

# GLOBALIZATION AND LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING IN CHINA

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Globalization has been an irreversible trend in the world economic and social advances. China, as an indispensable developing power, is playing a significant role on the world stage. Language, as a cultural element, is also affecting the process of China's globalization. This paper aims to study the relationship between globalization and the cultural development of foreign language teaching and learning in China. It analyzes the reasons for the boost of foreign language teaching and learning in the age of knowledge economy. Language, conveying ideological, political and cultural connotations, carries more significance beyond its linguistic importance. In the context of globalization, therefore, language teaching and learning is a more complicated issue than a pure culture indicator.*

## **KEYWORDS**

*Globalization, the Age of Knowledge Economy, Language Teaching and Learning, Linguistic Capital*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Globalization, nowadays, has become a fashionable word in the popular context of average people. It is also a key word in the academic discourse of politics, economy, sociology, technology as well as culture (Block and Cameron, 2002: p1). Language, as a substantial constitute of culture, is changing the world, nations as well as people's life through the increasingly frequent communication locally, nationally and regionally. In China, the national language---Putonghua or Mandarin, which has 5000 years of history, is now facing the challenges arose from foreign languages, especially English. There is an unprecedented wave of teaching and learning foreign languages, which is as hot as the booming of using internet, inside and outside school settings in China. However, this new phenomenon of language teaching and learning is not only as simple as an educational or academic issue in the globalization context, because culture per se as well as language is meaningless without carrying political, economical and social connotations. English is the primary foreign language taught widely in most Chinese schools, this paper mainly refers foreign language as English. Focusing on the globalization context, this paper, first of all, aims to explore the correlation between the new phenomenon of language teaching and learning with the potential political, economic and social factors. Secondly, it tentatively analyses the motivations of teaching from teacher's perspective and learning from parents and students' perspectives in the context of globalization and knowledge economy. Thirdly, this paper evaluates the ideological and cultural conflicts between foreign language teaching and learning and Chinese culture and language. In conclusion, controversial implications and impacts of globalization on language teaching and learning will be provided.

## **2. GLOBALIZATION AND THE SPREAD OF FOREIGN LANGAUGE TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Globalization is a worldwide phenomenon happening in the scale of all the nations. However, different people, especially scholars, perceive this phenomenon differently and define it in

various ways. Some simply perceive globalization as the diffusion of Western modernity (Held and McGrew, 1999: p12). Some regard it as the overwhelming impact of global economic process, including production, consumption, trade, capital flow, and monetary interdependence (Burbules, 2000: p2). For some others, it is conceived as a highly differentiated process, which happens in all the domains of social activities including the political, the military, the legal, the cultural, the ecological etc. Concerning the debate about globalization, there are mainly three schools of thought according to Held and McGrew (1999: p2), the hyperglobalizers, the skeptics and the transformationalists. The hyperglobalizers think that global capitalism, governance and culture have replaced more local institutions, for example local business, national government and native culture. The order of the world and life has been taken over by global arrangement. The skeptics believe that global capitalism has led to the polarization between nations. The development of internalization has to be regulated by national governments. The transformationalists argue that globalization is the key driving force behind the rapid social, political, economic and cultural changes which are reshaping modern societies and world order.

Although perspectives and attitudes towards globalization vary, it is happening and does bring about changes to nations and individuals. The process of globalization in China may fit the third view of transformationalist which is more dialectical toward this new global situation. In addition, no matter what position one may take, there is no denying that culture in the whole world and in each nation is also influenced by the globalization process. According to Tylor, culture per se is also a complex whole, which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society (Robertson and White, 2003: p89). Language, which is not only a part of culture, but also a important conveyor of the other cultural elements, will be changed or influenced by other agents of globalization and further reflects changes on other social domains like the economic, the social and the political.

With the development of modern technology, especially the information and communication technology, more and more business transactions, social communication and international issues can be conducted more easily and quickly mainly through languages. What language can be the dominating lingua franca in this trend? It is obvious that more frequently European languages like English, French, German, are chosen as the lingua franca in international communication. According to Devoir's research data in 1997, about 84% of the internet resources are presented in English (Maurais and Morris, 2003: p20). No exception in China, mainly English and several other foreign languages are required to be learnt by schools at different levels. English definitely ranks the top in most non-English speaking countries as the first priority for second language learning. Why does only English seem to become a universal language in the process of globalization? Various explanations can be searched in literatures. Pells attributes the simple structure and grammar of English as the biggest advantages to the wide acceptance of English as well as American culture (Pells, 2002: p8). The process of economic globalization is conveyed by media and international organizations and the economic dominance of the US as the essential reason. Historical reason, which may be traced back to the colonization of many countries by the UK, should not be ignored (Phillipson, 1993:p31). However, if these illustrations can be used to explain the spread of English in China? Are there any specific features of the foreign languages dissemination in the process of globalization? Further exploration should be carried on.

### **3. THE RISE AND FALL OF THE EDUCATION OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN CHINA**

Foreign language teaching first emerged in the semi-colonized period started from 1840 in Chinese history. Western imperial countries headed by the UK invaded into the feudal China and interfered with its economic system and national sovereignty through signing unequal treaties. English was first taught only in schools set up by missionaries. From then on, English was taught

as the most popular language in Chinese modern school system (Adamson, 2002:p233). However, since 1950's, the world politics began to experience the Cold War period, and China was grouped with Russia and cut the relationship with other Western countries. English teaching was suspended, but Russian became popular in Chinese education. Russian was learnt even from primary school and almost by every people in the society including scientists, workers and farmers. Teachers of Russian were looked upon with envy and respect; English teachers had to be silent or were forced to change their profession or leave their position. Some were even purged as traitors at that time (Adamson, 2002:p233). In 1960s, however, the Sino-Soviet relationship broke up due to the political disagreements. Therefore, Russian learning came into its low tide in China. During that time Russian were still taught but it was not so highlighted as before. Adding the collapse of USSR in 1991, Russian language teaching and learning has almost disappeared in mainstream school system in China (Mcarthur, 2003:p20). Even Russian lost its priority after the deterioration of Sino-Soviet relationship, English was not rehabilitated because of another political movement 'Red Culture Revolution' dismissed all the formal education in China. Until late 1970s, after Deng Xiaoping assumed his power, political and economic order was back to the normal track and education system was resumed. As the 'Open Door' policy and the notion of socialist modernization were promoted in the early 1980s, English as a necessary tool to learn technology from Western advanced countries was emphasized on in schooling system again (Adamson, 2002:p239). During this time, English learning was only confined to the academic circle and universities which could be called elite learning. In 2001, the entry to the World Trade Organization and the successful bidding for hosting 2008 Olympic Games in China added more impediments to the English teaching and learning. The more professional and specialized English elites are needed for the international communication and transactions and the basic English user at the mass level are urgently required in order to guarantee the success of the international fair. Nowadays, not only in schools but also in communities, not only in the young but also among the old, English learning is regarded as a compulsory subject for a qualified Chinese citizen.

The historical development of language teaching in China is not only a simple linguistic issue. It is correlated with other elements of changes in national and international environment. First and foremost, the fluctuation of political situation directly influences the diplomatic and international relationship of China with other countries. Language is not only a communication tool, but also intimately connected with ideology. Therefore, the choice of learning language reflects the strengths and weakness of political forces. Secondly, the priority of learning foreign languages is also stimulated by the economic development. At the beginning of the Cold War, USSR was still a powerful representative of economic and technological advancement and the Chinese economic construction was greatly supported by the USSR, so Russia was diffused widely in China. When coming into the new economic order, Western countries, especially the US, take the lead of international business and the China's opening to the outside world has to be realized mainly through the contacts with these developed countries. Additionally, the entry of WTO further clears the limitations and regulations for China to conduct international transactions in all the domains with other countries. In order to make this process more smoothly, the clearance of language barrier is also urged by the Chinese government. Therefore, the booming of English teaching is the need of economic development. Thirdly, the penetration of IT technology and Western popular culture, which are introduced as commodity into the life of Chinese people, also motivates the initiatives at the mass level to pick up English as soon as possible. The outside stimulations came from the global changes seem to overweigh the inside motivations of language learning in Chinese people. From a dialectical philosophy perspective, outside forces cannot be expressed without the cooperation of inside factors. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the inner motivations of learning foreign languages at a micro level of teachers and students.

## **4. THE DEVELOPMENT OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THE AGE OF KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY**

In the age of knowledge economy, foreign language, especially English, is not only a form of knowledge, but also become the primary resources of economy in the special linguistic environment of China (Zhang, 2003:p140). Language competence can enhance worker's employability as a high communication skill; language teaching, as marketable knowledge, has become a valuable commodity for learners and created changes in the labor market. Therefore, language as knowledge creates and extracts more economic values in the globalization context.

### **4.1. Teaching language as a good business and a good profession**

In the new socialist market economy, linguistic competence is also transferred from an academic subject into a modern commodity. Due to the booming of language learning demands from the children and adults, a big market emerges and a great deficiency appears in the labour market as well. Thus, language teacher, especially English teacher, becomes a good profession not only in social status but also in economic benefits. English training schools are also making good money from this trend. Many international organization and private business increasingly recognize the market potentials of English training business. According to the official statistics in Shanghai, there is about 1 billion market value in the field of language training. Another convincing example is the New Oriental School in Beijing which mainly deal with the English examination training like TOEFL, GRE, GMAT and IELTS etc. It only started from a single teacher English class and now has grown up into a big private business group with billions of assets (<http://www.cpe.com.cn/>).

In the formal school setting, English curriculum and teachers are more concerned by policy-makers and students, because English scores are of great importance for them. English teachers have more class hours than teachers of other subjects or even than Chinese teachers. Taking more teaching responsibility means English teachers have more income than other teachers. In an international scale, native speaker teachers are of more qualifications and more eagerly needed by China and other countries. The director of the International House in Britain puts: 'Once we used to send gunboats and diplomats abroad, now we are sending English teachers' (Phillipson, 1992: p8). There is also a tendency in China that American English accent is more popular than British English accent due to the popularity of American media. Therefore, the linguistic model is marked with geographic preference (Block and Cameron, 2002: p22). Compared with foreign native-speaker teacher, non-native Chinese teacher of English cannot take advantage in the high level English teaching, but they do take the majority in the middle level such as high schools and compulsory schools. A hierarchy of teaching profession is gradually formed from native-speaker English teacher, Chinese teacher of English and teacher of other subjects. However, both kinds of English teachers benefit from the trend of English spreading socially and economically.

### **4.2. Bilingualism as linguistic capital**

Alfred once said 'The most valuable of all capital is that invested in human beings' (Becher, 1983:p13). In the age of knowledge economy, foreign language learning has become an invisible investment for increasing human capital at national and individual level.

Having realized the significance of English, especially its economic productivity in the international forum (Phillipson, 1993:p67), Chinese government increasingly focuses on the English teaching in education system. From primary school to university, there are different national curriculum frameworks for English teaching. English has become a compulsory subject

for middle school and high school students. In colleges and universities, there is a national examination for students to take, which counts considerable credits for their graduation. Even in some key universities like Beijing University, students cannot qualify for the Bachelor Degree if they fail in the exam. Hence, English has become a necessary qualification for the students' credentials.

On the other hand, from the student perspective, they also hold very positive attitude toward English learning. A common phenomenon among the young learners and university students is that they would like to take extra English classes out of school during weekend and holidays. That means students have to spend more time, and energy on English learning and parents have to offer more financial support for their children's study. Why are both the students and parents so motivated about learning English? For the younger learners, a desire to establish good basic for achieving bilingualism in the future study is wide spreading, whereas for the university students good English ability or bilingualism will add value to their 'linguistic capital' in Bourdieu's term (Block, 2002:p5). In other words, those who can speak good English or have high English qualification will be capable of doing high-skilled jobs or taking high positions, which means 'linguistic capital' increase their employability and they will be rewarded well financially. Another reason for the spread of learning English is the motivation to go abroad to study. The target countries for their study are always the English speaking countries like US, Britain, Canada etc, which are also developed countries. The pursuit of learning English and specialized subjects promotes the learning of English in the scale of China as well as in other countries. The linguistic knowledge study is disseminated nationally and internationally. Therefore, globalization changes people's motivation of learning English for economic reasons. Bilingual competence as an importance communication skill represents valuable 'linguistic capital', which can further credit 'human capital' in market competition.

Actually, the booming of language teaching and learning is a powerful manifestation of the development of knowledge economy. Firstly, English language teaching and learning has become the intangible resource which further stimulates the productivity and competitiveness in the labour market of teaching profession and the special environment of school study. Secondly, the increasing fluidity of English teachers internationally and nationally develops more forms of employment. For example, English teacher in formal schools can be free-lancer teacher in private schools. Many English teachers create their own innovative teaching methodology through running self-employed English schools, like Li Yan Crazy English (Lai, 2001:p33). Thirdly, learning English and improving English level have been pursued by students as marketable knowledge. More and more students are willing to buy the commodity of English training and expect to increase their marketability in the future career. Fourthly, the commoditization of English teaching and learning breaks the stereotyped relationship of teachers as leaders and learners as followers, and establish a new form of teachers as providers and learners as clients. These four features of English teaching and learning not only fit the key trends of knowledge economy concluded by Tonkin and Reagan, but also further explain the variety of it. According to their (2003: p11) theories, English teaching and learning can be perceived as the weightless economy and weightless work. Relationship between teachers and learns is changed from an extremely hierarchical model to a more equalized and complicated pattern. English is a high skill for teachers and marketable knowledge for students. Since the booming of English teaching and learning is the product of knowledge economy, its economic importance may overwhelm its linguistic significance in the global environment. Furthermore, it will further expedite the economic globalization and create more market potentials globally.

## **5. THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALIZATION**

It is widely assumed that the spread of English learning will enhance the quality of the whole nation in China. Chinese government promulgates a series of policies to strengthen the significance of English learning. For example, no matter what subject a student majors in, he must pass the national standard English examination in order to obtain the professional title in the career. Any PhD thesis must be composed basing on the original English materials (Zhang, 2003: p138). It is true that more people know more English words or grammars through the preparation for taking exams. However, is it true if one cannot pass English exam, he is not a qualified talent. Is it true that only those who have good mastery of English can be regarded as talents. No matter what academic achievement one may have conquered, if he cannot pass English exam, he is not valuable to be a scholar. Has English ability become the exclusive standard for the judgment of talents in China? Another question people may ask is who they are. Chinese people have almost 5000-year language history. Why do they have to learn English which seems to proceed the importance of their mother tongue. If the 'linguistic imperialism', which refers to the dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and reconstruction of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages according to Phillipson (1992:p47) really has invaded into China. Is China in the danger of losing its national and cultural identity?

According to Modiano (2001: p162), people do not only learn the rules of language of how to express meaning, but also access to ideologies conveyed by language which imply the individual, the world, and the social realities that frame people's experience. He further argues 'one is ontologically colonized by the ideologies which flourish in the required tongue'. It is true in China that more and more young people strive to go abroad. It is true that a lot of young kids are happy to celebrate their birthday in MacDonal'd's. It is fashionable if one can pop in some English words when speaking Chinese. Do these phenomena mean that China is going to be Englishized, Westernized or unified? Does China have to pay the price of its national identity for becoming a qualified member of the global community?

As illustrated in the previous content, in the context of globalization and the age economy knowledge, English is going to play a more and more important role in the academic study and economic life. However, the views that China is at stake of losing national and cultural identity or China is facing the ideological transformation due to the spread of English are far too pessimistic or exaggerated. The first countering argument is that China has experienced the history of colonization and the spread of English, but people's ideas and life were not westernized at all. Great differences still exist between China and western countries ideologically and culturally. The long history of Chinese culture and civilization overwhelms the ideological influences carried by language spread. Secondly, a dialectic perspective should be taken to discuss the fate of national identity. Is the purpose of learning English to be enabled to think and behave like an American or a British people? The answer is absolutely not. English only acts as a tool which can help Chinese people to express and present themselves in the international forum. More importantly, Chinese people should diffuse Chinese language as well as Chinese culture through the media of English. In other words, the better English Chinese people speak, the more they can tell the world about China. It is not important that what language Chinese use. What matters is the content and idea that Chinese people want to express. The voice of China should be heard by other countries in the world. Hence, the purpose of learning English is to protect and foster national identity rather than to imitate Western culture. Thirdly, a pleasing phenomenon can be noticed in China is that the growing overseas students come to China to learn Chinese language and culture. According to the statistic of Chinese Ministry of Education, about 350,000 overseas students from 160 countries come to China to study from until 1999. Especially from

1992 to 1996, the figure jumped from 14,000 to 41,000. That is, the annually increasing rate is about 30% (<http://www.moe.edu.cn/>). This phenomenon implies that Chinese culture is not colonized and Chinese language still maintains its own charismas which represents the national identity of China. According to academic report by the British Council, English will not hold a monopoly by the middle of 21<sup>st</sup> century, but that it will be part of the an oligopoly with a few other languages, each having its sphere of influence (Maurais and Morris, 2003: p16). Graddol even predicts that Chinese will be in the same hierarchical level like English as a big language in 2050 (Maurais and Morris, 2003: p17). These statistics indicate that English will not hold the hegemonic power to destroy Chinese cultural, whereas Chinese language will become booming as the strengthening of Chinese power in the process of globalization. Therefore, globalization will lead to diversity rather than uniformity. More Chinese people can speak English and more people in the world will know more about China.

## **6. CONCLUSIONS**

In the worldwide scale, the trend of globalization is unavoidable; no matter it is problematic or positive for different nations. In the situation of China, globalization is an opportunity for its economic development and also a challenge politically and ideologically. On the one hand, in order to be assimilated into the track of economic globalization, China has to adopt Western style of economic administration. On the other hand, China, as a socialist country, has different ideological system and even controversial political position about the world affair. Therefore, language, conveying ideological, political and cultural connotations, carries more significance beyond its linguistic importance. The spread of English teaching and learning is bound to be wider and wider as the globalization develops.

In the age of knowledge economy, the mastery of English has become a high skill for professional teachers and 'cultural capital' or 'linguistic capital' for learners. English level is closely linked with employability and occupational competition which may further bring about changes in the labour markets. In addition to the economic manifestations of the influences of English teaching and learning, ideological and political impact of new language should not be ignored. Even though in fact, there are some negative results of the language hegemony of English, or the pessimistic influences of language imperialism, they cannot threaten the essence of Chinese culture. On the contrary, the spread of English teaching and learning can be perceived as an opportunity to advocate Chinese culture and diffuse the influence of Chinese language to the other countries.

Referring to the three approaches to globalization again, superglobalizer and skeptic's attitude should not be held as positive toward the spread of foreign language. Once again, transformationalist's perspective is suggestive toward this issue. On the one hand, China is going to be more integrated into the globalization or more internationalized through more smooth English communication. On the other hand, China can foster its national identity and disseminate its influence through language communications. Therefore, globalization and the spread of language teaching and learning will interact on each other, and their interactions will be the powerful impediments of the development in all social domains in China.

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