendly relations with teachers, and mutual respect between teachers and students. Additionally, some traditional approaches, such as teachers' use of their authority to keep order in class, may still be necessary because Chinese students are accustomed to instructors' role as parents or managers. Other complicating factors, such as large class sizes, limited class time, and diversity in English competence and self-discipline among students, not only restrict critical thinking in the classroom, but also force teachers to be more serious and directive to ensure class efficiency and order.

Fourth, the interviewees claimed that students from poor, rural, and distant regions have little access to Western knowledge, culture, and pedagogy. Many interviewees (e.g., teachers A and D) argued that disadvantaged students are very motivated, as they desire

to learn English to get better jobs and change their future prospects. The development of active and confident participation among poor and rural students represents a significant challenge. Teacher B suggests that English language teachers need to encourage these students and treat them equally. Disadvantaged students are usually more sensitive than their counterparts from urban regions, but they can be offered support in discreet ways to help them catch up with other students and gain more (access to) equal linguistic opportunities in the future.

There are three main limitations in the study, which suggest future research in this area. First, due to the limits of time and geographical distance from research participants, interviews were conducted over Skype or by telephone, and surveys were administered by email. In this sense, the data may not be as rich as in-situ ethnographic research or face-to-face interviews. Second, the research study focused on teachers' understandings and perspectives; students were not involved in the study. Students' perspectives might differ from their teachers' and merit documentation and analysis as valuable voices to include in the discussion. Third, regarding the transferability of the study, we implemented the research study in one technical and vocational college, so the findings may not resonate with perspectives in other higher education institutions, especially top-tier universities with excellent domestic and international prestige.

This paper analyzed how English language teachers at a Chinese college have taken up Western pedagogy. Postcolonialism examines the point of view of (de)colonization to further highlight the cultural hegemony of the West and to draw attention to new forms of orientalization (Yang, Zhang & Wang, 2006). Although we have expressed postcolonial skepticism, challenging the superiority and transferability of Western pedagogies (as well as the stability of what constitutes Western pedagogy, progressive education, and Chinese learners with a reflexive and transdisciplinary approach, see Introduction, this issue), the case study and our analysis have no doubt advanced certain elemental stereotypes. We recognize that hierarchies remain rooted in the terrain in which our study is situated. We also recognize that in some ways we (like some of our participants at the focal college) have cast Western pedagogy as modern or more advanced and the Chinese learner as more passive and dependent on the authoritarian teacher. At the same time, a number of our findings have challenged these stereotypes and norms. In the first place, we have problematized the notion that Chinese college educators need help from the outside to fix the problem of their underdevelopment with Western best practices. Rather, we have worked to illuminate, with a transdisciplinary lens, how participants understand and engage with so-called Western pedagogies in the specific contexts of their English language teaching. These contexts are shaped by transnational flows of educational policy and practices under tropes of modernization, trickling down through the institution, as well as bubbling up from the students' (and teachers') engagements in a more digitally interconnected world.

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APPENDIX A

Survey

1. How many years have you taught English in colleges or universities?
a. less than two years   b. two to five years   c. five to ten years   d. more than ten years

2. Estimate how many months you have lived in an English-speaking country.
a. 0   b. 1-4   c. 5- 12   d. 12-24   e. 24…….

3. Where did you get your highest degree?
a. China   b. North America   c. Europe   d. Australia

4. What are the main challenges you experience in daily English language teaching? (please select a maximum of 4)
a. students' poor English foundation
b. class size
c. students' lack of interest
d. students' lack of motivation because of less frequent use in daily life
e. lack of modern facilities
f. students' lack of independent learning abilities
g. students' expectations for instructional modes due to previous experience

5. According to your knowledge, what are the main challenges students face in daily English learning? (please select a maximum of 4)
a. poor English foundation
b. lack of independent learning abilities and reliance on teachers' instructions
c. less persistence in English learning
d. lack of motivation
e. lack of initiative in participation
f. lack of interest
g. lack of confidence in expression
h. modest personality

6. What are the characteristics of Western pedagogies?

7. What are your purposes of using Western pedagogies?

8. We feel pressured to use Western pedagogies.
a. strongly agree   b. agree   c. undecided   d. disagree   e. strongly disagree

9. If your answer is a, b, or c, where are those pressures coming from? (please select a maximum of 2)

a. teachers themselves   b. students   c. school administrators   d. society

10. Are your students in favor of Western pedagogies?

a. strongly agree   b. agree   c. undecided   d. disagree   e. strongly disagree

11. If your answer is c, d, e, why might they not like Western pedagogies? (please select a maximum of 3)

a. former learning habits

b. low motivation in English learning

c. the desire to obtain more knowledge from teachers' instructions

d. preference for serious learning (e.g., knowledge transmission)

e. modest personality

f. some Western pedagogies are entertaining rather then informative

g. others

12. Students learn best from Western pedagogies.

a. strongly agree   b. agree   c. undecided   d. disagree   e. strongly disagree

13. If your answer is c, d, e, what are the main reasons? (Please select a maximum of 3)

a. students' former English foundation

b. students' learning habits

c. motivation for learning

d. students' independent learning abilities

14. What is the preferable teacher-student relationship in the present form of English education? (Please select a maximum of 2)

a. equal   b. trustworthy   c. hierarchical   d. others

15. In the use of Western pedagogies, modifications are essential.

a. strongly agree   b. agree   c. undecided   d. disagree   e. strongly disagree

16. What are the modifications you usually make to Western pedagogy?

17. Please rank the following choices 1-6 according to the extent of students' difficulty with Western knowledge/pedagogies in the classroom. Please note: 1 indicates the greatest struggle (1   2   3   4   5   6)

a. Students from rural or distant regions

b. Students from cities and coastal areas

c. Students from poor families with fewer learning resources

d. Students from rich families

e. Students whose parents cannot read or speak any English

f. Students whose parents are illiterate

18. What actions should be taken to facilitate the English learning of students who rank first and second in question 17 (please select a maximum of 3)?

a. explore their English learning interest and motivation

b. give them more academic guidance from teachers and other educators

c. give them financial assistance

d. provide them with more English learning resources

e. give them emotional support to build up their confidence

f. other _____