Social and Academic Status of TEFL Lecturers in Higher Education in China*

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In the 21st century, change is a constant in higher education institutions across the globe and is no less so in China. An educational reform is undergoing in higher education in China. Within this context, this paper did research on the teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) lecturers’ social and academic status from the perspectives of vocational sociology and knowledge sociology. The paper focuses on lecturers’ appointment, promotion, assessment, and professional development. The findings of the study show that pressure on lecturers is increasingly intense. The findings are significant for higher education leaders who need to implement policies that foster effective work environments.

Keywords: teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) lecturers, social status, academic status, higher education, China

Introduction

Teachers are the heart of every university. Without their commitment, effective teaching and learning could not take place. According to the “Outline on National Education Reform and Development Plan Within Mid-term and Long-term (2010-2020) in China” (Zhang, Wu, Zhao, & Liu, 2010), the contemporary strategic plan focused on enhancing the quality of education, building a community of lecturers with high standard of morals and high levels of professionalism, improving lecturers’ professional training, and increasing investment in education lecturers’ salaries. Within the context of educational reforms in China, this paper presents the social and academic status of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) lecturers from the perspectives of vocational sociology and knowledge sociology based on the empirical data. This paper includes issues concerning lecturers’ social and political status, appointment, assessment, promotion, and further education.

Social and Political Status of Academics

As the economy developed, modernisation has resulted in English becoming a very important subject in secondary and tertiary education in China. English teachers consequently hold high social status. Historically, however, this has not always been the case. Teachers’ social status in China has changed over time from a period when traditional values held sway through the upheaval of the Cultural Revolution to the present era of reform, modernization, and the opening up of the nation, which began in the 1980s.

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In traditional Chinese cultural discourses, teachers enjoyed high social status and were regarded as key figures in society. Influenced by Chinese traditional culture, especially Confucian writings, Chinese people revered teachers deeply. There is an old saying that “师者，传道授业解惑也” (Shizhe, chuandao shouye jiehuo ye), which means that teachers were regarded as the persons who could propagate the doctrine, impart professional knowledge (Cleverley, 1991; Hu, 2002; Lee, 2000), and resolve doubts. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), however, teachers and intellectuals were attacked by young people and persecuted. In short, teachers were held in low esteem during this period.

In the 1980s, Deng Xiaoping, the then leader of the Chinese government, instituted a number of reforms and introduced policies that reinstated teachers’ social prestige and improved teachers’ economic conditions (Li, 1999). At that time, teachers were described metaphorically as “春蚕” (chunchan), which means “silkworm”, a term which can be defined as one “who diligently spins silk thread till death” (Boyle, 2000). Teachers were also described metaphorically as “蜡烛” (lazhu), which means “candles”, a term which can be defined as those “who burns themselves in order to light others” (Boyle, 2000); and “灵魂的工程师” (linghun de gongchengshi), which means “soul engineers”, a term which can be defined as one “who instructs moral qualities among students” (Boyle, 2000). The use of these expressions indicated a renewed respect for teachers.

With the reforms, it was not only the case that teachers’ social status was re-established, but also that their political status improved. In his talk on national educational affairs, Deng Xiaoping stated that “Teachers are key to a university’s capacity. They nurture qualified students for the development of the country” (Deng, 1983, pp. 101-106). He went on to state that “We should enhance teachers’ political and social status. Not only students, but also the whole society should revere teachers” (Deng, 1983, pp. 101-106).

Under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, policies were formulated to improve teachers’ conditions. In 1985, the 9th Conference of the 6th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party unanimously passed a bill establishing an annual Teachers’ Day (10th September). In 1986, the Compulsory Education Law of the People’s Republic of China legislated that all in society should respect teachers. In 1993, the 8th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party passed the Teachers’ Act, in which teachers’ rights and responsibilities, qualifications and appointment, and benefits and rewards were stipulated. These three initiatives—Teachers’ Day, the Compulsory Law, and the Teachers’ Act—were instrumental in enhancing teachers’ social and political status.

Appointment of Academic staff

During the present period of rapid economic development, universities have been given more autonomy and flexibility in employment practices (Wong, 2004). Before the mid-1990s, lecturers in universities were employed in permanent positions by local educational authorities across the country and worked in these positions until they retired. Every university had to conform to the state retirement policy, with males retiring at age 60 and females retiring at age 55 (National People’s Congress of People’s Republic of China (No. 104), 1978).

In the mid-1990s, however, some universities were able to launch an appointment system which entailed the independent contracting of employees. Under this new system, lecturers are appointed according to their potential research output. Staff who perform poorly may be fined, demoted, or relegated to contract employment. The official retirement age, however, remains in place.
Academic Staff Assessment

There is a two-fold system for assessing teaching in Chinese universities. First, lecturers are assessed by a committee of experts, which is made up of professors, associate professors, and deans. Each semester, the committee observes the lecturer at work in the classroom. Second, students also evaluate their lecturers’ teaching through questionnaires administered each semester. Lecturers who fail their assessments may be forced to leave their teaching positions and change jobs within the university.

Consistent with global changes in academic assessment procedures, lecturers’ research performance is also assessed. The assessment results have a significant impact on promotion and generate additional financial rewards for staff. For example, lecturers who publish an article in an international journal are awarded ¥5,000; whereas if they publish in a national academic journal or provincial journal, they are only awarded ¥1,000 and ¥200 respectively.

In some universities, lecturers who do not produce sufficient research output are fined from ¥200 to ¥1,000, while in other universities, they may not be fined, but they will not receive any rewards. These policies reveal the considerable pressure on academics to be not only effective teachers, but also productive researchers.

Promotion

There are three criteria for promotion in universities in China: (a) seniority; (b) research output; and (c) completion of required teaching hours.

The first criterion, seniority, is measured as the period of time that is mandatory at a particular rank before promotion to the next. For instance, from assistant to lecturer, the period is five years.

The second criterion for promotion is research output. In order to be promoted from lecturer to associate professor, several kinds of outputs are needed including at least one published national journal article among all articles published, one translation from English to Chinese of at least 120,000 words in total published, and one academic project.

To meet the third criterion, each lecturer must complete a required teaching workload. Academics at different ranks have to complete different workloads. Junior ranked academics do more teaching than senior ones.

It is important to note, however, that not all the lecturers who meet the set criteria can be promoted to the upper levels because the number of academics at each level is capped. Applicants are ranked according to the points acquired for their seniority, research output, and workload. Applicants of the highest rank will be promoted. Each year, the number of lecturers promoted differs because the quota changes.

Academics’ Professional Development

In China, there are two ways for lecturers to pursue their professional development: One is in-country post-graduate study and the other is overseas study. This latter option is especially important for TEFL lecturers given that the content they teach is a foreign language. Both options bring challenges of competition for English lecturers’ professional development.

Until recently, teachers in Chinese universities were required to have a minimum of a master’s degree as a condition of employment. To gain entry to master-level work, language teachers had to pass the academic post-graduate entry examination, which includes not only their English major area, but also a second foreign
language which all students are required to study (e.g., Russian, French, or Japanese). All the applicants who passed the examination were ranked according to their marks and only the top applicants were accepted because of the limited number of vacancies.

The opportunity to go overseas for further learning also brings challenges. In recent years, the China Scholarship Council (CSC) has provided opportunities for lecturers in higher education to study or undertake research abroad. Applicants who meet the criteria, which include age, professional rank, and research output, pass the expert evaluation and are given a rank. Those who secure the first few positions are sponsored by the CSC to go overseas for further study. However, the competition is very intense. For example, in 2008, there were only 12,000 positions available across the whole country for all disciplines (CSC, 2008).

**Conclusion**

In summary, this paper has described conditions that reflect the specific development of Chinese higher education in a context of global change. The issues discussed potentially affect staff morale and motivation. Lecturers are working under great pressure because of the system of appointment, promotion, and assessment. At the same time, professional development does little to release the pressure. A combination of these factors presents a necessity that the government makes good policies to increase the investment in education. Only in this way can raise the lecturers’ social and economic status, consequently their pressure can be released. Thus, the motivation of lecturers could be enhanced and the quality of education can be improved.

**References**


