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English as a global language in China: Teachers' and students' views in Chinese schools

1. Introduction

While the first decade of the 21st century witnessed an unprecedented level of popularity in English across China, the last ten years have seen a fall in the status of English and a meteoric rise of the importance of the Chinese language and culture in the education system (Feng & Adamson, 2019; Pan, 2024). The changed status of English was exemplified in the 2017 English curriculum standards (2017 ECS) for senior high school students (aged 16-18). A few years after the implementation of this curriculum, this paper explores how teachers and students perceive the changed status of English as prescribed in the 2017 ECS, and what this means for the role of English as a ‘global language’ in China.

The research project reported on in this paper focuses on three main issues: (1) whether English or Chinese is now seen as the ‘global language’ amongst teachers and students; (2) whether, to their mind, English should be a compulsory subject in education and the national examination; and (3) whether English education should include the promotion of Chinese language and culture. Before moving to this, however, we will examine how English and English education are positioned from a teaching and assessment point of view in China today, and how this relates to the teaching and learning of Chinese culture, as prescribed in the 2017 ECS.

2. The roles of English and English education in the 2017 English Curriculum Standards

As proposed by Pan and Wang (2024), a notable feature of the 2017 ECS is that English education is deemed to be “of great importance” in spreading Chinese culture and in enhancing global understanding. Specifically, it is assigned the missions of “spreading Chinese culture”, “deepening understandings of the motherland culture” and “(enhancing) patriotism and (strengthening) cultural confidence” (MOE, 2018:1). The ultimate goal is to help students gain a robust sense of national identity, strengthen their confidence in Chinese culture and cultivate a patriotic attitude. English language education is now deemed a tool for spreading Chinese culture and fulfilling the general objective of “cultivating socialist builders and successors with devotion to Chinese culture, international vision and intercultural communication skills” (MOE, 2018: 1-3).

This may at first seem like a paradox – teach English in order to promote Chinese – but a similar rationale was put forward for English education in Japan during the period of internationalization in the late twentieth century (Seargeant, 2009). In the Japanese context, English was embraced as an international language and a necessary skill for Japan to achieve its ambitions of raising its profile as a global player. The logic of the argument was that English as a global language was distinct from the language as a carrier of Anglo-American (or any other English-dominant country’s) culture, and thus could be a ‘neutral’ medium for promoting local Japanese culture on the international stage.

A key idea embedded in the 2017 ECS is that English is deemed to be important and useful for individuals, social development and global communication and understanding. As with the Japanese case, this lingua franca role of English distances students from being impacted by any of the potential cultural or political ‘threats’ of English as it relates specifically to Western Anglophone culture (Pan and Seargeant, 2012). An instrumental stance towards English is thus maintained by the Chinese state. However, the form of this instrumentalism is different from the previous incarnation of the policy in the country. The goal now is “to tell China’s story well, spread the voice of China, show the world a true China to improve its global soft power and the influence of Chinese culture” (Xi, 22 August, 2018). In contrast, in previous eras, this instrumentalism was related to resistance against foreign aggression intended to facilitate modernization or internationalisation (Pan, 2015).

To summarise, the 2017 ECS explicitly stipulates that English education is intended to promote Chinese culture and expand China’s influence globally. The state is concerned that English education in China might promote Western values at the expense of Chinese language and culture. Hence, English education is used as a tool to promote Chinese culture and cultivate nationalism. By emphasizing the “cultivation of patriotism” and “promotion of Chinese culture” in English education, the state directly engages with what it perceives as the potential threat of English-language cultures. By enforcing the importance of Chinese language and culture in English education, it aims to help learners consolidate their own Chinese cultural identity. By fostering students’ patriotic nationalism, the state aims to position English education as a means to reinforce state governance. Within this context, the concept of English as a global language takes on an intriguing aspect, mediating between nationalist and internationalist politics.

3. Methodology

From the above, it could be argued that English education is now viewed as a tool to promote Chinese culture. However, language policies can be planned, but social discourse cannot (Ricento, 2006). Do teachers and students therefore hold similar views to those espoused in the policy regarding the role of English and English education? To address this question, the research reported upon in this article was conducted between August 2021 and January 2022.

To probe the various aspects of this central research question, a pilot study using questionnaires for teachers and students was launched in a middle school in Hunan province in south central China. Based on a pilot study conducted in 2021, we then revised the questionnaires and sent them to 33 key and ordinary schools in 12 provinces across China via Wenjuanxing, an online questionnaire portal. In total, 54 teachers who had adopted the 2017 ECS as their guide in teaching English at senior-high level participated in the survey. These teachers had all been teaching for a minimum of two years, and their ages ranged from 24 to 60. The student questionnaires were distributed by these teachers to their senior high school students. A total of 357 senior high school students aged between 16-18 volunteered to take part in the online questionnaire. This paper examines three major issues covered in the questionnaire: the status of English versus Chinese as a global language; the perceived need for compulsory English education and examinations; and the promotion of Chinese culture via English education. Eight items rated on Likert scales and three open-ended questions from the survey are included in our discussion below. The closed items were analyzed by SPSS 27. The open questions were answered in Chinese and were analyzed thematically (Schreier, 2012). First, the themes were coded independently by two research assistants. Then they needed to compare, discuss and agree on their coding. Where there was a difference or disagreement, a third researcher was involved to assist with the analysis. The survey results are listed below. They were translated by the chief researcher and read by two professional proofreaders.

4. The students' and teachers' views on English and English education

4.1 English vs. Chinese as a global language

In the educational sphere, Chinese language and culture have been prioritized to fulfil the Chinese dream of rejuvenating the great nation of China and to “improve the influence of Chinese culture globally and make the world understand China better” (Xi, 21-22 August, 2018). Within this changing context, how then do teachers and students view the importance of English vis-à-vis Chinese?

In the questionnaire responses, with regard to the dominant status of English, over 70% of the participating students and teachers believed that English is the current dominant language in the world (see Table 1). Both the students and the teachers firmly maintain that English still holds the highest status as a global language.

Table 1. English is the most dominant language in the world.

	Mean	SD	1 ^a (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)
Students	1.48	0.83	73.67	4.2	22.13
Teachers	1.42	0.80	77.78	3.7	18.52

1^a=agree, 2= not sure, 3= disagree

However, when the importance of Chinese is compared with that of English, a significant number of the teachers (75%) and students (65.14%) think that English and Chinese are of the same importance (see Table 2). Those who do not hold this opinion believe that Chinese is more important than English (teachers 23.08% and students 34.57%).

Table 2. Which is more important, English or Chinese?

	Mean	SD	1 ^a (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)
Students	2.34	0.48	0.29	65.14	34.57
Teachers	2.21	0.45	1.92	75.00	23.08

1^a=English, 2= the same, 3= Chinese

More notably, an overwhelming number of students (90.48%) and 87.04% of the teachers believe that the Chinese language is becoming increasingly important and has the potential to overtake English in dominance one day (see Table 3).

Table 3. Chinese is becoming more important among the world languages and has the potential to become the most dominant language in the world.

	Mean	SD	1 ^a (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)
Students	1.15	0.49	90.48	3.64	5.88
Teachers	1.20	0.55	87.04	5.56	7.41

1^a=agree, 2= not sure, 3= disagree

To further explore the participants' points of view, an open question was designed where respondents could explain their opinions in further detail. It is notable that the teachers and students unanimously gave answers in very positive ways with regard to the status of China and the cultural influence of China globally in comparison with the global status and influence of English. They believe that China has become increasingly important in geopolitical terms and that the cultural influence of China is spreading more and more widely.

The teachers' and the students' views are mostly in line with the 2017 ECS stipulation in that they recognise the importance of English for communication while also showing confidence in Chinese language and culture. The majority of the participants showed a belief that Chinese may replace English one day, becoming the world's most dominant language. However, this view is not shared globally and some scholars challenge the idea of a transition of power from the US to China and, specifically, from the status of English to Chinese as the pre-eminent international language. O'Regan (2021), for example, asserts the impossibility of the replacement of English with Chinese precisely because China has been adopting a type of instrumentalism in its domestic language policy (see also Pan, 2011); as such the country has willingly followed normative international standards of English in its academic, political and economic spheres, which are now firmly embedded. Nevertheless, O'Regan does agree that China's soft power has grown globally through the spread of its language and cultural values. It seems that the state has been successful thus far in positioning the foreign language education system as an ideological state apparatus for producing consent, and the thinking of the teachers and students surveyed in this research resonates with the state in the way they believe in the increasingly international status of China and the Chinese language. Whether Chinese will eventually become a global language and replace English is thus an important issue worthy of scholars' ongoing observation and investigation, as the geopolitics of the world continue to shift.

4.2 Compulsory vs. optional English education and examinations

As noted, since the 2010s the high status of English in China has increasingly been questioned, and there have been national debates over whether English should be a compulsory test subject along with the role it should play in society and education. Official measures to remove English from the Gaokao (national college entrance exam) have also been launched in some provinces. Although these endeavours have proved unsuccessful so far, the issue of how and to what extent English should be de-emphasised has been a topic of intense discussion now for more than a decade. In March 2021, Xu Jin, a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, once again proposed that English should be removed as a key subject from primary and secondary education in China and eliminated as a Gaokao subject. His main argument was that English is useless as the majority of English learners in China will not use it in their future work and that English education takes too much of students' time. His proposal generated another round of national discussion, and as of the end of December 2021, his proposal had been read 150 million times and commented on 25,000 times on Weibo (the main microblogging site in China).

Thus, a question of great relevance is as follows: as stakeholders, do school teachers and students support or oppose compulsory English education and the inclusion of English in the Gaokao?

Table 4 English should be an optional subject

	Mean	SD	1 ^a (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)
Students	3.06	1.219	12.61	24.37	13.17	41.18	8.68
Teachers	3.38	1.159	0.00	37.04	3.7	42.59	16.67

1^a=Strongly agree, 5= Strongly disagree

From the results of our survey, it would seem that more students (49.86%) and teachers (57%) disagree or strongly disagree that English should be an optional subject than those who support the proposal (students 36.98%; teachers 37.04%) (see Table 4). Moreover, although dissatisfaction is expressed towards the exam-oriented study of English, over 67% of the students and almost 80% teachers disagree or strongly disagree with the suggestion that English examinations should be excluded from graduation examinations such as the Gaokao (see Table 5).

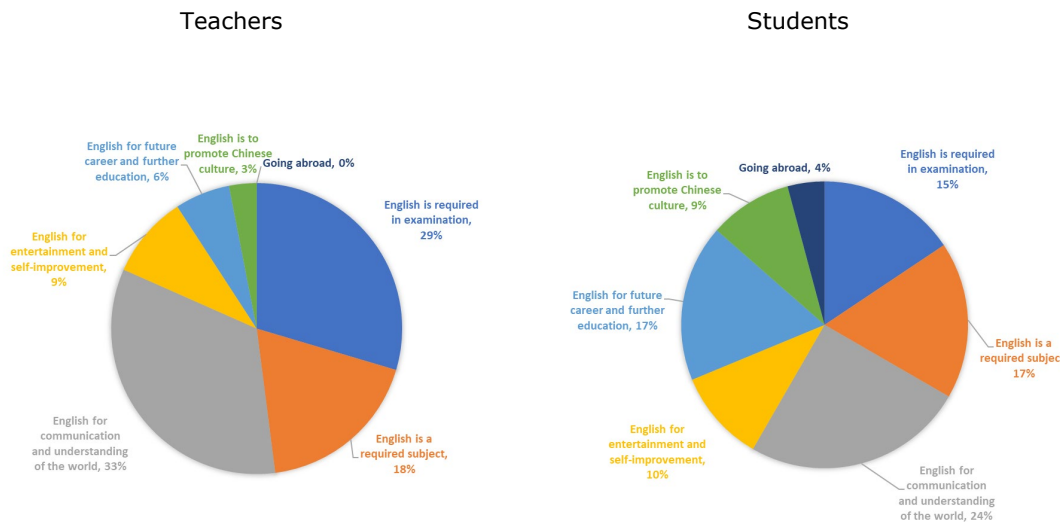
Table 5: English should not be a compulsory examination subject for graduation.

	Mean	SD	1 ^a (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)
Students	3.58	1.09	8.96	13.45	10.08	55.18	12.32
Teachers	3.86	0.904	0.00	14.81	5.56	59.26	20.37

1^a=Strongly agree, 5= Strongly disagree

These data appear to disagree with Xu Jin’s main argument that English education is of no use and is a waste of students’ time. Regarding the open-ended question (see Table 6: where the teachers and students could further explain how and why they found English to be useful to them), we found that the ideas of learning English as a required subject and for examination still prevail. Among the 54 answers we collected from the teachers, 29% related to learning English for examination and 18% was related to English as a required subject. Among the 357 answers by students, 15% of them reported that they learn English for examinations and 17% of them associate their reasons for learning English with compulsory English education.

Table 6: Why do you study English?



However, besides these two salient reasons, there were also a wide range of other reasons for why both teachers and students still feel invested in English language education. The top reasons include learning English for communication and for understanding the world; for interests such as entertainment and self-improvement; for their future careers and further education; along with the government's preferred narrative of its use as a means to promote local Chinese culture.

The findings show that even though there seems to be disparity between the official discourse and the social discourse (of the teachers and students), all participants in the study have been influenced by the official discourse and 47% of teachers and 32% of students think that students learn English because it is a required subject and one that features in examinations. Both the teachers and students appear to take this status of the subject for granted, regarding English as a form of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986), that is, a resource which may potentially bring them honour, prestige or recognition as they believe that learning it may bring them future opportunities both in their studies and careers.

4.3 Promoting Chinese culture via English education

In a speech in 2013, the Chinese president made clear that one of the strategic goals for the country was to “tell the Chinese story well, portray [our] Chinese characteristics well and spread the voice of China globally” (Xi, 2013). These aims were soon being reflected in the education system. In the 2017 ECS, students were required to understand Western culture and distinguish the differences between Western and Chinese culture. Moreover, it was stipulated that students should be more aware of Chinese culture and be encouraged to be patriotic. Notably, the country's foreign language education policies are derived from the central government's concept of national interest (Ricento, 2015), and the state's political and economic position is a crucial factor in planning and making policies. In the coming decade, as pointed out by Pan and Wang (2024), politically, a new task related to the fulfilment of “the great rejuvenation” awaits English learning. The fulfilment of this Chinese dream entails promoting a global understanding of China and Chinese culture.

The survey results show that the students and teachers believe that it is important to cover Chinese culture when teaching English. Over 60% of the students and over 70% of the teachers agree or strongly agree that Chinese customs and cultural traditions

should be taught and that Chinese culture should be covered when English is taught at schools (see Table 7).

Table 7: In English education, it is important for us to also cover Chinese customs and cultural traditions and to spread Chinese culture.

	Mean	SD	1 ^a (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)
<i>Students</i>	2.1	0.974	26.23	43.72	18.58	8.2	3.28
<i>Teachers</i>	2.045	1.18	40.91	34.09	9.09	11.36	4.55

1^a=Strongly agree, 5= Strongly disagree

Moreover, the questionnaire survey also shows that over 90% of the students strongly agree that they are guided by the idea of “spreading Chinese culture to the world” in their English learning, and over 90% of the teachers agree or strongly agree that they teach with the same purpose (see Table 8).

Table 8: When learning English, we are guided by the idea of “spreading Chinese culture to the world”.

	Mean	SD	1 ^a (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)
<i>Students</i>	1.46	0.613	63.31	30.25	3.08	2.52	0.84
<i>Teachers</i>	1.58	0.835	59.26	31.48	3.70	5.56	0.00

1^a=Strongly agree, 5= Strongly disagree

However, even if Chinese culture is strategically positioned in English education, many students and teachers do not accept that Chinese should be a more important subject than English. Over 50% of the teachers and students believe that Chinese and Chinese culture is as important as English and English culture in the context of learning (see Table 9).

Table 9: Chinese and Chinese culture is more important than English and English culture in the context of learning.

	Mean	SD	1 ^a (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)
<i>Students</i>	1.78	0.6	31.1	59.3	9.59
<i>Teachers</i>	2.03	0.69	22.22	51.85	25.93

1^a=agree, 2= the same, 3=disagree,

Regarding the open-ended question (see Table 10) on the role that Chinese culture could play on the international stage, the teachers' and students' answers centred around the themes of "spreading Chinese culture globally", "the global impact of China" and "the status and power of China".

Table 10: Is it necessary to use English to promote Chinese culture? Why or why not?

Themes	% teachers	% students
Spreading Chinese culture globally	38%	37%
The global impact of China	35%	30%
The status and power of China	24%	8%

The answers to the open-ended question also show that the views of the teachers and students are consistent in that they think that teaching and learning English may help them be more aware of Chinese culture and indeed make them more patriotic, 11 out of 54 teachers explicitly voicing the opinion that Chinese language and culture should be taught in English classes. However, they also expressed concern that promoting Chinese language and culture through English teaching in classrooms may not be sufficient to export Chinese values globally, suggesting that there is still a long way to go in this regard. In summary then, in line with policy statements, the students and teachers believe that English could be a useful tool for promoting Chinese culture. This shows that foreign language policies appear to have been successfully used in China as a means to produce and regulate people's self and national identities (Blommaert, 2005). Through direct engagement with foreign culture in the context of foreign language education, the state acquires learners' consent to use English in an instrumental way to help learners consolidate their own subjectivity and Chinese cultural identity.

5. Conclusion

As has been noted, the 2017 English Curriculum Standards highlighted that English education is intended to cultivate patriotism and promote Chinese culture, as part of an effort to balance the teaching of English and Chinese in language education. Based on the research reported upon here, it appears that both teachers and students today show strong confidence in the status of Chinese language and culture on the global stage. Even though they agree that English remains the dominant global language, a majority believe that Chinese may, at some stage, replace English and become the world's most dominant language. Despite this, more than half the teachers and students continue to support compulsory English education and disagree with excluding it from the Gaokao. In general however, the views of both the teachers and students are in line with policy statements, as they state their belief that English could be a useful tool for promoting Chinese culture. From this research, it is clear that the symbolic power exercised by the state is functioning effectively in China in that teachers and students exhibit their confidence in Chinese language and culture and express their belief that it is their mission to promote this via English. However, teachers and students also hold independent views on the importance of English, as they regard it as a symbolic form of capital in relation to their future opportunities and success.

As in many countries, foreign language education in China has, and continues to be, closely connected with the nation's political climate. The status of English in the country has gone through many ups and downs (Pan, 2015). English is now being positioned as a means of cultivating students' patriotism. In the changing political and social context of China, explorations of the transformation of the status of English in China continue to be of importance, and this context provides a potentially very interesting focus for how the status of English will develop more generally throughout the twenty-first century. Issues worthy of scholars' attention may include the trajectory of English in China's language policies and education and in China's linguistic landscape, the ways that Chinese cultures are embedded in textbooks or the teaching and learning process and the stakeholders' evolving views on English and language education. It is even more important to do the relevant research now, as we are currently witnessing another important political turning point in China's history, in which ideologies over the positioning of different languages play a central role.

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