

## **Book Review**

### **Perspectives on Teaching and Learning English Literacy in China**

Jiening Ruan and Cynthia B. Leung. Springer (Eds.), 2013. 178 pp. ISBN 978-9400749931

Reviewed by:

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*Perspectives on Teaching and Learning English Literacy in China* is a collection of 10 articles contributed by scholars in the area of language literacy from a range of regions, including the Chinese mainland, Hong Kong, Singapore and America. These articles together trace the evolution of English language education in China from social, political and economic perspectives and discuss the most recent nationwide English curriculum reform in China. They provide a comprehensive review of the changes in official English curriculum documents and their impacts on the teaching and learning of English in China from Imperial Times to the present. The learning settings discussed in the book cover early childhood education, primary and secondary schools and university as well as ethnic minority regions in China. While authors of the articles have acknowledged China's efforts in enhancing its learners' English literacy, they have also identified the challenges in the implementation of the latest curriculum reform, pertaining to the issues of assessment and teacher preparation.

When tracking the development of English language education in China against the historical and socio-economic backgrounds in China in relation to the world (Chapters 1 to 7), a most salient finding is that the offering of an English language course is shaped by the instrumental function that English serves for the country in different periods. Some common distinctive events are discussed in these chapters alongside their impacts on English education in China, for example, the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Cultural Revolution, China's Open Door Policy, and China's more recent international engagements, such as the holding of 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. Philosophical views (Confucianism, Deweyan Pragmatism, and Marxism) are also mapped into the charts of English education in China (Chapter 1). Curriculum documents (guidelines, standards, syllabi) for various levels of schooling at different times are described and analysed in detail, which will prove extremely useful for international readers, introducing the purpose of learning English and the major activities that students do under the auspices of the school. Empirical research on teachers and learners' use of technology (Chapter 10) is also presented. The contexts of discussion include primary schools (Chapter 5), secondary schools (Chapter 6) and tertiary education (Chapters 2 and 7) as well as other learning contexts that are less frequently researched, including early childhood English education (Chapter 4), after school English language learning (Chapter 8), and English teaching and learning in ethnic minority regions (Chapter 9).

This book also identifies challenges in the implementation of the intended curriculum reform. The first challenge (or barrier) involves the assessment policy and practices in China, especially high-stakes tests such as the test for college entry (Chapters 3, 6 and 7), given that curriculum writers and test designers are two separate groups of people (Chapter 3, p. 46). The second challenge is teacher readiness, as the authors point out, while the new curriculum aims to develop students as users of English, mastering language knowledge, language skills, learning strategies, affect, and cultural understanding, teachers, who are the actual implementers, should be *willing* and also *able* to enact these ideas (Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 10). The third challenge centres on the provision of teaching and learning resources. The economic and educational resources that the “haves” and “have-nots” enjoy will affect enormously students’ learning experiences and learning outcomes. The effects take place in the urban and rural areas in China (Chapter 5), but even more notably with ethnic minority groups of students (Chapter 9). Other issues such as bilingual teaching at university (Chapter 7) and first language influence on second language learning among young learners (Chapters 4, 5 and 9) are also significant researchable topics.

This book offers a comprehensive review of curriculum documents at various stages of English language education in China in a range of learning settings, from historical, socio-economic and philosophical perspectives. It pinpoints the difficulties in implementing the recent curriculum efforts as well as important topics for future research. Empirical data on teachers’ views and their teaching and assessment practices (see, for example, the work of Coniam, 2014), especially in relation to national college entrance exams, would have been helpful. Coverage of an even wider range of learning contexts, such as postgraduate studies, would also make the book more resourceful. Nevertheless, this work is essential reading for those who are interested and/or engaged in English language education in China in general, and in policy making, curriculum development and implementation, and assessment in particular.

### **About the reviewer**

Clarence Wenfeng Wang is a lecturer in the Centre for Applied English Studies, The University of Hong Kong. His research interests include language and education policy, language teaching and learning, and world Englishes.

### **Reference**

Coniam, D. (Ed.). (2014). *English language education and assessment: Recent developments in Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland*. Singapore: Springer.