

Factors that Affect Elementary English Education in China in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

With the development of globalization in the 21st century, English has gradually become one of the main tools for communication between countries and people in the world. With the increasing use and importance of the language, English education is becoming more necessary and experiencing development in China. Since it is believed that younger children have a stronger ability to learn new languages, English instruction in primary schools, is essential for students to become fluent in this language. However, in the past decade, primary school English instruction has been facing some difficulties, including the imbalance of English education quality in different regions caused by economic development, the barrier of learning English pronunciation brought by dialects in different parts of China, and the negative impact of excessive after-school tutoring institutions on the quality of English teaching in schools. These challenges hinder the development of English education.

Introduction

With the development of globalization in the 21st century, English has gradually become one of the main tools for communication between countries and people in the world. As a large developing country, China has become more active in the international community in recent years. Therefore, English is an indispensable tool for China to communicate with other countries and to bring Chinese culture to the world. With the increasing use and importance of the language, English education is becoming more necessary and experiencing development in China. Currently, since it is believed that younger children have a stronger ability to learn new languages, more and more younger children are encouraged to learn English (Guo & Guo). English instruction in primary schools, therefore, is essential for students to become fluent in this language. However, in the past decade, primary school English instruction has been facing some difficulties, including the imbalance of English education quality in different regions caused by economic development, the barrier of learning English pronunciation brought by dialects in different parts of China, and the negative impact of excessive after-school tutoring institutions on the quality of English teaching in schools. These challenges hinder the development of English education and need to be recognized and solved.

Methodology

This paper included three main source types: 1) published academic journal articles, 2) books, and 3) author interviews. By researching in academic databases, I selected seven journal articles from journals including *Asia Pacific Education Review*, *Culture and Economy*, *Economics of Education Review*, *Multilingual Education*, *Time Education*, *University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository*, and *University of Wisconsin-Platteville*, and books including *English Language Education Across Greater China* and *Spotlight on China*.

For the interviews, I selected two of my relatives in elementary school in different cities and their parents too. One of the students transferred to Chengdu from a more rural city, Luzhou, and another just entered elementary

school in Beijing. Because they have experience studying in these three different cities, representing three different levels of development in China, my relatives gave me helpful information that helped me compare English education levels. During the interviews, I asked them about their difficulty level with textbooks, resources at school, exams, and tutoring centers. From them, I learned that they start learning English at different ages, exams in Beijing are much harder than in Luzhou, and schools in Beijing have many more resources and technological devices related to English learning, including more native speaker teachers, computers, and developed transportation systems. The interviews gave me many more details about how unbalanced English education quality is across China.

Background

From the establishment of the new government in 1949 until the end of the 20th century, China has focused on developing comprehensive education nationwide to reduce the high illiteracy rate (Hu, 2003). With the help of economic development, English education in China has overcome major challenges during its development, including the scarcity of teachers, teaching resources, and people's low demand to learn another language. In the 21st century, English education in China has made significant progress. Not only has English been included in the education curriculum nationwide, but it has also been included in many national examinations. At the same time, a large number of foreign language schools have been established to provide students with more opportunities to learn different languages (Qu, n.d.). Although English language education has had a positive development since the 2010s, it has begun to face some new issues that need to be discussed and solved, including regional differences in the quality of English education, the influence of local dialects on English pronunciation, and the impact of private tutoring centers. These problems, if ignored, will cause some negative consequences to Chinese primary schools' English education. If the regional differences in English instruction quality are too significant, there will be unfairness when students take national exams and significant pressure on college English instruction (Hu, 2003). Moreover, different regional dialects in China will cause trouble for students when they learn pronunciation and add to the pressure on English teachers (Huang, 2017). Finally, if many educational tutoring institutions are not standardized or regulated, the quality of English education at schools will be impacted, causing difficulties for the long-term development of fluency in English.

Issues that Influence English Education

Issue 1: Economic Development

From the late 20th century to the present time, with the rapid economic growth of China and the rise of its international status, China has been gradually catching up with the developed countries. China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 indicates that the country has joined the import and export trade and co-operations with more foreign enterprises (Hu, 2003). This achievement is undoubtedly a turning point for China, which had been falling behind for many years. Besides economic development, China also ushered in the development of science and technology, becoming comprehensively open to international society. Along with this comes the development of international tourism (Cheng & Wang). Due to multiple stimuli, the demand to speak English has increased, which has led to development of language education, especially at the primary school level. Economic development has been positively affecting English education, for bringing resources and high demand for the language.

Unbalanced Development: Urban & Rural Areas

Cities in China have developed an uneven economy due to different geographical locations and economic policies, and the development of English education is closely related to economic development (Hu, 2003). Developed cities have more advantages for English education in two ways -- more education resources and more connections with the

international community. The most developed cities, such as Beijing and Shanghai, have significant advantages in terms of economy, technology, and other resources. These cities also have better-constructed buildings with updated technology for schools and learning centers. In addition, they have more effective transportation systems for students to access these resources. At the same time, developed cities attract more professional teachers, which leads to higher education quality for students. Compared to other cities, these developed cities are closely connected with the international community through different international events, such as the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing and the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai, the two largest international events China has hosted since the new government was founded. These events contributed to the growing national demand for English. Since 2000, Shanghai's taxi companies have offered English training courses for drivers, and China's national newspaper, *The People's Daily*, has begun printing English-language editions nationwide, preparing the country for international tourists (Hu, 2003). English education has also become an important part of national education. Primary school English education, especially, is considered essential for higher-level English instruction in colleges. In these developed cities, specifically, the government began to use policies to popularize learning English. As the new generation of the country, students are expected to use their English language competence to help China be able to function in international communication systems as part of a globalizing movement (Pavlik, 2012). For example, almost all primary schools, including those in rural areas, are required to teach English from first or third grade (Qu, n.d.). At the same time, parents are becoming aware of the importance of letting their children learn English. In China, it is now common to see parents sending their children to various tutoring centers or private-school English courses (Qu, n.d.).

However, English-education levels in some of China's inland and mountainous cities are much lower compared to those of the cities described above. In China's inland or mountain cities, the speed of economic development is limited mainly for geographic reasons. These cities do not yet have the resources to attract large numbers of foreign businesses or to develop international tourism. As a result, these less developed inland cities do not interact with the international communities as much as the developed cities (Hu, 2003). In addition, students' access to the schools and learning centers is largely limited due to the lack of construction and transportation. Even though most of these cities are also required to start English education in first or third grade, some only have the resources to teach half of the mandatory curriculum. For example, while schools in developed cities use two textbooks every year, schools in some cities only use one, which puts students at a disadvantage. For example, in Luzhou, a city in south Sichuan province, southwest China, children have to walk for hours to get to school everyday because of the lack of infrastructure in the mountain regions (Yang). In addition, due to the lack of international communication in these cities, a large percentage of people do not feel the necessity to learn English. Therefore, English education in primary and secondary schools in developed cities, with better educational resources and opportunities, has a critical gap with other less developed inland cities. This gap results in the imbalance of English education across China (Hu, 2003). Such an imbalance will cause significant problems. First, when students take the National College Entrance Examination, different English proficiency levels will generate too many unfair factors, as English is one of the main subjects in the exam. Second, when students from all over the country enter colleges, it is difficult to provide high-quality English instruction for students at all levels, which puts pressure on colleges that prepare students for the College English Test (Yang).

Case Study: Beijing & Mianyang

In this research project, one each from among China's developed and developing cities, Beijing and Mianyang, will be used to compare the level of English education. Beijing is one of China's most representative developed cities, while Mianyang is a suburban city in Southwest China's Sichuan province. Beijing, as China's capital, and political and economic center, is the heart of communication between China and the world. Beijing's superior position has attracted various global resources. For international enterprises, companies, and tourists, when they think of China, they think of Beijing (Hu, 2003). Therefore, Beijing takes the responsibility of leading national English instruction. People living in Beijing are considered international representatives of China. English is one of the necessary skills for them to live in this international city. Beijing leads the country by having the largest number of English tutoring

centers and international schools. Some private schools require English tests for admission, and children are sent to English tutoring centers by their parents when they are as young as three years old (Hu, 2003). Compared to Beijing, there is a significant gap in English education in Mianyang. Even though it is close to Chengdu, the largest city in southwest China, Mianyang's economy grows slowly mainly due to geographical limitations. There are few foreign enterprises, large international events, or developed international tourism (Yang). As a result, Mianyang does not have frequent communication with the international community, and residents are not exposed to the English-speaking environment. Therefore, schools in Mianyang do not intensely focus on English instruction but consider English as a general teaching requirement instead (Yang). Students in Mianyang who want to attend English schools have to drive two hours to Chengdu, where they have more options and opportunities.

Issue 2: Dialect

In addition to the significant differences in the quality of English instruction caused by regional disparities in economic development, dialects in different parts of China also create obstacles for students to learn English. China has a long history, a vast territory, and rich regional cultures. Although Mandarin is the official language, people in different regions use various dialects and language expressions in daily life. The Chinese language is divided into eight language families according to regions, and there are a total of 128 regional dialects under the language families (Ma & Tan, 2013). Therefore, it is not easy to increase English proficiency in such a complex language system. Students learn a new language based on their existing linguistic knowledge, including the basic vocabularies and grammatical structures of their mother tongues. As a result, EFL learners unconsciously bring those lexical items, pronunciation, and grammatical structures of their mother tongue into learning a new language (Ma & Tan, 2013). This phenomenon of mother language affecting the new language is called language transfer. Due to the differences in pronunciation methods and phonetic elements of dialects in China, students who use these dialects daily will find difficulty learning English pronunciation. If teachers and students do not find ways to solve language transfer in the learning process, it will be difficult for students to communicate with native English speakers. This undoubtedly undermines their actual English proficiency: they can read and listen, but native speakers will likely have trouble understanding them when they speak.

Sichuan & Wenzhou Dialect

In China, there are two regional dialects that are most distinctive. One is the Sichuan dialect, the most widely used and best-preserved dialect in China (Ma & Tan, 2013), and the other is the Wenzhou dialect, the most difficult (Huang, 2017). In the Sichuan dialect, the first phonetic symbol of verbs and nouns is often stressed, and there is no clear distinction between the sounds of n and l. Such language features will make it difficult for students from Sichuan to learn English. They bring the characteristics of the Sichuan dialect into the English pronunciation process. Take the sentence "He often talks loudly in public," for example. The right way to speak aloud is "He 'often 'talks 'loudly in 'public," but there is a high chance that Sichuan students will say "'He 'often 'talks 'loudly 'in 'public" (Ma & Tan, 2013). At the same time, when n and l are not distinguished, many students will make pronunciation mistakes, such as pronouncing "noodles" as "loodles." On the other hand, for Wenzhou people, because they have confusion between the alveolar and the velar nasals, it is challenging for them to pronounce nasal sounds (Ma & Tan, 2013). As a result, they will face difficulties in learning English pronunciation. For example, they tend to pronounce /ŋ/ as /n/ (Huang, 2017). In addition to the Sichuan and Wenzhou dialects, dialects from other parts of China can also pose difficulty to English students and teachers. Although this is a common problem that people face when learning a second language, due to the diversity of Chinese dialects, it is necessary for teachers to carefully help students who use different dialects. In primary school, students' language habits are not completely fixed, so it is a key stage to help them learn pronunciation. Therefore, it is one of the challenges for English education in China to help students to learn English pronunciation skills by overcoming the language transfer brought by dialects.

Issue 3: Tutoring Institutions

In addition to regional economic differences and dialects, English education in primary schools in China is also influenced by off-campus tutoring institutions. As English is one of the main subjects in the most crucial exam for Chinese students, the College Entrance Exam (or 'Gaokao'), people pay more attention to English education and believe speaking English will be more competitive in the work field (Zhang, 2013). More and more parents want their young children to go to private tutoring centers to learn English before they are of school age to get ahead. Seeing this as an opportunity to earn financial benefits, these tutoring centers create anxiety for other parents. They claim that most children learn English before school age, and that the rest of the students are behind and will be less competitive in the National College Entrance Exam (Zhang, 2013). After hearing and believing this, parents are often anxious and pay expensive tuition fees to send their kids to learn English.

It seems promising that more and more children start to learn English at a very young age, but this phenomenon has serious problems. First, the cost of sending children to private English learning centers, especially professional ones with native English-speaking teachers, is extremely high, and this high expense becomes a regular part of the education investment for Chinese parents. High educational costs are concerning for young couples who plan to have children, which leads to a declining birth rate in China. In 2020, the birth rate in China dropped to the lowest in history (Xu, 2015). The declining birth rate will cause a severe population crisis in the future, and the factors that cause this should be addressed. Second, many private institutions have already interrupted the education plan at primary schools (Xu, 2015). When a group of new students comes to a classroom, if most of them have been learning English for years, and a few have not, this situation will put pressure on teachers to make the teaching plans suitable for the whole class. Even more unfortunate is that private tutoring centers often offer higher salaries to attract professional teachers that used to work at school, and this makes parents not see schools as the first place for their children to study. This situation will severely decrease the quality of education at school. Teachers, thinking that students will learn the material from tutoring centers eventually, will not try as hard as before to help students learn in the classroom. In addition, students will not pay attention in the classroom and because they are more willing to get help outside of school (Liu & Bray, 2016). This creates a vicious circle: tutoring centers attract professional teachers by paying higher salaries, which ultimately leads to a decline in the quality of education in schools. The decline in the quality of education in schools, in turn, gives students and parents anxiety, and promotes the emergence and development of more tutoring centers. English is not the only subject affected by after-school tutoring agencies (Zhang, 2013). Other subjects, including mathematics and physics, are also affected. Eventually, tutoring centers gain the most benefit from it. Therefore, to maintain the quality of school education, tutoring centers need to be regulated and reformed.

Suggested Solutions

Since English education in China is faced with the above challenges, some solutions need to be discussed to solve these problems and make English education develop continuously. To address the regional differences in the level of English education, schools and governments can promote some education exchange programs. Teachers from developed cities can volunteer in other cities, while teachers from inland cities can go to developed cities to attend meetings and training programs. These programs promote the sharing of educational resources such as textbooks, technologies, and educational theories. These exchanges will be able to drive the English education quality improvement in inland cities. In order to solve the impact of regional dialects on English pronunciation, teachers can look for similarities between English and dialects in the teaching process. For example, the pronunciation of "s" in the Sichuan dialect is almost identical to English. By looking for similarities like these, teachers can help students learn English pronunciation faster and more accurately, thus reducing the influence of their mother tongue on their oral English. As for tutoring

centers, the Chinese government has started a large-scale plan to regulate off-campus tutoring centers, mainly including limiting business hours and controlling course prices (Zhang et al., 2021). In addition to regulations, other solutions can help students receive higher quality education in schools. First, the government should consider raising school teachers' salaries so that they are not tempted to work in tutoring centers simply because of a higher salary. Secondly, schools should start some programs for students who need extra help but cannot afford the exorbitant charges of tutoring centers.

Conclusion

This paper mainly discusses the new challenges facing English education in China, especially in primary school English education, after it has gone through the development stage. These challenges mainly include regional differences in English education resources, the influence of dialects on students' English learning, and the influence of off-campus tutoring centers on the quality of public schools. It is necessary to attract people's attention through research and the search for solutions. However, during the research process, some areas still do not have enough research support, causing limitations to some degree. For example, in studying Chinese dialects, few studies comprehensively identify the influence of this dialect on English learning and provide appropriate solutions. At the same time, as tighter regulation of tutoring institutions has been recently proposed by the Chinese government, there are still very few relevant studies that have been undertaken on this topic as yet. If more and more researchers can further study the difficulties behind English education and put forward effective ways to overcome them, Chinese students will receive higher quality English instruction and bring China to the world.

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