



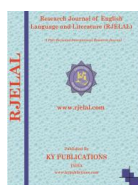
THE USE OF ENGLISH IN MODERN CHINA

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Abstract

English has been widely used in many nations and it may continue to play an important role in the international environment. Thus, using English seems to be a necessary choice for every non-English speaking country that strives to integrate itself into the whole world. China is such a good example. This paper starts with a brief description of English development in the early stages of China. It then focuses on the changes that have taken place in several main aspects of modern China and analyzes some possible reasons for its English use. Then it proceeds to explore the use of various languages that co-exist in current China. Finally, this paper also attempts to discuss the implications for English language teachers.

Keywords: modern China, English, education system, media, tourism, business

I. Introduction

With the speeding process of globalization, the role of English as an international language becomes more and more important. Crystal (Pennycook, 1994:8) has observed:

English is used as an official or semi-official language in over 60 countries, and has a prominent place in a further 20. It is either dominant or well-established in all six continents. It is the main language of books, newspapers, airports and air-traffic control, international business and academic conferences, science, technology, medicine, diplomacy, sports, international competitions, pop music, and advertising.

Based on the above statement, it can be seen that English has been widely used in many countries and it may continue to play an important role in international environment. Thus, using English seems to be a necessary choice for every non-English speaking country that strives to integrate itself into the whole world, China is such a good example.

II. The development of English in the early stage after establishment of PRC

More than fifty years ago, when PRC was just founded, Chinese government had already recognized the importance of learning a foreign language because it was in urgent need of absorbing some advanced skills and experience from developed countries and improving the backward situation. During this period, Russia held predominant position in Chinese foreign affairs, compared with other countries which had established diplomatic relations with China. Therefore, China needed to cultivate a large quantity of talents who had a good command of Russian and learning Russian in China was very popular in the 1950s. However, as compared to Russian, the development of English in that decade was very slow which was mainly due to limited government support and its regulations. Ding and Zhang (2003) stated that it was during the seven years from 1949 to 1956 that the scale of English education for pupils and high school students had shrunk. Until 1956

when Chinese government was aware of the importance of strengthening the education of foreign languages apart from Russian, the total number of English majors in universities increased to more than 2,550, while from 1953 to 1956 the figure was 1,348. Therefore, based on the secondary role of English that held in Chinese educational system in this particular stage, English use seemed to be very limited in China.

III. The use of English in current China

In current China, English is not an official language and it is only taught as a foreign language. However, as its use as an international language increases, English is still involved in many aspects of Chinese people's life, including education, tourism, business, media and internet.

3.1. English used in Chinese educational system

Currently, in PRC there is vast interest in English; 250 million out of 1.3 billion seek to learn the language in various ways at various levels (Mcarthur, 2002:357). In fact, in order to make learners adapt to the needs of communication with people from other countries, English use becomes wider in Chinese education, which can be easily seen in the following aspects: A large number of original English books related to various subjects have been published and used massively in higher education as first-hand resources; bilingual education is put into practice in some comprehensive universities recently so that teachers engaged in various fields are all required to speak English when using related English publications; academic papers are usually written in English in order to get involved in the international academic circle; English teachers and learners possibly become the largest group of English users in China, etc.

In the current Chinese educational system, English has a predominant role in foreign-language teaching. In the past two decades, English is a compulsory course for a majority of students from grade one in junior high school onwards, although a few students from northeast are entitled to choose Japanese as their foreign language for the area where they live used to be the colony of Japan. I have conducted a survey in a grade one Japanese

class of foreign language school of Nanchang University. The result showed that only one of the forty students learned Japanese in high school while the rest of them had been learning English for six years before starting to learn Japanese at university. Thus, the priority of English teaching is obvious in China.

Moreover, English teaching tends to be imposed on children at an earlier age. According to Lin (2002), a new policy is carried out by the Chinese education ministry so that for students from cities and developed areas, English teaching will be implemented from grade 3 of primary schools; for students in remote areas, age of onset is usually from grade one of middle schools.

In addition, China also has an integrated system to evaluate learners at different English levels, which could motivate students to learn English. For example, passing the College English Test for Band 4 (CET 4) successfully is an essential condition for non-English majors to obtain their degrees; CET 6 is designed for higher-level non-English majors; TEM 4 and TEM8 are used to test English majors and even people entering the workforce need to take an English test to seek a higher position. What's more, with the increasing number of students who take GRE, IELTS and TOFEL tests, English training courses provided by privately-run training agencies have emerged, which is also a form of English use in educational system.

3.2. English used in tourism and business

According to the statistics from "China Tourism Statistics 2019", the number of foreign tourists coming into China has reached 60.7 million. With the prosperity of tourism, for the purpose of removing language barriers and accelerating the economic development, China needs many English talents in every walk of life, especially guides, hotel staff and salespersons, which to some extent promote the popularization of the English language. For example, in order to eliminate the inconveniences of those newcomers, all the taxi drivers in Beijing and other big cities are encouraged to learn basic English.

In addition, English firstly used in business in China can be traced back to the old days. As one of the earliest motivations for Chinese to use English, business after China's entry to WTO creates more chance for Chinese people to use English because of increasingly frequent international trade.

3.3. English used in media and internet

With the reform and opening-up in China, English media has been developing quickly in order to promote the exchange of ideas. In the field of news and technology exchange, cooperation had been set up between China and other 134 countries by the end of 2003. Over 100 countries and regions can receive the programs from international channels of China Central Television (Tian, 2004). Apart from English channels, China also has its own English newspapers and foreign language publishing houses which are the platforms for Chinese and people from other countries to understand each other and consist of groups of excellent Chinese English users including broadcasters, reporters, interpreters, news presenters and editors.

Moreover, it is generally accepted that internet is the biggest media in the present world for English online can accelerate the process of information exchanges via emails, English advertisements and etc, which may benefit the development of a country's economy and culture, including China. With the coming of international era, in order to grasp computer skills, it is inevitable for all the people who have recognized the importance of internet in 21st century to learn English because English is the basic language of computer science.

3.4 English, Mandarin Chinese and Chinese dialects

As the carrier of cultural and economic communication, English has been used widely in many aspects of China, such as education, media, tourism and business. However, it is not an official language of China and no one has it as a first language. Usually most people with English as a foreign language belong to the well-educated group. But there are still a large quantity of Chinese who are not English users. Therefore, using English as a common language for communication seems

impossible in close future. However, as an international language, using English is the necessary choice for the development of current China because more opportunities can be created in international community.

Mandarin Chinese is a common language for Chinese people and the only official language in China. Although there are fifty-six ethnic groups in China, Mandarin Chinese is imposed on the education of most minorities, including Tibetans, Uigurs, and Koreans. Therefore, it is the tool of communication for people from different ethnic groups and from different regions of China, and it is usually spoken in formal public situations, for example, at press conference and in TV programs.

However, the preferred languages of communication for people living in the same region are dialects instead of Mandarin Chinese. Dialects are often used in families and a specific community. Chinese may speak different dialects according to different areas where they are living. Furthermore, for a minority of people who have no education background, especially old-aged people and those who live in the remote areas, dialects is the only way for communication. Moreover, the great importance of dialects was attached to the spread of some old and excellent cultural traditions, for dialects are the languages widely used in some traditional Chinese local dramas. Some people even tend to learn another dialect when they move to a new area in order to get involved in the local culture.

At present, all these languages co-exist in Chinese society and are the essential tools for people to understand each other. Moreover, all of them are changing because of mutual influence. According to Li (Kirkpatrick and Xu, 2002:270), the presence of Chinese Characteristics is a basic part of English used in China. Many examples can be given to demonstrate this.

IV. Change in language classrooms and implications for English language teachers

As an English language teacher in university and a non-native English learner, I have a very close look at the changes that have taken place in language classrooms in China in recent years. For

instance, many facilities are started to be equipped in classrooms to help students learn English; communicative approach is being adopted by more and more teachers; traditional language teaching methods which include rote and grammatical drills has fallen into heated debate, etc.

There is little doubt that teaching methods adopted widely in China have changed as well. At present, group work and discussion naturally become the methods that teachers are most likely to use in speaking and listening classes, because people's needs for English mainly focus on the communicative skills. However, Murray (Pennycook, 1994:160) pointed out that "informal class discussion" is facing a strong resistance in classes of China. Jochnowitz (Pennycook, 1994) observed that China would be a different kind of society, if free classroom discussion and independent thinking were encouraged. Therefore, it seems significant to find a way to help students adapt to more communicative teaching methods and prepare them for the real-life situations outside the classrooms.

Apart from changing teaching methods, the aid of multi-media is an indispensable way for improving learners' communicative skills and stimulating their interest in language learning, which may lead to strong motivation for them to learn English.

V. Conclusion

In the process of globalization, the increasing use of English is an inevitable choice for China to achieve its international position and this trend will remain in the near future. In this paper, both the phenomena and reasons related to current English use have been discussed to illustrate that English use in China is changing and will possibly continue to change according to people's needs of communication, which have also indicated that the main task of English teachers at present is to help students adapt to more communicative teaching methods and prepare them for real-life situations outside the classrooms.

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