

Chinese Teachers of English Creative Writing Project 2022

Background of the Project Organiser

This project was devised by Karina Thorne (karinathorne@hotmail.com), Online English Tutor, Course Designer & Teacher Trainer, with 6 years of experience living and teaching in Beijing, China. During this time, and curious to better understand the teaching methodologies of Chinese Teachers of English and Chinese, Karina interviewed local teachers, observed many classes of both English & Chinese, and wrote reflections on her blog to share that knowledge with others.

Having graduated with an MA in Digital Technologies for Language Teaching, her dissertation focused on the development of the L2 Creative Writer Identity during an online course. In this way, Karina learned to combine the skills of online course design and creative writing pedagogy. Following the success of the course, which was populated by English Language Teachers, Karina founded ***Share Your Story With Confidence*** (SYSWC): <https://www.shareyourstorywithconfidence.com/>

SYSWC is an online community of native and non-native English Language Teachers interested in reading literature and developing a creative writing habit. A ***Creative Writing Club*** (CWC) has been launched where members read and analyse different 'short' types of writing, such as, short stories, poetry, journaling, blog writing, etc. The literature is selected from a diverse range of lesser-known authors to give members inspiration to write and share their own stories.

So far, the CWC has proved popular. And now, Karina is looking to expand and adapt the SYSWC project to address the needs of Chinese Teachers of English.

Background of the Project

In order to better understand the personal and professional context of Chinese Teachers of English, short online interviews were conducted with 10 teachers based in Beijing. The interview format composed of 10 questions and all interviewees answered the same questions. The questions were designed to ascertain their English language goals and identify any barriers to achieving these goals. Finally, their interest in creative activities, such as fiction reading and writing was probed, to check their suitability for this project.

Response Summaries

1. English Teacher Role

Tell me about your role as an English Language Teacher.

Primary School Teacher (grade 3)
Primary School Teacher Trainer
Language School Teaching Assistant
University Teacher Trainer
Private School Teacher (grades 1-4)
Primary School Teacher Trainer
Primary & Middle School Teacher Trainer
University Teacher
Private School Teacher (grade 5 &6)
Teacher Trainer & Publisher

The majority of interviewees are primary/middle school teachers or teacher trainers with previous experience as teachers in primary schools. The rest are private school teachers who also teach young learners, a teaching assistant, university teacher and a teacher trainer turned publisher.

2. English Language Proficiency

Describe your English language proficiency in words and/or using recognised scales/levels.

IELTS 7/speaking and listening stronger than reading and writing/comfortable unless outside of comfort zone

IELTS 7/confidence relates to own study abroad experience/ "Those teachers who are confident with their level are those who have been abroad and used it in certain situations"

B1

IELTS 8/proficient/quite confident with speaking English/comfortable when talking about teaching

IELTS 6.5/B2/OK/not confident using English

B2-C1/Upper Intermediate/Listening, reading & writing B2-C1, speaking C1

IELTS 7.5-8/Speaking is better than writing/ "When talking about case studies we use Chinese, not English"

"I can speak fluently and express myself freely"

Predict IELTS 7 or 8/listening and speaking not the best/reading and writing may need work due to teaching low grade students

Between C1-C2. Can communicate orally and in writing without much difficulty. Can talk about teaching fluently, but difficult to chat or to develop a normal conversation

The majority are upper intermediate level or above. They are comfortable and confident communicating in English, especially when talking about teaching. However, there is difficulty talking about non-teaching topics, due to lack of opportunity to engage with native/fluent speakers and/or a working environment that does not require higher level English skills.

3. The 4 language skills in order of importance

Consider the 4 main language skills and put them in order of importance to you.

Vocabulary and grammar first/Speaking > Listening > Reading > Writing/Elementary lessons are focused on speaking/ "in order to grow professionally, I need to read more"/ "To advance in my career I need to write papers and get them published in English"
Listening and reading > speaking and writing/ "I hate writing!"
Speaking > Listening > Reading > Writing/ "My writing is really bad"
Speaking > Listening > Reading > Writing/ "When you get to a certain level of the language you think writing is important. You can achieve a higher level of proficiency"
Listening and reading > speaking and writing
Listening and speaking > Reading and writing/ "All skills are closely related to each other"
Reading > Listening > Speaking > Writing/ "All skills are very important"
Listening and speaking > reading and writing
Speaking > Listening > Reading > Writing/ "If you need to do some study or research you need to work on your reading and writing skills"
All skills are equally important/Some skills are more difficult to acquire/Reading is the easiest/Writing is the most difficult

All skills are considered important. However, speaking and listening are perceived to be easier to acquire than reading and writing. Writing is seen as the most difficult skill to acquire. Advancing in one's career, publishing research articles and reaching higher levels of proficiency are the main reasons for developing writing skills.

4. Current activities to practice and improve English Language skills

Talk about the activities you do now to practice and improve your English language skills.

Read and watch plays and sitcoms/Not with language acquisition or practice as purpose/Need a notebook and keep track of words to make this an intentional learning experience
Watch American TV series to relax, not learn/ "If I want to become 8 or 9, I have to force myself to read more or listen more. If no-one forces me, I just watch"
Online & F2F courses/Watch TV series/Speak to native speakers and international friends
Read, watch movies, listen to English songs/ No requirement to write articles in English (just Chinese/ "I'm a very lazy person. I am not very good at writing. I do wish I could write well."
YouTube webinars in English, connect with old international classmates on Facebook
Vocabulary tool, online & F2F courses
Read every day, vocabulary apps, read the news aloud, sometimes watch English films or news, reading a lot, listening a little, few speaking opportunities due to absence of foreign experts during the pandemic
Reading, listening, teaching, tests.
Watch TV series, TEDTalks, Coursera courses
Practice speaking and writing while teacher training/Rarely write in daily life/ "I seldom speak with native speakers"

Many different types of activities are undertaken to maintain English language skills, particularly reading and watching TV. However, often this is without structure or intention to acquire new language, making it difficult to see real progress.

5. The definition of 'success' in English

What does 'success' mean to you in terms of acquiring English language skills?

Comfortable in my work setting and comfortable communicating in English/ "I need to realise it is a tool and a skill that can be enhanced"

Professional perspective – I have what I need to do my job/Personal perspective – close to retirement, so no need/Would like to be able to understand two native speakers conversing and to expand vocabulary

Admire people who can talk to native speakers clearly/Wants to be able to understand two Americans speaking

“The most challenging job for the English Teachers is to improve their students’ writing skills”

Two aspects: A higher IELTS/TOEFL score (7.5), teach well, make students fall in love with English Help students love English/Enhance own teaching methodologies, “like a window /door to open and learn from other countries”/ No end goal, continuous

It’s an ongoing lifelong process/Successful as a learner, communicating ideas in English/ However, the world is changing, how can we interpret these new ideas in English

Professional context: success is when students perform well in exams/Personal context: to become an interpreter, to become a professor, to write a novel

Successful in learning English by being able to communicate without any difficulties/Successful teaching students and making them interested in learning/Accomplishment and satisfaction in my job

“Using English as a working language makes me feel successful”/Seldom uses the language practically/ “I don’t have a lot of native speakers as friends, I don’t have a lot of foreign contacts.”

Many teachers find success through their job, putting into practice the language they have acquired and inspiring their students to fall in love with English. Some teachers see language learning as a lifelong commitment and skill that can be continuously enhanced. Therefore, they have goals beyond the professional context.

Again, a lack of engagement with native/fluent speakers is cited as the main reason for reaching the highest levels of proficiency and confidence in English.

6. The barriers to achieving ‘success’ in English

What barriers prevent you from achieving your goal(s) in terms of English language proficiency?

Lack of Time. Type of Learning Activity (5-min videos). Speak with a native speaker. Access a suitable language partner. Setting the proper goal.

N/A

Laziness/Disorganisation/A personalised plan/A trainer

Knowing what to write/Knowing how to write

Time management/Daily life commitments

First language interference

The opportunity/The motivation/Access to foreign expertise

Workplace relationships

Lack of practice/Family responsibilities

Lack of practice

With heavy workloads and family commitments, a lack of time is the biggest barrier to achieving ‘success’ in English. Motivation can be improved with a personalised learning plan with clear goals. Also, access to foreign expertise in the form of a teacher trainer can boost confidence.

7. Time commitment in order to achieve ‘success’

If you had a clear plan, how much time per day/week/month would you dedicate to achieving your goal(s)?

30 mins per day/Fixed duration/Not too long or too short
Between 30 mins and 2 hours per day to become very fluent in English
6-8 hours per week with a mentor/coach who knows you well and can support you in the right way/BBC says 5 hours a day
Half an hour every day/1-2 hours a week
Ideally, 1-2 hours per day, Monday to Friday/Weekends 3-4 hours
1 hour a day/30 mins during work time/60 mins in holiday time
30 mins every day or every other day
After work, in the evenings, on weekends
"I could squeeze one hour every day, if I really want to do that. Maybe more on the weekend"
I prefer a short-term, intensive programme/2-week or 4-week/7-8 hours a day/4-5 days in a row

Time for a personalised learning course is 30 minutes per day during the week during term time, 60 minutes per day during the holidays, with more time available for study on the weekends. There is also some preference for a fixed-term (short/intensive) offering.

8. The definition of creativity

Define creativity in your own words.

Based on training and practice. Accepting new ideas. Challenging ideas. Adapting to change. Not just for certain people (i.e. academics and professionals)
Your own idea/Some are born creative/Some can be trained to be creative
Something new/Create new ideas based on your understanding about the things you are interested in and related to your work or life/"Pop some new ideas"
A mindset/Thinking skills/To think in a new and different way
Kind of abstract/Use mind-maps with students to think deeply and in their own way
Creative people: give very brilliant ideas/Solve a problem from different aspects/Earn more money/Have strategic vision/Are very ambitious
Bloom's Taxonomy – highest level of thinking/A problem-solving ability/A certain attitude/About co-operation/Solve problems in a new or original way
Something new and inspiring, never seen or heard of or thought of before
A unique way of thinking/Efficient/Innovation/Putting effort into thinking/Think and put into action/Being brave/Making change
No constraints in expressing yourself/Interesting ideas/No rules to guide you/Relaxing/Exciting/Learning for pleasure

The teachers have a clear understanding of creativity as a fun and challenging skill that can be developed over time. The benefits of being creative include learning how to solve problems and adapt to new and difficult situations, which are essential life skills.

9. Personal/professional experience of creative activities

Did/do you use creative reading, creative writing or creative thinking activities in your teaching context? If so, give details.

Graphic organisers/Read and write short fiction/Come up with original ideas/Find unique solutions to problems
Drama-related activities (movement/dance/acting)
No, students are learning to speak not write
Open-ended stories/Jigsaw writing/Puzzle stories/Drama games

Learn morals from stories/Act out stories/Story mapping

N/A

Text analysis with students

N/A

Cultivate thinking skills through brainstorming, evaluation, reading circles, process writing

Write poems/brainstorm rhyming words/Read graded readers/Dialogue writing/Sentence chains

Most teachers have experience teaching their students or other teachers using creative reading (i.e., reading literature), creative writing or creative thinking techniques, such as reading, analysing and writing poems or stories.

10. The value of creative activities

What can you and your students gain from creative activities?

Write for fun/Explore humanity/Become more tolerant/Useful future life skill

N/A

It can give you imagination/Push history and people forward/It's meaningful

Thinking skill training/It's challenging and interesting/Motivates students/Everyone is involved, even weaker students, and they acquire language more naturally

Engaging and motivating/Helps with creative thinking

Knowing how to solve new problems/Valuable for dealing with future situations

Effective way to raise interest and motivation in reading/A good way to develop thinking skills/A way to connect learning to real life/Develop a problem-solving ability

Feel young/new/confident/Different/unique/attractive

Students can find a connection between the stories and themselves/Increase student's learning interest/Help them become better citizens/As a teacher it helps me grow, gain satisfaction from including creativity in the lesson

Students develop their writing skills and build their interest in language learning/It's fun/Freedom to experiment/Children are proud to share their work

There are multiple benefits for participating in creative activities. Students enjoy fun lessons and become more motivated to learn. Teachers enjoy the challenge of designing activities that help their learners come up with unique ideas and solve problems. In this way, both groups practice and develop a skill that can be used now and into the future.

Overview of Response Summaries

The over-arching goal of the teacher participants is to communicate comfortably, confidently and fluently with native and non-native speakers in English about non-teaching topics.

Among the group there is a strong desire to:

- put current English language knowledge into practice
- develop creativity through reading and writing
- move from intermediate to advanced level proficiency in English
- acquire knowledge and skills to support both the personal and professional context

Learning Proposal

To satisfy these learning requirements, I make two tailor-made proposals which build and advance reading and writing competency in English:

1. Group course that builds reading and writing skills in English using diverse materials
2. 1:1 programme that involves reading, analysing, and writing short fiction in English

Active participation in these learning experiences will not only develop language proficiency and transferable life skills but also boost self-confidence to communicate in English in real-life scenarios.

Indeed, a future ambition is to organise Virtual Exchanges between participants in the Chinese Teacher programme and members of the Share Your Story community, to share experiences and read/write collaboratively, using English as a lingua franca.

Proposal 1 – Group course (2500 RMB)

3-week/9.5-hour course

3 x 60-minute live group sessions per week

Plus 1 x 30-minute live 1:1 session on completing the course

Homework for independent study

Tailored support from the tutor

A series of 9 online lessons which include under-represented groups in society, that build and advance vocabulary, grammar, reading and writing skills in English. Plus, 1 private session to check expectations and satisfaction.

Topic/practice examples:

1. Refugees/reading about refugee life
2. Leadership/discussing leadership and predicting a story
3. Influential Women/writing about the women who inspired you

Benefits:

- Exposure to stories of diverse cultures and identities
- Opportunity to express your own culture and identity
- Deepen and expand low frequency vocabulary
- Develop a reading and writing habit
- Communicate your thoughts on non-teaching topics with confidence.

Proposal 2 – 1:1 (5000RMB)

10-week/10-hour course

1 x 60-minute live 1:1 session per week

Pre-session task + homework for independent study

Tailored support from the tutor

Over 10 weeks, read and examine 3 short stories by international writers, acquire new advanced vocabulary, identify key sentence structure/features in creative writing and write your own stories with tutor support.

Key activities:

1. apply reading strategies to deepen understanding of short fiction texts
2. identify sentence patterns/features used in creative writing
3. write a short piece incorporating key elements of story
4. evaluate reading/writing progress throughout the course
5. reflect on the experience and how it may be adapted in personal teaching context

Benefits:

- Advanced language acquisition through deep reading
- Enhanced critical thinking via discussion and analysis
- Better writing competence in response to detailed feedback
- Develop a critical awareness of reading and writing ability
- Set SMART goals to extend reading and writing habit after the course.

Registration

To register for one or both of the learning experiences proposed, or to request bespoke training services, please email karinathorne@hotmail.com or connect on WeChat (*YingGuoRuiNa*).