

English Education in China[†]

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Policy terminology, concluded by the China's central government and the Party, refers to the specialized vocabulary presented the methods and strategies of dealing internal and foreign affairs, characterized with expertised meanings and specific formations. Meanwhile, it has not only been involved in the political arena, but also the economy, science and technology, education, national defense, the people's livelihood, etc. which has been used especially in foreign affairs' interpretation. Such as Professional, scientific, hierarchical, time sensitive characteristics has decided the particularity of the policy terminology research of Chinese-English interpreting. Prior to exploring Chinese-English consecutive interpreting in the fields of national affairs, interpreters should regard the acknowledgements of current situations of domestic and international affairs as the most significant mission. Simultaneously, Chinese-English consecutive interpreting has been considering the interpretive theory of translation from Paris's scholars-"deverbalization" and "cognitive supplement" as the theoretical guidance. The principles of accuracy and culture are not only conformed to the core subject, but also political sensitivity and culture with Chinese characteristics. There have existed some problematically inappropriate collocation, redundancy, unconverted parts of speech in numerous pragmatic applications, which will be solved by the strategic methods of literal interpretation and paraphrasing, liberal translation, affixation and vocabulary synthesis.

Key Words: Policy Terminology, English Education, China

1. Introduction

China is a multilingual and multidialectal country with 56 ethnic groups, among which the Han Chinese, the biggest ethnic group in China, speak Putonghua and the 55 minority groups speak as many as 80 to 120 languages (Zhou, 2003). English is a second language for most Han Chinese and a third language for minority Chinese besides Putonghua (Lam, 2007). Its popularity has fed a booming industry of English education in china. In both major cities and small towns, teenagers as

well as people in their 30s or 40s pay a fortune to learn this language, either to further their education in a foreign country, get a promotion in their companies, or just to be better connected to the rest of the world. This essay discusses the English education in China, including the history of English education, the current English teaching environment in China, and the reason why English is the most popular second language in China.

2. History of English Education in China

English in China has a rich history in both cultural and linguistic aspects. Language learning and teaching in China ran from the early 17th century (Hu & Gu, 2002). The introduction of English into school education is a result of China's encounter with the West since the 19th century (Wang & Gao, 2008). Although this contact was

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unfortunate in the sense that it was accompanied by battles and invasions, the advanced weapons used by Western countries made China realise the importance of connecting with the rest of the world. However, the Cultural Revolution that started in 1966 led to a whole decade of chaos and isolation, during which the formal education system ceased to function, and the motivation for learning foreign languages were totally undermined (Hu, 2002).

The end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 and the national programme of “Four modernisations” brought a new era of political, economic and social development (Hu, 2002; Wang & Gao, 2008). Since China’s reform and opening up in 1978, English language education has been increasingly emphasised for its important role in accelerating China’s modernisation process and in providing access to new socioeconomic opportunities to individual learners (Wang & Gao, 2008). Since foreign language study was included in the junior and senior secondary curriculums as a core subject in the early 1980s, millions of students have received formal instruction in English (Hu, 2003). English became a required subject on the nationally prescribed primary curriculum in 2001, but large cities and economically affluent areas have started to conduct English classes years back (Wu, 2001). Since 1980s, massive investments have been made to upgrade the various components of English language teaching (ELT), including curriculums, textbooks, tests, and teachers’ qualifications.

However, the unbalanced economic and cultural development in different parts of China presents a challenge to providing quality English education in various regions (Hu & Gu, 2002). Studies have shown that significant differences exist in language teaching developments between the major cities and small towns, and observable gaps have been shown in proficiency, classroom behaviours, and language learning strategies between students from developed and less developed areas (Hu, 2003). This is contributed by several factors.

Firstly, developed areas have more advanced teaching facilities and instructional equipment at their disposal. In the 1980s, limited national resources were first channelled strategically into coastal regions, in order to accelerate social and economic reform and development (Hu, 2003). The 1985 nationwide reform had a key component of decentralisation, which made local governments increasingly responsible for implementing basic education (Yin, 1993). Because of the differences in economic prosperity in different areas, it is easier for the economically developed coastal and urban areas to raise financial resources to purchase better facilities and equipment, while remote areas often lack the “hardware” necessary to support educational reform and innovations (Hu, 2003). Secondly, developed areas also have greater advantages in terms of English language learning materials compared to less developed areas. Thirdly, students in developed areas have greater access to authentic English materials such as English TV programmes, websites, newspapers and magazines, as well as English pop music, which provided them with a more comprehensive English learning environment (Hu, 2003).

In summary, English education in China has come a long way, and the emphasis on English since 1980s has led to significant improvement in China’s English education. In the past few decades, China is gaining English proficiency much faster than any other country in the region (Hu, 2003). However, it should be noted that as English education is developing as a whole, there is a significant imbalance between the quality of English education in urban and rural areas. This should be the focus of English education reform in the next stage.

3. Features of English Education in China

3.1 English in China’s formal education curriculum

English education has been greatly emphasised in China’s formal education system. English, Chinese and mathematics are considered three

major subjects from primary schools to high schools, and English worth 150 points in College Entrance Examination, constituting 20 per cent of the total score (Hu, 2002). There has been a clear recognition of the importance of English as a tool that countries can use to promote international exchange and foster economic progress, and to acquire scientific knowledge and technological expertise (Hu, 2002).

3.1.1 Classroom Behaviours

Chinese learners are often perceived as reserved, reticent and passive, and the English classroom has been defined as dominantly teacher-centred and grammar-focused (Wen, 2003; Wang & Gao, 2008). This is true in traditional English education that is part of China's formal curriculum, where students memorise grammatical rules in order to pass standardised tests. This assertion is supported by the Chinese culture of learning, which regards teachers as authoritative figures, and the hierarchical structure of classrooms is often perceived as a barrier to the implementation of Western-generated teaching methods, such as communicative language teaching (Hu & Gu, 2002; Wang & Gao, 2008).

However, to say that all Chinese learners are passive is an overgeneralisation. Western-generated teaching methods that emphasise interaction between teachers and students are currently on the rise in China, as an increasing number of Chinese learners have a more practical goal in learning English, and teaching methods such as communicative language teaching has proved to be effective in this aspect (Wang & Gao, 2008). As a growing number of Western-trained English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers are returning home to teach, the use of those teaching methods are further encouraged.

3.1.2 English textbooks

Adamson and Kwo (2002), after reviewing secondary English textbooks, found that these textbooks are largely compiled for China's economic and political utility, which is a common feature of formal curriculum in China. However,

most professionals recognise the impact of China's entering into global stage on English learning, and urge that English education should be more pragmatically oriented to cater to societal demands (Pang et al, 2002). This trend to meet societal demands is gaining influence, and even College English Test (CET) is undergoing reforms, so that it can be used as a reliable indicator of whether and how learners' competences match society's needs (Jin & Yang, 2006). Meanwhile, the Ministry of Education has allowed seven economically developed coastal provinces to develop their own textbooks, allowing them to choose textbooks that incorporate new conceptions of education and international education developments (Hu, 2003).

In addition to serving the practical needs of employment, textbook writers also recognise that one of the key aims of English education is to help students obtain an understanding of cultures and civilisation of English-speaking countries (Feng, 2007). Educators thus need to reach a balance between English for pragmatic values and English for cultural advantages.

3.2 English in informal educational institutions

In addition to English taught in public school system, there are a range of private institutions that offer English classes that serve different needs. Some teaching institutions are exam-oriented, while others focus on gaining the ability to communicate fluently. The exam-oriented mode is represented by institutions that provide targeted trainings of English tests such as IELTS, TOFEL, and other aptitude tests such as SAT, SSAT and GRE, the result of which are necessary to apply for high schools or universities in English-speaking countries. These institutions focus less on gaining functional English, and more on exam skills and techniques that enable students to get a better result. The industry leader in this sector, New Oriental Education & Technology Group (New Oriental), was listed on New York Exchange in 2006 (New Oriental, 2017), showing how vast and profitable the market is. As of 2016, it has 771 learning centres and more than 26.6 million student

enrolments (New Oriental, 2017). With regard to English education that focus on mastering the language rather than passing the test, relevant teaching institutions often target on young children who have not face the pressure of passing standardised test yet. The main purpose of this type of education is to prepare students for an English speaking environment, and to develop their social and interpersonal skills at the same time.

English education in those informal institutions increasingly starts at an early age. Students who learn their ABCs when they become a first grader are considered late starters, and bilingual kindergarten has become a common phenomenon in China, while more and more parents rush their children as young as 2 to 3 years old to English teaching institutions (Sun et al, 2016). This is because various second language acquisition theories point out that children who start learning a second language at a young age have a greater chance of mastering it at the level of native speakers, and would perform better compared to their peers who started learning English at an later age in terms of English receptive vocabulary, English productive vocabulary, and English receptive grammar (Sun et al, 2016).

4. Conclusion

English language education has been on the rise since 1980s. This heat was first deprived from the need to promote cultural, social and economic development of China, as most cutting-edge results in science, technology, and other areas of specialty are first published in English. Also, as most developed countries are English speaking countries, including the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and Australia, English is an essential tool that facilitate communication and cooperation with those countries. This eager to connect with the world is fuelled by the reform and opening up policy that started in 1978, which opened up China to the rest of the world. English is also important in terms of individual

development, and fluent English is considered a highly marketable skill, with the additional benefit of connecting individual learners to the world, broadening their horizons and enabling them to gain a more profound understanding of different cultures and civilisations.

The English education reform in China is characterised by top-down investments in infrastructures, facilities, and curriculum. The different levels of economic development in China's regional area led to an imbalance in the quality of English education, and developed areas generally have access to more innovative pedagogy and more advanced facilities. This disparity should be addressed in the future English education reform. The landscape of English education in China is primarily comprised by two sectors: the formal school system and the private teaching institutions. While the English education in formal education system is primarily grammar-based and teacher-centred, reform has been made to adopt more Western teaching methods, and several provinces are allowed to use textbooks that incorporate more innovative pedagogies. As to private English teaching institutions, the two distinctive features of those institutions are that they can serve different needs of learners by providing tailor made curriculum, and they increasingly target young children in their classrooms.

In conclusion, English education in China is shaped by government initiatives and individual needs. Based on the current trend, China's English education is likely to become more pragmatic to satisfy the need of society and individual learners.

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