

**Dr. David Lavery**

# It Dawns on Me: Teaching Chinese English

I had answered an advertisement in the M.L.A. Job Information List. The People's Republic of China wanted English teachers, and I--a recent Ph.D.--had grown tired of playing Gypsy Scholar in this country. So, with my wife Joyce's encouragement, I had applied.

We heard nothing for fourteen months and has assumed we would not. I was accustomed, after all, to hearing nothing from job applications. In the meantime we had moved from Florida to Seattle so that I could take a one year visiting professor position in Seattle University's "Matteo Ricci College. (In retrospect, I realized that I should have discerned the foreshadowing, given that the program in which I had become a faculty member was named after the Jesuit who opened China for the Catholic church.) In another minor development, our daughter Rachel had also been born (she had been neither conceived nor conceived of when I had applied). Two weeks after the birth a letter arrived from China informing me that I had been named a "Foreign expert in English" at East China Normal (Teachers) University (Wa Dong Shi Da) in Shanghai, a city of 11 million people--China's largest. I was to come immediately.

In the wake of the cultural revolution, China had opened its doors slightly to Western influence, as it has at several key moments in modern history, and since English, they well knew, had become *the* world language, it was imperative that it be widely taught in their schools. And yet English language instruction in the PRC at the beginning of the 1980s was woefully inadequate, as I soon learned.

Anyone with a speaking knowledge of this difficult non-Eastern language--regardless of his or her original field of specialization--was usually pressed into service as an English teacher after a quick re-education. Many even became university professors. and the materials from which students learned were likewise inadequate. My classes were made up entirely of future teachers, all of whom had studied English for at least six years--were using thirty year old British textbooks and only slightly newer recordings of British English. Consequently, they spoke with British accents and made awkward conversation with decidedly formal British diction. Stories abounded of young Chinese sent to the U.S. to be translators, only to discover they could not understand even the simplest street conversation in New York. No wonder the government was making an effort to import foreign (American, Canadian, Australian, and British) native speakers to teach their future teachers. For the first time in my life, I became a member of a foreign language department.

After almost a month of getting acclimated to our new surroundings (a month in which we learned that "culture shock" is not just a term in an anthropology matching test but a real, very palpable malaise), I finally began teaching. A few days before we had departed for China, President Reagan had been shot. As expected, my students were most interested in understanding the assassination attempt. Why did this young man try to kill your President? they asked on the very first day I taught. Based on what I knew at the time (from a close reading of the Far East Edition of *Time Magazine*), I tried to explain: "It seems that Hinckley was in love with a movie star named Jodie Foster, who had appeared in a film called *Taxi Driver*, in which a deranged young man tries to kill a presidential candidate in order to make a young prostitute (played by Foster) fall in love with him. Hinckley, confusing the movies with reality, evidently believed that if he killed the real President of the United States, himself a former Hollywood actor who would later be characterized as the "acting" President, Jodie Foster (the real Jodie Foster, not the character played by her in the film) would then fall in love with him." They listened politely, and they stared at me like I had come from another universe. I wondered that first day I would ever be able to make myself understood by them.

Many years of teaching apathetic American students had influenced my teaching style greatly. Built into everything I did in front of a class was a presumption of lack of interest. I knew that a large part of my work was merely trying to convince my classes that they should listen to me at all. (Many students, I find, have lost the ability, and courtesy, to even feign interest; in fact, I sometimes fear that I will walk into class one day to find my students all sitting with TV channel changers in hand, ready to blink me away should I become uninteresting.)



I brought this attitude with me to China. But after about a month I began to realize that it was misplaced there. My students--almost all of them--actually wanted to learn! In a country where a "Learn English Now" show became the most popular program on Chinese

television, where only a fraction--perhaps one in twenty--of those students desiring to do so can even be admitted to college, they hung on my every word. I was not teaching students who proclaimed in the halls and elevators, as soon as they were out of my sight, how much they hated English. I did not need to convince them to listen. I could just teach. The realization was startling: this was what I went into teaching for.

Each class, I learned, had elected a class "monitor" who was in charge of attendance and other practical matters as well as maintaining esprit de corps among its members. Each class selected its star pupil to serve in this capacity, and, to my surprise I learned that they were, in fact, very, very proud of their monitor. The monitor's success--on everything from an in-class drill to a major test--spoke well of them all. Neither a brown-nose nor a show-off nor a teacher's pet, the monitor represented their own best self-image; his achievement were their achievements.

In one of our numerous discussions of American slang, in which they showed an abiding interest, mentioned one day that we had recently begun to call attractive, sexy young women "foxes." To my surprise, my students refused to believe me. With great resolve they shook their heads "No." Are not foxes understood in my country as sly and treacherous? they asked. Yes, I responded. Then how can a beautiful female be thought of as a fox? they asked again. It is an insult, they insisted, with a metaphorical logic the anonymous poets of slang in American certainly did not possess, not a compliment. I was unable--and am still unable to respond. (I was careful not to tell them that attractive virile men were now being called "hunks," for I knew I could never explain the tenor and vehicle of that piece of slang!

One day my students inquired about the meaning of the expression "it dawns on me" which appeared in one of their readings. As usual, I acted it out for them, trying to make the metaphor buried in the words (which for native speakers are a cliché, and hence seldom thought about) vivid and apparent. I asked them to imagine themselves standing in darkness in the early morning, waiting for the sun to rise. I asked them to recall the wonderful feeling of "en-light-en-ment" they would experience as the sun came over the horizon. I showed them how the world would (literally) "dawn" on them. Then I asked them to bring to mind the last time they had not understood something, being in the dark about it, and to remember the wonderful feeling of coming out of the darkness into the light as it "dawned on them." An excited murmur ran through the room as the students tried out the phrase. They seemed to understand both tenor and vehicle.

The next day they inquired about another expression in their readings. Again, I acted it out, trying to make it dramatically clear for them. Again I asked if they understood. And as a class, with clear voice and proper emphasis, they responded, "It dawns on us." It as the finest moment in all my years of teaching.

On their final examinations that year my students did not do especially well, and no doubt the fault was mine, I thought, for after all I was a clumsy novice at TOEFL. In the evening of the day the results were posted, however, I was surprised by a delegation

from my class which came to our rooms to apologize for their performance on the test. *They had failed me*, I was told. They were ashamed of themselves as students *to have let me down*. With bowed heads they asked for my forgiveness. I could not help but think of how a typical American class would have reacted in similar circumstances. No doubt I would have shouldered all the blame. No doubt some students would have been irate that I had *failed them* with my test.

We left China earlier than we anticipated. Were supposed to stay a year but had not foreseen how difficult being new parents in a foreign land would be. After less than six months we returned. I bid my Chinese students a tearful good-bye. In the middle of July I managed somehow to find a college teaching position in Alabama. When I entered the classroom that fall to begin my tenth year of teaching freshman English, I was still a teacher of Chinese English. My students, however, often bored, scowling, sick-to-death of English, sometimes anti-intellectual, seldom respectful of teachers, quickly re-educated me to the ways of the American classroom. Now I teach American English.