

# The globalisation of the English language: Reflections on the teaching of English in China

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*Using data collection from schools and government documents, the paper discusses the switch from the teaching of Russian to that of English, presents a picture of English teaching in China at present, and predicts some of the changes in the teaching of English in the future in this country. The paper focuses on the following issues: a) Why has China chosen English as the foreign language most widely taught in schools? b) What is the influence of globalisation of the English language in China? c) Why is the teaching of English important to China? The paper consists of three parts: Stages of foreign language teaching since 1949; The situation of English teaching in China; Looking at English teaching from a cultural perspective.*

globalisation, English teaching, College English, international language, cultural perspective

## INTRODUCTION

Globalisation is an influencing force everywhere in the world. It makes us more aware that, along with the prescriptive slogan 'think globally, act locally', there must, as so aptly put by Hogan (1996), be the additional critical observation that we also 'think locally, act globally'. China has the world's largest population and a history of over 5000 years. In recent years China has chosen English as the major foreign language taught in all colleges and universities as well as in almost all high schools. English is taught from Grade 5 in many elementary schools, and in some, even from Grade 3. In every large city there is at least one high school of foreign languages, which attaches great importance to English teaching. For those who have had the experience of learning English from their elementary schools to universities, the time and energy they have spent on English language learning is greater than that on Chinese language learning. While people in China pay attention to the English language, they also have started to become interested in aspects of western culture. Even in the mid-1980s, people sent cards to each other mostly before New Year, saying 'Happy New Year!'. But since the 1990s, people have started to send cards to each other before Christmas, saying 'Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!' English not only appears in media, but also in people's daily conversations as well as on their clothes, and provide examples of English integrating into traditional Chinese culture. In other words, Chinese culture is enriched with the introduction of English culture. Why is English as a foreign language the most widely taught in China? What is the relationship between the globalisation of the English language and China? In the age of globalisation, it seems necessary to discuss these issues from a cultural perspective.

## STAGES OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING IN CHINA

### Russian teaching

Chairman Mao (1949, p.1471) once said: 'The firing of the cannons in Russia in October 1917 sent Marxism to China', which shows that Marxism in China comes from Russia. Since Marxism came to China, there has been a very special relationship between China and the

former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The Brotherhood relationship, from 1921 to 1959, was followed by a period of hostility, between 1960 to 1988, which moderated into the present day relationship. The relationship between the two countries has actually been between the Soviet Communist Party and the Chinese Communist Party and dates back to 1921 when the Chinese Communist Party was founded.

After World War II, the whole world was divided into two groups: that of the Capitalist Group, centered around the USA, and the Socialist Group, centered around the USSR. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Chinese Communist Party decided to build China into a socialist country. But the Chinese Communist Party had no such experiences. Since USSR, the centre of the Socialist Group, had already gone on its road of socialism and there had been a very close relationship between the Soviet Communist Party and the Chinese Communist Party, it was quite natural for the Chinese Communist Party to rely on the USSR. As a result, China's policy-making was greatly influenced. The Chinese Communist Party and government sent many leaders and intellectuals to the USSR to learn from the Russians. However, as a proportion of the population in China, those who had the chance to go there were only very few in number. To learn from the USSR, more and more people needed to be able to know the Russian language and communicate with Russians. It seemed that the only way to achieve such a goal was to teach Russian in schools. Thus, very soon Russian became the most widely taught foreign language in schools: not only in colleges and universities but also in high schools. Russian was promoted at the expense of English because of China's political alliance and economic construction (Hu, In Press). At that time, people took great pride in learning the Russian language. In China Pharmaceutical University there is a veteran professor of English, who entered Beijing Foreign Languages Institute in 1952 with the desire to learn Russian. However, the school arranged for her to learn English. She felt rather disappointed because Russian was then regarded as communism's language while English was considered the imperialism's language. After much persuasion by her teachers, she finally agreed to learn the English language.

### **Foreign language teaching: More absent than present**

The relationship between the Soviet Communist Party and the Chinese Communist Party began worsening after the death of Stalin in 1953. In 1960, the USSR withdrew all of its experts from China and stopped all aid projects and contracts with China. This shocked the Chinese Communist Party greatly. The Chinese government realised that China should build socialism by itself, while criticising the USSR as a revisionist country rather than a socialist one, China regarded herself as the centre of the Socialist Group. China was then in a situation that it could neither learn from the Western world – the Capitalist Group – nor from the USSR for its being a revisionist country. In 1966, the Cultural Revolution broke out. Almost everything foreign, traditional, or so-called revisionist was strongly criticized. Consequently, foreign language teaching was almost completely stopped. To be exact, it was more absent than present from 1967 to 1976, during which period if one listened to a foreign broadcasting station, one would be suspected as a spy or special agent and would be investigated, or even arrested and put into prison.

### **English teaching**

When the political agenda prevails over the educational, foreign language education suffers and when the political agenda converges with the educational, foreign language education gains (Hu, In Press). From 1966 to 1976, higher education in China existed in name only. China had almost completely closed its doors to the outside. It was during those 10 years that the gap in science and technology between China and other countries, such as Japan and USA, was greatly widened. When looking through the narrow opening of its door 10 years later, the Chinese government seemed to be shocked by the rapid developments of other countries as well as the impact of the globalisation of the English language. To improve its backward position and catch

up with advanced countries, something had to be done. As a result, China stopped enrolling university students from the peasants and workers by means of recommendation and resumed the College Entrance Examination in 1977 (Deng, 1977). In 1978, the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party was held in Beijing, the motto of which was 'Practice is the only real criterion to test the truth'. As a turning point in the development of China, the meeting decided that economic construction should be the central task of the whole country and China should reform and carry out the opening-to-the-outside-world policy (Deng, 1978). As a precondition of implementing this policy, there should be people in China who know foreign languages. Deng Xiaoping (1979) required that all people who were able to learn a foreign language should learn it. In the situation that English was becoming an international language, only by knowing English would Chinese people communicate with most of the other peoples in the world and access the most advanced science and technology. Such a reality led to the policy of making the teaching of English as the major foreign language in China.

## THE SITUATION OF ENGLISH TEACHING IN CHINA

### English teaching in schools

English is the most widely taught foreign language in China. In municipalities directly under the central government and capital cities of every province as well as in some developed cities, English is taught from Grade 5 in elementary schools, and in some, from Grade 3. Usually, there are three lessons of English every week. *People's Education Press* and *Longman* mainly publish the English textbooks used in elementary schools. Never before have parents in China paid so much attention to their children's education. Under the persuasion or pressures of their parents, nearly every child has to choose something special to learn, such as painting, singing, swimming, playing musical instruments and so on, but English is what most children are learning. Most parents spend much money on employing tutors to teach their children English, whether their children have already started to learn English formally in school or not. These parents hope that in this way their children can be good at English or at least when the children start to learn English in school formally they will learn it easily.

Recently, it is reported that English will be taught from Grade 3 in every elementary school in China. Except in very remote and backward places, English is taught in every junior and senior high school. The Ministry of Education is in charge of compiling the English textbooks used in high schools. Both in junior high school and in senior high school, English is divided into two bands: Band 1 and Band 2. For each Band, there are specific requirements. For example, according to the English Syllabus for Junior High School (2000), students are required to meet the specific requirements for Band 1 in the following five aspects:

- a) Vocabulary: to be familiar with 450 words and 100 expressions.
- b) Reading: to read at the speed of 40~50 wpm (words per minute).
- c) Listening: to understand the listening materials at the speed of 100 wpm.
- d) Writing: after listening to it for three times, students are required at the speed of 6~8 wpm to dictate the text which they have learned and is now written.
- e) Speaking: to be able to ask and answer simple questions on the text as well as make simple conversations on familiar topics in daily communication.

In junior high school, both English and Chinese are taught five periods per week respectively; while in senior high schools, both English and Chinese are taught six or seven periods per week respectively. It appears that English and Chinese are taught for the same length of time in high schools. Compared with the pupils in elementary schools, students in junior and senior high schools have to bear more pressures from the English course because English is the subject to be examined both in senior high school entrance examination and college entrance examination.

In every college or university, English is a compulsory course for every non-English major student. Such an English course is called College English in China. College English is divided into six bands: from Band 1 to Band 6, which students should complete in six semesters. That is to say, one Band each semester. The two requirements of the College English Teaching Syllabus (1991) are the basic requirement and the higher requirement. Accordingly, at the basic level, students should meet the specific requirements in the following six aspects:

- a) Vocabulary: to recognize 4,000 words, of which they are to be familiar with 2,300 words.
- b) Pronunciation: to read aloud with acceptable pronunciation and intonation.
- c) Reading: to employ basic reading skills and read with ease texts on general topics at intermediate level. The reading speed should be no less than 50 wpm with at least 70 per cent accuracy in comprehension.
- d) Listening: to follow classroom instruction in English and to understand listening materials on familiar topics presented only once at the speed of 120 wpm with the score no less than 70 per cent accuracy in comprehension.
- e) Writing: With some guidance, to complete in 30 minutes a short composition of 100 - 120 words on a given topic.
- f) Speaking: to carry on daily conversations in simple English and to ask and answer questions based on a given text.

Every student in the key universities must meet the basic requirement, which can be shown by whether a student has passed the College English Test Band 4 (CET 4) or not. Such a requirement was originally only for students in key universities, but other universities have followed. They also require that each of their students pass CET 4. Those who fail to pass CET 4 may not, for example, gain their bachelor degrees, and in some schools are not even awarded their diplomas. Once a student passes CET 4, there is no compulsory requirement for him/her to pass College English Test Band 6 (CET 6). However, most of those who have passed CET 4 will go on trying to pass CET 6: some succeed, some fail. In 1999, China started the CET Spoken English Test. Those whose scores are above 85 are entitled to participate in such a test. Nearly every student who meets the requirement takes part in the test.

There are four or five periods of every week. In every school year, College English Test (CET) takes places twice nationally: one is in the middle of June while the other is in late December or middle of January. At each time, the CET consists of two kinds: CET 4 and CET 6. There is an organisation called the CET Committee in charge of the testing, under which there are three centres: Beijing, Shanghai and Wuhan. The CET Committee is directly under the Ministry of Education. According to authoritative statistics (1999), students participating in such examinations range from 100,000 at the beginning in 1987 to 2,400,000 every year from 1997 to 1999.

Table 1 shows the situation in which the Chinese and English Languages are taught in elementary schools, junior high schools, senior high schools and universities, respectively. We can see that the periods of the Chinese language and those of the English language are similar. However, Chinese students have to spend much more time on learning English than Chinese because it is more difficult to learn a foreign language than to learn one's native language.

*Table 1. Teaching of both Chinese and English in Chinese schools*

Schools	The Chinese Language		The English Language	
	Grades	Periods/Week	Grades	Periods/Week
6-Year Elementary School	1~6	6	5~6	3
3-Year Junior High School	1~3	5	1~3	5
3-Year Senior High School	1~3	6~7	1~3	6~7
4-Year University	0	0	1~2	4~5

## English teaching outside schools

In addition to English teaching in schools, there is also English teaching outside schools. The students are usually adults from all walks of life. They study English for different special purposes. In China, any one who wants to get a promotion in his/her specialty must pass a certain level of English test. Once you pass the test, you will get a certificate usually valid for three years. However, if you do not get your promotion within the 3 years, you will have to pass the English test of the same level again. Learning English for promotion is one of the most important reasons for adults to learn English. People also learn English for other purposes, like doing business with foreign countries, going abroad to tour, study or to live, and so on. Thus, some organizations have appeared to meet such needs. Well-known teachers of English are usually employed to finish the task-based teaching by these organizations, some of which are running so well that they are nationally famous, such as 'Beijing New Orientation School' in Beijing, 'Qianjin Spare-Time School for Advanced Studies' in Shanghai and 'Jingling Translation Society' in Nanjing. Therefore, competent teachers of English are always popular and never lack money.

### LOOKING AT ENGLISH TEACHING FROM A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

#### Globalisation of the English language and China

Neave (2000) says that for the past quarter century, higher education has been high on the agenda of governments and central to the fortune of nations. That China has chosen English as a foreign language to be taught not only in higher education but also in secondary and elementary education is also central to the fortunes of China. Why is English taught in China? Carl Marx once said that if you could sing *The Internationale*, you would be able to find friends everywhere in the world. It is true of English. Crystal (1997) reports that 85 per cent of international organisations make official use of English, at least 85 per cent of the world's film market is in English, and about 90 per cent of published articles are written in English. In addition, Zai, Zheng and Zhang (1999) report that more than 80 per cent of all scientific papers are first published in English and over half of the world's technical and scientific periodicals are in English. Furthermore, five of the largest broadcasters (CBS, NBC, ABC, BBC and CBC) reach a potential audience of about 300 million people through English broadcasts, computer program instructions and software are often supplied only in English, 85 per cent of the international telephone conversations are conducted in English, and English is the language of medicine, electronics, space and the Olympics.

From what has been mentioned above, we might come to such a conclusion: English does not only belong to English speaking countries, it belongs to the whole world. No other language is more widespread geographically than the English language. China is carrying out an opening-to-the-outside policy so that it can better know the world and communicate with the world. However, without knowing English, it cannot know the world. In summary, China has adopted English as its most widely taught foreign language because English is now an international language.

But, why has English rather than any other language become an international language? This seems to be a rather complex question. But if we consider this issue from the following four aspects, we may gain a greater understanding.

- a) Historically: The English language, as well as the English culture, spread to Asia, Africa, North America and Australia with the establishment of the British colonies in those four continents.
- b) Geographically: In this world, there are six continents inhabited by human beings, of which Europe is greatly influenced by the English language, while North America and Australia are completely occupied by the English language. Besides, in many countries in Asia and Africa, English is an official language. No other language has such a power.

- c) Politically: After the Second World War, both the United States and Britain, the two major English speaking countries, were amongst the most politically influential countries.
- d) Economically: Since the end of the World War II, the United States has been the most powerful country economically with the most advanced science and technology. As a result, it has also become the most powerful country militarily. Britain has been amongst the most developed countries in the world. The economic position of both USA and Britain leads to the rapid development of media that have wide influence in the world.

When answering the question ‘Why is the world becoming smaller and smaller?’ we usually say that it is because of the rapid development of communication and transportation. In fact, we seem to ignore another very important factor: the globalisation of English. It is English that most readily bridges different cultures in the world. If the central contradiction of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is between global networks and local identities, English is a tool of both (Warschauer, 2000). Most people speak English not because English is their native language, but because English is the language they could share. That English has become an international language is the result of natural development rather than deliberate creation. But given the development of the world, it is accidental for English to become an international language; it is inevitable that there will be an international language. That is to say, if English were not the international language, there would certainly be another language to become the international language.

The influence of the English speaking countries are indispensable to the fact that English has become an international language. Once English becomes an international language, however, neither the United States, nor Britain or any other English speaking country can control the language any more. Even native speakers may need to learn new dialects, not only to fully understand what people are saying in different parts of the world, but also to communicate effectively in international settings where the use of North American, British, or Australian colloquialisms may be inappropriate (Warschauer, 2000). Cook (1991) says that an Englishman or an American has no more right to tell a Tanzanian how to teach English than does a Chinese. More and more people use English not because it is the native language of the United States or any other English speaking countries but because it is the most powerful language belonging to the whole world. Even if the United States switched to another language, it would not change the status of English being the international language. Crystal (1997) believed that if there were to be a major social change in Britain that affected the use of English there, it would not have any real effect on the world trend.

The globalisation of English has a deep influence in China, which is reflected in the following:

- a) there are specialized journals on English learning and teaching as a second language;
- b) China Central Television Channels 4 and 9 are specialized channels in English;
- c) in large cities, the special program of English News and English teaching are broadcast at regular times;
- d) English newspapers, such as China Daily and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, are becoming more and more popular;
- e) people can often read English advertisements either in newspapers or magazines;
- f) every hotel involving foreign countries or nationals is required to have instructions written in English;
- g) slogans and illustrations in English are often seen in schools; and
- h) enterprises of joint-venture or exclusive foreign investment use English more often.

What is mentioned above consists of the English language environment in China. In such an environment, people who are good at English are never unemployed. One always will be thought of highly if one has very high competence in English. Usually, enterprises do not employ graduates without English Certificate CET 4. Other conditions being equal, if one has English Certificate CET 6 and the other person has CET 4, one will be a favourite.

## **Prospects of English teaching in China**

### ***Teachers of English***

English teaching and learning is not only a matter of language. Nobody can learn a language well without knowing its culture. At present, the vast majority of teachers of English learn English in China, teach English in China and finish their postgraduate studies in China. In other words, they usually have not had the experience of living in English speaking countries. Such a situation is not favorable for the improvement of English teaching. In recognition, the Chinese government has begun to send its English teachers to English speaking countries for further training and experience. Such a program is considered to be a very promising beginning. Although compared with the total number of English teachers in China those who have been sent out are still a very small number. When everything is taken into consideration, the key issue of sending teachers of English to English speaking countries only involves money. Therefore, it seems to be a simple rather than complex issue. Thus, with the financial improvement of China, the day when all the teachers of English have the experience of being immersed in English culture will soon come.

### ***Decrease of classroom teaching and increase of teaching and learning in other ways***

In the past, classroom teaching has been the only approach to language learning and teaching. However, in recent years, there have been some significant changes, especially with the appearance of multimedia software for teaching and learning. In China there is one set of English textbooks for second or third year college students and three major English textbooks for undergraduates. For each of these English textbooks, there is at least one set of multimedia software for teaching and learning. All of these software are very convenient to use. For example, if one wants to improve one's pronunciation, they simply press the button for reading aloud and can read after a native speaker who has beautiful pronunciation and intonation. If one wants to know the Chinese meaning of any part of the English text, they press the translation button and the Chinese version will appear on the computer screen. Immediately after finishing the exercises the program provides their correct and incorrect answers. With such software, the classroom is no longer the only place to learn English, students could learn English even at home. The appearance of such software could be regarded as the turning point of English teaching and learning in China, for it will lead to multi-modal ways of English teaching and learning.

Beijing Foreign Languages Studies is now undertaking a national project on distance education of English. In his introductory speech to the Third International Symposium on ELT, held in Beijing 2001, the professor heading the project suggested that the future of English teaching was through distance education. Instead of learning English in classrooms, most people will be able to finish their English studies at home.

### ***English teaching environment***

As far as the English teaching environment is concerned, while efforts from learners and teachers, schools and communities produce micro-pictures, policy making decides the macro-picture. It is very hopeful that China will join the World Trade Organisation in the near future. This means that there will be an increase in the use of English in China. It seems to be a necessity to improve the English learning environment to help learners access more English. Such a situation will influence policy-making in China to accelerate the development of English language environments so much so that the English language becomes a second rather than a foreign language. Actually, that English is taught from even Grade 3 in elementary schools provides an exciting symbol of that fundamental change. The more the Chinese government looks at English teaching from a strategic perspective, the sooner the day will come when English becomes a second language in China.

## CONCLUSION

English teaching has been a career of several generations of teachers of English in China since 1978. Lakoff (2000, p. 41) says,

Language is not “just words”. It enables us to establish our selves, and ourselves, as individuals and as members of groups; it tells us how we are connected to one another, who has power and who doesn't.

To some extent, development and improvement in China depends on the quality of its English teaching. In the age of information technology where English is becoming an international language, Chinese people still use English as a foreign language to get information while other peoples use English as their native or second language to do so. This places China at a disadvantage in language. Consequently, English teaching in China is much more difficult than in those countries whose English is either native language or a second language. Cook (1991) points out that in societies where the second language is in actual use, second language learning in the world outside can be compared with second language learning inside the classroom. With the globalisation of the English language, it seems that English teaching in China is not only a matter of a foreign language teaching. It has a very close relationship with the development of the whole country. Robertson (1992, p.8) says that ‘globalisation as a concept refers both to the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole’. If both the Chinese government and people could look at this issue from a strategic point of view, it could be seen that China still has a very long way to go. To only teach English is not enough; how to make the quality of English teaching comparable with the English taught in other countries is what really counts.

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