

Impact of English on Chinese mainland: From historical, educational and political dimensions

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Abstract: The impact of English on the Chinese mainland from multidimensional perspectives: historical, educational and political is critically discussed. Historically, English education has witnessed its inception, ups and downs, and the present boom. The recent expansion of English education is functionally and economically oriented at both individual and social levels. At the core of the impact of English stand the policy-making decisions of the Chinese government which has always played a significant directive role.

Key words: impact of English; Chinese mainland; English education; language policy

English has been widely believed to have been functioning as a global language in modern society, especially in the contemporary era of globalization. English, indeed, has played such an important role on the global arena that few countries can not feel its impact. The impact of English on the Chinese mainland from multidimensional perspectives: historical, educational and political is critically discussed.

1. Impact of English on China: From historical dimensions

1.1 Earlier periods of Qing dynasty

Although the presence of English in the Chinese mainland can be traced back to the early seventeenth century, it is known that there was only sporadic and unsystematic development of English originating from cultural and linguistic contact then in South China (Bolton, 2003). In fact, the systematic development of English in China was mainly due to the emergence of English Language Teaching (ELT) in China. According to Bolton (2003), the earliest Western missionary schools were set up in South China, in Macao and Hong Kong in 1839. For example, the Morrison Education Society School was opened at Macao in 1839, transferred to Hong Kong in 1842, and lasted for only ten years. It was not until after the end of the Second Opium War in 1860 that private missionary education in English started to expand elsewhere in China owing to the establishment of more treaty ports and the persistent efforts of missionaries to convert the Chinese (DENG, 1997). The rapid expansion of such missionary education can be seen from the following figures: by the 1870s there were only 20 mission schools with around 230 students across the country, but by 1925, there were over 250,000 children in 7,000 Christian elementary schools, and about 26,000 in Christian middle schools (DENG, 1997).

After the end of the Second Opium War in 1860, some Qing (dynasty) government officials were aware of the urgent need for China to learn modern military and technical knowledge from the West in order to resist further foreign intrusion and to better cope with the Western powers in national and international affairs. To

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achieve this, the teaching and learning of European languages, English in particular, was regarded as crucial; accordingly, the first foreign language school sponsored by the government in China, the *Tongwen Guan* (同文馆) was founded in Beijing in 1862, which witnessed the inception of official English teaching in China. Subsequently similar schools were set up in other areas of the nation such as Shanghai and Guangzhou (Bolton, 2003). Over the period, the Western missionary schools together with these government sponsored language schools formed the main source of English language teaching.

Further humiliated by the Qing government's defeat in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895 and the looting and burning of Yuan Ming Yuan, the Winter Palace of the emperor (first by the combined armies of English and French in 1860 and then by the Eight-Power Allied Forces in 1900), more and more government officials began to recognize that their ability to face foreign aggression and their ways of modernization could only be, paradoxically, fostered by learning from the Western powers; English language education was thus encouraged to satisfy all this (WANG, 2004). At the turn of the 20th century, thirteen Protestant Christian colleges had been established across China, which "had a profound influence on Chinese education" (Bolton, 2003, p. 231).

1.2 Periods of the Nationalist government and Communist government

In 1911, the SUN Yat-sen led Nationalist Party overthrew the Qing Dynasty and founded the Republic of China (中华民国). Under the rule of the Nationalist government between 1911 and 1949, "English language teaching continued in its educational system because English was considered useful to the nation in 'getting more knowledge' and 'broadening its horizons'" (WANG, 2004, p. 152). For example, English was taught as the first foreign language in education throughout that period (LIN, 2004a). In spite of this, there was, however, no substantial change in English education owing to the chaos caused by endless and long-lasting civil wars and the Anti-Japanese War over the whole period.

In October 1949, the Chinese Communist Party defeated the Nationalist Party and established the People's Republic of China (PRC). The founding of PRC saw an end to the functioning of Western missionary schools. Foreign missionaries were expelled from China by the new regime, and the Christian colleges were either renamed or merged with other educational institutions (Bolton, 2003). At the same time, Russian replaced English as the first foreign language in education due to China's alliance with the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). But by the late 1950s, China's relationship with the USSR became worse and was therefore ready to seek more contact, at least economically, with the West (Lam & Chow, 2004). As a result, English regained its importance and took the place of Russian as the first foreign language learnt at schools and universities.

During the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, the learning of foreign ideas including foreign languages was condemned. Despite some facilitating events such as the recognition of China's membership of the United Nations in 1971 and the US president Richard Nixon's visit to China in 1972, English language education was still not given enough attention. It was only after the end of the Cultural Revolution that China could speed up its process of modernization through opening itself up to the Western world after a long time of isolation (WANG, 2004; Lam & Chow, 2004). Consequently, English language education was promoted to ensure successful implementation of the nation's open-door policy. Ever since then, ELT has thrived across the nation.

Since the 1980s, particularly with the advent of some significant events such as the return of the former British colony of Hong Kong to China's sovereignty in 1997, the acceptance of China as a member of the World

Trade Organization and Beijing's successful bidding for hosting the 2008 Olympic Games in the same year of 2001, English has exerted even greater impact on the Chinese society. In such an era full of unprecedented opportunities, the Chinese government is well aware of the significance of English as a medium in its route to the world and has been using the language to promote itself politically and economically; for example, founded in 2000, the state-run Channel Nine only uses the English language to introduce China to the world (LIN, 2004b). Undoubtedly, the Chinese government is determined to continue its internationally-focused policy and encourage the use of English to meet its growing demands for international discourse.

2. Impact of English on China: From educational dimensions

Never before has English language education become so widespread and penetrating in the Chinese society as since China's adoption of the open-door and reform policy after the Cultural Revolution. Indeed, the nation has since witnessed a surge of learning English, making English language teaching one of the most developed industries in the country. Since the 1980s to the present time, the Reform and Opening Policy has made "it absolutely necessary for the Chinese to learn English and/or other foreign languages. More and more educational, occupational and economic advantages became attached to learning English and other foreign languages" (Lam & Chow, 2004, p. 235). For example, if students intend to be enrolled in better high schools and universities, it is important for them to have a good result in English exams. Also, the mastery of English can help one to find a better job such as working in a foreign invested company or a joint venture with a salary three or four times higher than the income of those working in local companies (LIN, 2004a).

Fu (1986) showed that English language education in the Chinese mainland in the early 1980s resurged and evolved along two streams. The mainstay of English language teaching was in the public educational system, supplemented by the other stream in the form of spare-time learning via numerous evening English classes and various broadcast English lessons on TV and radio (FU, 1986), which not only made English language teaching a salable business but paved the way for the further expansion of the business in the 1990s.

According to WANG (2004), a striking feature of the expanded English language education over the period was the emergence of various private off-campus English language educational services, among which one of the most influential, most profitable as well, is Beijing New Oriental School founded by YU Min-hong in 1993. According to LAI (2005), Beijing New Oriental School had only 30 students enrolled when it was first established in 1993; by the end of 1995, the enrolment number skyrocketed to 20,000; and now the school was expanded to become the biggest English language school in China with its branches across 20 cities and its total enrolment of 800,000. As anticipated by YU Min-hong, the income for the New Oriental School would increase by 20%, reaching 0.7 billion yuan by the end of 2005.

The Chinese in the 1990s regarded mastery of English as having a number of potential advantages, mostly economically focused: better opportunities of overseas study; better paid jobs at joint ventures; more chances to cooperate with foreign companies; better informed of the updated information via computer technology; and a prerequisite in some employment sectors (cf. Bolton, 2003; WANG, 2004). In response to these potential needs of leaning English, the two streams of public on-campus and private off-campus English education were expanded enormously from the beginnings of the 1990s (WANG, 2004). In addition, another important contributing factor to such an enormous expansion of English education comes from the traditional deep-rooted educational belief of Chinese parents who would like to spare no money and effort in their children's education in general, and English

learning in particular. As a result, all this has made the use of English and education in English have an enormous potential economic market in China.

The industry of English education is booming and is expected to continue its expanding momentum in the years to come. According to Bolton (2003, p. 228), there were only 850 secondary school English teachers in 1957 throughout China, and this figure had risen to 500,000 by 2000; and the number of English speakers in China has been recently estimated to be over 200 million with 50 million secondary school students learning English. Surely, the significant events like China's joining of the World Trade Organization and Beijing's successful bidding for hosting the 2008 Olympic Games have further stimulated the nation's desire for learning English; for instance, people in Beijing have been highly motivated in learning English, including those as young as four and as old as eighty (LIN, 2004a).

All in all, English education in China, closely associated with social needs of the time, has been playing a gate-keeping role for individuals and an economy-promoting role for the nation in the new era.

3. Impact of English on China: From political dimensions

Unlike Philippines which had been colonized first by Spain then by the US (Gonzalez, 2004), China had been a self-sufficient, isolationist country before the Opium War. After the war (1840-1842), China was only partially colonized with the cession of Hong Kong to the British Empire. In Philippines, English became the language widely used, permeating all important areas such as economics, education, science and technology, religion and politics in the country, and has recently aroused great concern over its impact on the national language, Filipino and on the Filipinos' national cohesion (Gonzalez, 2004). By contrast, the repercussions of English on China were of a different type. Such impact of English on China can be viewed from two political perspectives: one concerning the Chinese government foreign language teaching policy and the other involving perceived effect of English on the Chinese language and cultures.

3.1 Government policy regarding foreign language education

English in the Chinese mainland is not like English in Singapore, or India where it is functioning as an official language, and also unlike the former, "The terms 'Singapore English' and 'Indian English' indicate underlying formal processes in terms of nativization and acculturation" (Kachru, 2005, p. 220). In contrast to these various official Englishes, English in the Chinese mainland has never been officially functioning as such apart from being taught, learned and used as a foreign language for communication with the outside world.

The shifting focus on foreign language education in China has always been reflected in the dominant language policy-making orientation of the Chinese government in line with the domestic and global political and economic situations of the time. The endless political and social unrest in China from 1839 to 1949 coincided with intermittent and unsystematic English language education in the Chinese educational system. The founding of the PRC in 1949 enabled the Communist government to seek ally with the then dominant communist nation, the USSR. As a result, in the period of 1949-1957 Russian took supremacy in foreign language teaching. However, the worsening relationship between China and the USSR in the late 1950s caused the change in China's foreign language teaching policy: English replaced Russian as the first foreign language. Since that time, "English gained in importance again" (Lam & Chow, 2004, p. 241).

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) English education was held back in the Chinese mainland again because the movement was aimed at repudiating all things foreign including foreign language education (Lam &

Chow, 2004). Not only were English publications, English films and radios strictly restricted, but nearly all subjects including English were interrupted due to the chaotic “revolutionary activities”. Overall, English language education was cut back by the Communist government so as to restrict the influence of the Western capitalism.

The language policy regarding English education has been given foremost attention in the Chinese mainland after the Cultural Revolution, especially from 1978 onwards, when the new government led by DENG Xiao-ping, an open-minded leader, adopted an open-door policy towards the world. In accordance with the policy, English was incorporated in the nationwide educational framework in 1978: in primary and secondary education as well as for non-English majors at the tertiary level (Lam & Chow, 2004). For example, English education commenced from year three at primary schools, and it is offered as a compulsory foreign language subject in high schools and generally as a compulsory subject for non-English majors at universities; also, English teacher education is strengthened aiming at improving and enhancing English teachers’ professional skills and the government has planned to recruit more qualified English teachers with Bachelor’s degree in primary education, master’s degree in secondary education and PhD in tertiary education (HU, 2002).

In perspective, two of the typical events have significantly shown the Chinese government’s global stance: its success in joining the WTO and its successful bidding for hosting the Olympic Games in 2008. In view of this, there will be a greater demand for the use of English, and the corresponding language policy of English education in China will therefore be maintained and strengthened.

3.2 Perceptions towards the impact of English on the local language and cultures

The spread of English has recently been an issue of controversy in terms of its impact on the local languages and cultures. In the Chinese mainland, some people worry about the adverse effect of learning English on the learning of the Chinese language and culture. In a recent article, ZENG (2006) describes the nation-wide promotion of learning English as deploring because too much focus on English has led to lack of enthusiasm in learning Chinese language and culture and decreasing proficiency in the mother tongue as well. From a test on the Chinese language proficiency slightly above the high school level among all the new students in the Central China Technological University, there are some worrying results: their proficiency level of English and specialized knowledge is in inverse proportion to their proficiency in Chinese with the highest passing rate at only 60% for undergraduates but an even lower passing rate of 30% for Ph.D. students (ZENG, 2006).

Similarly, some business-oriented English education programs such as Crazy English in the Chinese mainland have also aroused some concerns because of their heavy load of Western culture. For example, WANG (2004, p. 167) thinks that Crazy English’s “unrestricted packaging and marketing of American cultural products only helps to further disseminate American culture, thus making globalization of Western culture inevitable”, and that such English programs laden with foreign cultural meaning will inevitably affect the Chinese cultural allegiance.

It is true that English becomes indispensable in the Chinese mainland particularly in the new era of China’s openness to the world; nevertheless, the promotion of English should not be at the expense of ignoring the education of the Chinese language that is closely associated with the Chinese national origin, culture and identity. Therefore, not only should the Chinese education be attached great importance to, but we can also treat English as a means to reflect our own cultural values as well as a tool for intercultural and international communication. In a recent attempt to resist the undesirable cultural impact of English, XU (2002) advocates that tertiary English education in China, instead of adherence to the British or American varieties as a norm, should focus on English

as an international language, which can be used as a tool for liberating means to reflect multicultural values and identities as well as for intercultural and international communication.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the impact of English on the Chinese mainland varies to different extent when viewed from historical, educational and political dimensions. English language education in the Chinese mainland witnessed its inception after the Western intrusion, its ups and downs along with the Chinese historical events, and its high after the Cultural Revolution. Ever since the adoption of the open-door and reform policy by the Chinese government in the 1980s, English has exerted a strong impact on the Chinese educational field at individual, institutional and national levels. Significantly, language policies adopted by the government have always affected English language education greatly; however, critical perceptions towards English teaching in relation to the Chinese language and culture should also be given due consideration in the approach and content of English instruction. On the whole, English is envisaged to gain even more momentum in the 21st century in the Chinese mainland on the ground that the Chinese mainland has benefited largely from its openness to the world and will continue to benefit if moving along the same track in the era of globalization.

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