

English in Chinese higher education: past difficulties, current initiatives and future challenges

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***Abstract.** English is the most common foreign language in the Chinese curriculum. However, even though a great deal of class time is devoted to acquiring English, the results have not been universally good. Studies to address the issue have suggested various reasons for this: large classes and the subsequent difficulty of implementing interactive teaching; traditional examinations which favour grammar/translation pedagogy; the difficulty of recruiting fluent teachers, which makes communicative methodology hard to implement; low motivation in parts of the population where the chance of interacting with native-speakers is highly unlikely. In addition there may be other - new - reasons developing which put a brake on the spread of good foreign language skills among the Chinese population. The general problems reported in the foreign language classroom could be compounded by the growing influence of China in the world. The experience of groups whose economic and political weight were/are significant has shown that when others learn your language and it becomes a lingua franca of power, instrumental motivation for foreign language acquisition diminishes within the population. Can we expect to see the Chinese developing the same attitudes to foreign language learning, as Anglophones, for example, if/as Chinese spreads as a lingua franca?*

Key words: English, foreign language education policy, China, lingua franca, motivation

Introduction

Since 1982 English has been the most common foreign language taught in Chinese schools and colleges. However, even though pupils and students devote a great deal of class time to the activity, the results have not been good. Academic studies to address the problem have reviewed a number of possible contributing factors. Class sizes are mostly too large for any kind of interactive language teaching. Teaching staff are often not fluent and reluctant to use communicative language teaching methods. The likelihood of using the language in interaction with native speakers is low among some parts of the population. These are all possible deterrents for foreign language acquisition. In this paper we review the literature analysing the problems of teaching foreign languages in China over the last half century. We then suggest that there may be a further factor in the mix, that is not always mentioned. Prestige lingua francas have always been a product of dominance in political, economic, technical, spiritual, philosophical and cultural domains. The speakers of prestige lingua francas have not needed to acquire other languages to function successfully outside their national communities of communication. So, with the growing economic and political power of China recalibrating international relationships is there an equivalent spread of Chinese as a lingua franca? If this is happening and if there is a growing awareness of it among the Chinese population, do these developments have a consequence for Chinese learners of English? Lack of motivation and a reluctance to commit wholeheartedly to foreign language learning have been noted in the

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case of native speakers of other prestige lingua francas. Is this presenting as a phenomenon in China?

This paper is organised in the following way: First, we examine the history of English language teaching in China over the last half century. The ‘English for all’ policy and the difficulties of implementing it has provoked a large body of scientific literature seeking to dissect, explain and ultimately provide solutions for the foreign language classroom. We review these various opinions and proposals. Second, we suggest that there might be a further factor in the mix, which has been largely overlooked. We will argue that the growing influence of China in economic and political domains together with the sheer size of the country and its population reproduces some of the context prevalent in the Anglophone world which has proved so dissuasive for foreign language learning among native English speakers.

1. 1980s – the challenge

The Chinese spent much of the 20th century cut off from interaction with the world. Few had the opportunity to acquire a foreign language and fewer still had the opportunity to practise that skill outside the classroom (Lu 2012). Thus, as China opened up for trade and exchange in the 1990s, (e.g. entry to the WTO in 1997) there was an urgent need to increase foreign language skills among the population and of course, a very small pool of home grown expertise on which to draw. The selection of English as a foreign language for the secondary school curriculum had been made in 1982, as Deng Xiaoping instituted economic reforms and returned China to foreign markets since it was the language most widely used as a lingua franca both globally and regionally. The Chinese school system was highly centralised at this time and thus a top down approach pertained throughout the country and all pupils learnt English, with few exceptions (Zhang 2015). In higher education (HE) the foreign language choice was also English, reinforced through the need of academics and advanced students to access scientific literature published in English and to participate in transnational, scholarly interaction, taking place in English (Gil and Adamson 2011; Xu and Yang, 2015).

The Chinese education system thus faced a challenge; the decision to teach English to millions of pupils and students meant several obstacles had to be overcome. First, many in the secondary school teaching force had never had the opportunity to acquire English to a high degree of fluency and this was also true to some extent in HE. For older teachers this was partly a legacy of the Maoist era when learning a foreign language had been viewed as an anti-state activity and had been halted along with much other formal education. After the Cultural Revolution attitudes had softened, but in the 1970s and 1980s those learning foreign languages were still enjoined “to learn a foreign language, do not learn to be a foreigner” (Pan 2014: 72). The English language was to be adopted for the sake of modernization, but was not to be allowed to become a conduit for spiritual pollution (精神污染) from the capitalist world (Pan 2014). The teachers had the difficult task of ensuring the acquisition of the language but not promoting the cultural knowledge of its native speakers.

Second, some adolescent Chinese learners of English did not see the utility or attraction of acquiring a language, which was the language of traditional enemies: of the British intruders from the 19th century, who held Hong Kong as a colony until 1997; of the virulently anti-communist Americans who blocked Chinese participation in global institutions. For many learners in this period there were issues around motivation (Pan 2015). This was a language of people with whom they had no contact and with whom they did not foresee contact. Moreover, because of the large class sizes of the Chinese education system, English was taught using whole class/teacher-centred methodologies, which proved to be ineffectual. In summary - a teaching force with weak English language skills was teaching oversized classes

a language which learners in many parts of the country did not recognise as particularly useful, either for their present plans or their future projects.

2. Problems at the millennium

Although the 60,000 or so teachers of English in Chinese universities in the first decade of the 21st century had usually studied English Literature, Linguistics or Translation in their first degree, few had much experience of English language environments outside the university classroom (Zhao 2012; Zhang 2010). Only a small proportion of the workforce had ever studied abroad in an English-speaking country or used the language regularly with native speakers. Moreover, there had been an exponential rise in student numbers in HE, from 2 million in 1999 to 30 million in 2010, which had put pressure on recruitment and brought a large number of staff into the HE system with only basic teacher training (Rao and Lei 2014). There were few with knowledge of methodologies outside the teacher- and book-centred approaches that they themselves had experienced. Lian and Wang (2011) noted a number of serious problems: a high proportion of young, inexperienced teachers, who lacked the requisite knowledge base for the task; a general absence of pedagogic research experience so teachers could monitor and analyse their own practice; low levels of motivation and commitment and poor management which failed to address these problems.

Further difficulties stemmed from the high numbers of students in the foreign language class. Classes of 50+ were the norm (Borg and Liu 2013). A huge literature reveals the extent to which this problem of teaching English effectively to large groups preoccupied Chinese teachers and teacher trainers (See, for example, Gao, Y 2009; Huang 2006; Liang 2009; Locastro 2001; Pu 2008; Qi, & Wang 2009).

Both their training and the large classes they faced pushed many teachers towards a traditional Chinese approach to foreign language teaching. They themselves had acquired English in very text-focused programmes, and felt most comfortable reproducing such courses, i.e. presenting texts for comprehension exercises, explaining grammar rules and requiring students to complete exercises (Cai 2010). There was very limited opportunity for students to practise oral skills in class, apart from informal learning activities such as traditional “English corner” (Gao, X 2009) and nowadays e-learning. The large number of authorities writing on the difficulties of acquiring oral competence in large classes shows that the problem was fully recognised and although new initiatives were regularly suggested many endemic difficulties hampered implementation (For discussion see, for example, Chen, J. et al 2006; Chen, Y. 2009; Huang 2008; Hui. & Jiang 2008). For the vast majority of students, as Yu (2004) noted, there was no forum for real world interchange and speaking English in class was the only chance for students to practise oral English.

However, the traditional pedagogic approaches adopted in the classroom were appropriate to the assessments, since these were almost entirely written examinations. Textual explanation and grammar exercises were good preparation for evaluation of this kind. Moreover, the emphasis on the written language was not a concern for those students whose prime motivation for learning English was to gain the qualifications necessary to progress through the education system rather than to actually use the language in interaction either with English native speakers or with those using English as a lingua franca. This state of affairs became particularly clear at the point of progression to undergraduate studies. English was a compulsory subject for 高考 (Gaokao), and thus success in the English examination was important. Obtaining the Gaokao was the essential passport to securing a place at university, preparing for a good career and widening future prospects. There was intense competition and students tended to cram for the examination. For many Chinese learners cut off from sites of interaction with English native speakers (and indeed with non-native English speakers) it was perhaps easier to prepare for written examinations which tested knowledge about

the language rather than oral examinations which tested their ability to communicate effectively using it. This may be a reason why school-leavers tolerated a situation where their functional competence in English remained limited or poor even after years of study at secondary school.

It was also necessary to study English for the completion of many undergraduate degrees, for progression to MA programmes and for doctoral studies.¹ The preparation for examinations was usually a course entitled the *English Intensive Reading Course*. This was in part a series of texts, and comprehension was tested through questions, but the course also focused on exercises on grammar, vocabulary and translation. At this level too English competence was largely treated as a body of knowledge rather than a skill. At university level we can find documented evidence of dissatisfaction with this state of affairs. Research among students in twenty-one universities in ten provinces (Cai 2012a) revealed that fewer than half the students learning English were satisfied with their courses. The common complaint was that their classes were overly focused on the examinations and that they were not learning the skills necessary to become competent English speakers.

The problems were widely recognised by the political elite. In 2012, the retired vice-premier, Li Lanqing, lambasted the system, claiming that English language learning in China was highly “ineffective” (reported by Cai, 2011).

3. Efforts and initiatives since 2010

Thus as China entered the second decade of the 21st century there was widespread concern about the foreign language skills base. The low levels of English competence were a threat to the government’s internationalising projects, since they restricted the numbers of personnel able to take part in the flows, exchanges and interactions of a globalising world.

3.1 Government policies and their implementation

With the government aware of the problems regarding foreign language acquisition since the 2000s and anxious to find solutions, there have been a number of top-down policy initiatives to improve the final outcome of years of language learning. In 2004, the Ministry of Education issued the College English Course Teaching Requirement which focused on the delivery of English language education: university teachers of foreign languages were encouraged to use oral methods and introduce student-centred learning.

Oral work presented a challenge. Since large classes continued to be the norm, it was not possible to offer small group oral sessions. One solution was to offer practice within a language laboratory environment. Students interacted with machines to improve their oral skills. This dovetailed with a change in tertiary assessment. There had been an oral component to the College English Test (CET) since 1999 in some major cities, although it had only been taken by students who passed CET 4 with marks of 80 per cent or above or CET 6 with marks of 75 per cent or above.² As the oral examination was rolled out to more centres, there was growing use of the language laboratory since the test itself was machine-based, and the language lab was well suited to preparing for it.³

However, the introduction of machines in the teaching and testing of oral work introduced further issues. As much oral work consists of interaction between software and language learner rather than between two human interlocutors, new problems arose. The opportunity for students to create their own language is not usually met in the language laboratory context. Examining the CET examination website for 2016 underscores how formulaic exchanges are in this machine context.⁴ Students cannot develop a conversation but only follow a very mechanical path. Experience in the rest of the world has shown the limited results from this kind of automated language teaching (Tomlinson 2008; Quirk and Widdowson 1985). However, this was the solution on offer and the policymakers hoped that the introduc-

tion of “speaking to a machine” would help with “opening mouth” and change the old image of “deaf English” (聋子英语) and “dumb English” (哑巴英语) (Lin 2002).

The College English Course Teaching Requirement directive also promoted student-centred language learning. The communicative language teaching (CLT) approach with its interactive strategies and individualised learning was held up as a goal. In the 1980s, the first initiatives had accompanied China’s increased interaction with the wider world. Once the barriers were down, partnerships and links with foreign universities developed swiftly. By 2015, a large number of Chinese cooperation programmes with foreign universities (932 at undergraduate level and 223 at graduate level) were registered with the Ministry of Education. In this context, native English speaking teachers came to China on visits and exchanges and were one of the key ways that communicative language teaching was introduced into the system. And as Chinese academics went on study trips abroad they too adopted and adapted some of the pedagogical ideas prevalent in other places where English was being taught as a foreign or additional language.

3.2 The teachers

So how is the teaching profession responding to policy? The literature shows a widespread desire among teacher trainers to do something about the low level of skills after eight to twelve years in the English as a foreign language classroom. From among much discussion of new methodologies, we might mention in particular Li and Lu’s (2012) work on individualised instruction in large classes of integrated English in CALL (Computer assisted language learning) environments; Chen and Liu’s (2015) studies of college English teaching based on needs analysis and tailored to personalised development; Chen and He’s (2015) exploration of how students can help with preparations for the English language class. As the authors claim, in specific contexts and on a small scale, many of these experiments were moderately effective.

However, these initiatives were not rolled out across the country. In a series of structured interviews with university teachers of English, from different regions of China, carried out in 2015-6, Zheng and Wright (forthcoming) found some evidence that student-centered learning has not taken root in all regions. Given the situation sketched out above it is quite understandable why teachers might like to retain control in the English language classroom. Teachers who were worried about their competence in standard English, felt more vulnerable if they departed from the highly structured class with textual commentary at its heart. Such classes can be prepared and there is less unpredictability. And where there has been a move from the printed page to multimedia, there is still apparently a high degree of rigid planning. Liu & Long (2014) and Rao & Lei (2014) noted how collaborative class preparation, which was the norm for textual study, continues with the new multimedia focus; they found widespread evidence that Power-Points were still produced collectively. Given this practice, it seems that the foreign language class remains in the straitjacket of prepared classroom activities, where there is little opportunity for individual creative language work. Such planning and structure militates against any unscheduled oral exchanges and their development. Teachers’ concern to get input exactly right restricts any natural interaction.

Third, there is also the on-going problem of large classes. Zheng and Wright (forthcoming) found evidence of classes of 70+ in General English. In such settings, teaching tends to be little more than crowd control. Marking for such large numbers takes time away from experimentation. There is no space for individualised programmes. Teachers admitted that they tended to keep to tried and tested methods, and these were mostly text-based.

In general, there is a widespread desire in the pedagogic literature to move to language learning strategies that give better results. However, the straitjacket of the exam-

oriented system in which teachers work and the weight of tradition lead many to opt to remain within their comfort zone and to maintain a teacher-centred approach (Yan 2015).

3.3 The students

Among the students there is a similar division. On the one hand, those students who see English merely as one of the qualifications necessary to progress to higher levels of education are content with the focus on grammar knowledge and written text comprehension. On the other, those with ambitions to use English as a tool in their further study or in their future career express their disappointment at the courses they are offered in the public sector (Cai 2012a) and (where they can) often opt for study in private colleges or abroad.

Instrumental reasons have been a major factor in keeping students focused on acquiring some competence in English. The status of English as a compulsory subject in the Gaokao, the state examination which is the gatekeeper to HE and the necessity of achieving a pass at CET4 for degree conferment have ensured a base line of instrumental motivation.⁵ There has, naturally, been some discontent that English acts as gatekeeper for educational progression. See Shao and Gao (2016) for a discussion of the debate. And, as certain universities begin to permit graduation without CET4 (e.g. Fudan University, Shanghai Jiaotong University, Huadong Normal University, Huadong University of Science and Technology among others), we should expect some change. Where individual universities use their autonomy to award degrees without the English component, there are likely consequences. For the disciplines and academic routes where a pass in College English Band 4 is no longer required, English language learning will not be so widespread. Skills will deteriorate. But in any case where learners were acquiring English to fulfil educational requirements rather than for any real communicative need, motivation was never strong and language acquisition was never deeply rooted.

On the other hand, the market may replace the stimulus. There is, as Shao and Gao (2016) report, division in the population. Among those who aim for elite jobs where English would be a necessary skill or see themselves in foreign travel situations where English would be an asset, the motivation to become proficient in English is strong. In the growing middle class the belief that English is the passport to well-rewarded work is strengthened as graduate employers demand high grades in the CET before they will consider candidates. Elites have long seen the utility of knowing the foreign languages that allow them to function in diplomacy, foreign investment, international trade, knowledge exchange, etc.. The growing middle class in China is making the same evaluation. Current research (Wei 2016) confirms that this section of society perceives English as a necessary (if not sufficient) prerequisite for professional success.

Given the poor record in parts of the state system for the development of English language skills, there has been a growing tendency to bypass it. Parents, who are rich enough, make sure that their children gain the language skills necessary for careers in a globalising world in a variety of ways. In 2002, the Private School Education Law began to dismantle the blocks to private education (Simon 2013; Mangin 2015). There are conflicting reports of the numbers being educated in private schools but there is no dispute that the phenomenon is on the rise.⁶ Some of these are English medium and/or run in collaboration with educational institutions from outside China.⁷

The number of people who are studying abroad has also grown exponentially. Since China first opened up to international study in 1978, a total of 4 million Chinese have studied abroad (Ministry of Education 2016). In the single year of 2014, 459,800 students were undertaking all or part of their HE in foreign universities, which represented an increase of 11.1% compared to 2013 (MoE 2015). The three top destinations were English speaking

states: US, UK and Australia. Again we should note that this is an elite phenomenon, with 92% of those studying abroad funded by their families.

A less expensive, and thus more accessible way of improving English skills, has been to use digital technology to supplement the classroom. China is now the biggest market for digital English language learning products, not only in the Asia region, but in the world. Marketing sources reveal that the revenues for digital English language learning products reached \$701.1 million in 2015 and have been growing by 7.8% per annum. (Ambient Insight 2015)

Thus there is at the moment a fundamental difference between a group of middle class students with access to resources, travel, private courses and study abroad, who have acquired English to a level where they can use it confidently and hope to do so for professional purposes, and the large majority of students who report that they 'seldom' use English (Wei and Su 2012), who do not have obvious reasons for learning the language and whose skills remain at a very basic level.

4. Lessons learnt elsewhere

Thus far this paper has reported the general argument in the vast majority of scholarship, and in policy documents, the assumption that improving the delivery of the language course will improve the level of language skill achieved by the students. Such analysis prevails in the literature and is clear in several recent edited volumes, e.g. Sung and Pederson's *Critical ELT practices in Asia* (2012), Chan et al's *Foreign Language Teaching in Asia and Beyond* (2011), Spolsky and Sung's *Secondary School English Education in Asia: From policy to practice* (2015).

However, we would like to suggest that there may well be other factors playing a role in the patchy results for foreign language learning in China, and that these have little to do with either problems within the classroom or difficulties within education policy. We wonder whether the wider economic and political contexts are providing some of the key factors that militate against successful language learning. We propose this line of argument after several decades of experience in language departments in the UK where there are also poor results in foreign language learning and a long history of pedagogical initiatives to counter declining language skills. In this next section we shall draw parallels between the current reluctance of native speakers of English to learn foreign languages and the poor results obtained in the Chinese education system. We are going to argue that members of a community of communication that has millions of speakers do not have the same impulsion to learn foreign languages as those from smaller communities; that citizens of states which are economically successful often find that those who wish to trade with them learn their language; that citizens of states which are politically dominant often impose their language on weaker partners; that the language employed in centres of invention becomes a general scientific lingua franca for those wishing to access knowledge. Thus, economic conditions, political relationships, technological supremacy and cultural attraction can make the language of a community a prestige lingua franca that it is advantageous for outsiders to learn. The corollary of this is that insiders have few utilitarian reasons to learn languages of other groups if outsiders facilitate exchange by learning theirs. This was the situation with French native speakers whose language was a prestige lingua franca in the 18th and 19th centuries and English native speakers whose language took over that role in the 20th century. So we will look now at the evidence that this situation may be replicating for speakers of Mandarin. Could some of the problems in the foreign language classroom also stem from learners' belief that it is not really necessary for them to learn English or any other foreign language?

4.1 Foreign language learning in large states

Which populations learn foreign languages? The short answer to this question is ‘those who come from small states’. It is no coincidence that the country in the European Union that reports the largest number of bi/multilinguals amongst its population is Luxembourg (Eurobarometer 2012). Luxembourgers only number approximately 400,000 and for many activities, they need to go outside their borders. Luxemburgish will not serve them outside their state.

On the other hand, those from gigantic communities of communication do not have the same need to step outside their native/national language group. China contains approximately a fifth of the world’s population, many of whom know/use the national language, Mandarin. Mandarin-speaking Chinese thus have an enormous number of possible interlocutors without crossing state borders. In this they are broadly comparable to Americans, who can interact with 325 million co-nationals (or indeed the estimated billion and a half English speakers in the world). In both cases the sheer size of the community of communication makes it likely that it will provide the informants, the collaborators, the audience required by most of its members.

Furthermore, in both the US and China the sheer size of the country discourages those in its heartlands from crossing borders and the majority of each population has never travelled outside their country. Many are in remote sites from which it is difficult to move and do not have the economic means for travel. Many wishing to holiday do so within their states, diverse countries with many tourist destinations inside their borders. In consequence in both China and the US a minority of citizens hold a passport for foreign travel.⁸ So the first factor that may have some consequence for foreign language acquisition is the size of the community of communication and the state. There is a long history of correlation between size of state and language learning. Citizens of small polities learn the languages of others to have a wider stage on which to act (Bailey 1991). The Chinese, like the Americans, have a large national stage and therefore reduced impetus to cross borders, both actual and linguistic.

4.2 Foreign language learning in states with high boundary fences

In addition to China’s geography there is the weight of history. The Chinese have a long tradition of isolation. Ming and Manchu emperors banned travel and the communists under Mao closed frontiers. Even today the Chinese are dissuaded from crossing the borders of the virtual world of the internet. Many global search engines are blocked or limited and the Chinese are channeled to Chinese-based engines and directed to Chinese social media (see Riley 2015 for a recent overview).⁹ President Xi Jinping has discouraged outside influence and there is little evidence that the Chinese elite see value in foreign, particularly Western, ideas (MacFarquhar 2015; Xi Jinping 2013; Xi Jinping 2014). The Chinese may thus feel the legacy of this long political tradition that forbade or discouraged foreign contact together with current elite attitudes towards foreign values. (Of course, isolationism may also provide the impetus for foreign language learning where individuals want to exit from the strait jackets imposed by isolationism and an inward-looking society).

If they come from one of the many regions in China which only rarely sees a tourist or a traveler, they have little personal experience of the need to communicate across language barriers. And as Gong and Holliday (2015) argue, foreign language teaching is likely to fail in a situation, where students do not expect to use the language or participate in the ‘real world’, ‘authentic’ tasks of the text book.

4.3 The rise and fall of lingua francas

A third impediment to foreign language learning comes, as we noted above, from being a speaker of the current lingua franca. When others learn the language of one’s own group the motivation to learn their languages appears diminished. We can see this in the case of English native speakers.

English only became a major language of intergroup contact within the last two centuries. As the 17th century commentator, Richard Carew, noted, the English of that period were good linguists because they had to be (Carew quoted in Camden 1984: 40). The numbers of speakers of English first increased in the wake of growing British imperial power. Military victory, vigorous colonial expansion and increased trade abroad, scientific discovery and political reform at home were all factors that increased Anglophone influence and motivated (or forced) others to learn English. The spread of English would have ended with the end of the British Empire and the decline of British economic and political power, but this did not take place, because English was also the language of the United States, the next group to dominate. And in the recalibration of economic, military, political and technological power after World War Two, English continued to spread as the main lingua franca of the capitalist bloc led by the US (while Russian dominated as the lingua franca in the opposing communist bloc). After the fall of communism in Europe in the early 1990s the hegemony of English increased. English was the undisputed medium of neo-liberal globalisation. The needs of the global business elite were served by the spread of English as a lingua franca.

Against this background, the number of Anglophones acquiring fluency in languages other than English has fallen. In the United Kingdom, for example, the figures for those opting to learn a foreign language in school past the obligatory stage have shrunk year on year¹⁰ and foreign language skills among the population are woefully low.¹¹ However, the educational establishment does not foreground this macro reason for the waning interest in learning foreign languages. Its response has largely been to urge improvements in pedagogy with the aim of making foreign language acquisition more accessible, more attractive and more effective. We would argue, however, that the reasons for falling numbers and poor results have much more to do with student motivation than with teaching styles and teachers' competence. The problem is that in their majority British students do not see the reasons to learn the foreign languages on offer in the curriculum.¹² The economic, political, scientific and cultural dominance of the English-speaking world has had a negative impact on the motivation for foreign language acquisition among English native speakers. English native speakers have seen that social mobility and their life projects are not usually dependent on success in foreign language learning, and have been content to let other groups learn English to provide the medium for global knowledge flows, cross-border interactions, transnational relations and international networks.

So as China begins to dominate on the world stage we could question whether the Chinese might develop similar complacency. To address this point we need to consider whether Chinese is spreading as a lingua franca? The reasons why prestige lingua francas spread are linked with the influence of their speakers. All prestige lingua francas have been the languages of groups with political authority, economic muscle, military might, technological superiority, cultural weight, and soft power (in the sense developed by Nye in 2004). In the last decades, China's standing has increased in all these domains. Politically, China has assumed a commanding role in Asia (for example, developing cooperation along the old Silk Road) and taken the lead globally (for example, in issues raised by the BRIIC/BRICS¹³ states). In economic terms, China is now considered the second most powerful economy in the world.¹⁴ In technological terms, China is spearheading some of the new green energy technologies¹⁵ and developing 5G communication technology. In terms of military power, China is one of the few nuclear powers and has a large standing army. Cultural exportation is diverse including the Hengdian film studio productions, which have world-wide distribution, and television mini-series sold abroad, particularly in Africa. The growing influence of the Chinese on the international stage is well documented (Jacques 2012; Lardy 2012; Yueh 2013; Zheng 2016).

So we might ask whether those Chinese interacting with others in a globalising world are always needing to do so in English. Certainly many with aspirations to work in the transnational and international networks of finance and banking will need English. But what happens as power is recalibrated? The Chinese secured Shanghai as the site for the BRICS-led New Development Bank, in July 2015. Will English be the default language for this economic initiative? This is likely in the short term since the bank will have a rotating presidency, with the first president, K. V. Kamath, coming from India. But, the basic sociolinguistic truth is that in a multilingual situation the economically weaker learn the language of the more powerful. China had the clout to impose Shanghai as the site for the bank against competing claims. Will the Chinese also have the weight to use their language more if their economic input is the most significant? ¹⁶

This is also the question where China acts alone to invest abroad. What is the place of international English in the massive Foreign Direct Investment deals that the PRC made in 2015-2016? Is negotiation and interaction inevitably in English? Or have those who wish to do business with China started to make the effort to learn Chinese. It is very early in this process to work with anything more than anecdotal evidence but the growth of Confucius Institutes and Classrooms worldwide are an indicator that Chinese could be on the rise as a *lingua franca*. ¹⁷ In 2016, official government websites were claiming at least 150 million learners worldwide (Hanban 2016b). There were – significantly - rising numbers learning Chinese in the United States (Ruan et al 2015).

Where China has become a particularly dominant economic presence, people have turned to Chinese as a foreign language that is worth learning for economic advancement. Africa is of particular interest here (Nan 2013; Wangshu 2013). The Chinese have invested heavily in Africa because of their need for raw materials. The continent has been the destination of much Chinese migration. Pitago and Tang (2015) report more than 1.1. million Chinese in Africa and it is likely that this vastly under-reported. Many of these migrants have gone as employees of giant Chinese state-owned oil/gas companies and construction companies undertaking mining and infrastructure projects in Africa. Few workers here need to use a language other than Chinese. Many have gone from the agricultural sector of the population to farm in Africa and they too have tended to stay within language enclaves. Because of this massive Chinese investment, the availability of work in Chinese-led projects and a tendency among some Chinese groups not to know English, many Africans have recognised the utility of Chinese language learning, and the number of learners of Chinese as a foreign language has risen steadily in Africa. In 2016 there were 42 Confucius Institutes in 29 African countries (Hanban 2016a). The acquisition of Chinese has accompanied (and facilitated) the growing numbers of African students now studying in China (Akhtar and Bo, 2015).

We might speculate that this pattern will be replicated as the Chinese in the managerial/technical class in Chinese-owned companies move around the globe. What will their language practices be? Transnational corporations founded in non-English speaking countries have often adopted English as the language of the company (e.g. Philips, Nokia etc.). Is the situation in Chinese-owned companies the same and/or is it changing? Major companies, like Huawei and Lenovo do have English as one of their working languages, but discussion on their Chinese language websites show that the language issue is by no means resolved. Contributors to the discussion of Lenovo's move to English for branches of the company outside China challenge the policy, suggesting that it is not necessary to follow the model of companies such as Korea's Samsung because China is not in the same economic and political position as Korea. ¹⁸ There is evidence here of some confidence that Chinese will serve the company's purposes, even abroad.

So, although we are at a very early point in the process of the recalibration of language power, there are some first signs of evidence for our speculation that Chinese will be more widely used as a lingua franca in global settings.¹⁹ We know from history that reworkings of economic, political, technical hierarchies lead to the recalibration of language practices. Thus we can expect to see Chinese developing further as a lingua franca in some settings outside its borders. Such a development needs to be taken into account in the foreign language classroom. It affects instrumental motivation profoundly. At the moment, many Chinese students from the middle class still prepare themselves for participation in the networks, flows and exchanges of globalisation by learning English. However, we have begun to note early indicators among our Chinese students in the UK that attitudes towards English are changing subtly. We wonder how much a certain new assertiveness stems from these issues of language prestige and lingua franca spread.²⁰

5. In summary

China Daily (2010) estimated at the beginning of the decade that there could be as many as 400 million English-language learners in China. The public education system had promoted English language learning for all and the private market for English-language training was valued at the equivalent of \$7.5 billion in 2011 (WSJ 7/11/2013).

However, the results of all this investment and effort have been disappointing. On international comparative scales, such as EF's English Proficiency Index 2015,²¹ the Chinese are rated as low proficiency on English competence. Of course these are somewhat crude statistics, and should be treated with some care, but they are broadly in accordance with what the Chinese educational establishment itself recognises as a problem: poor results after years of tuition.

The Chinese educational establishment and foreign scholars have traditionally framed the deficiencies as methodological and much work has concentrated on how to improve learning outcomes through pedagogy. This mirrors exactly the educational establishment reaction in the Anglo-Saxon world at the end of the 20th century where education systems reacted to waning interest in learning modern languages by introducing novel pedagogy. In both communities, authorities were slow to recognise that the fundamental problem might be rooted in the macro context and that even brilliant teaching of a foreign language could not trump the lack of a clear reason to learn it. Those teaching modern languages in the Anglo-Saxon world may feel that they recognise the Chinese situation and have sympathy for their Chinese colleagues, as these latter try to improve students' commitment to learning a foreign language by working on the only factor that they can influence - teaching methodology.

Whether this strategy alone will be successful is doubtful. The impetus to learn a foreign language comes from the social mobility it permits, the cultural capital it represents, the access to information it provides, the admission to international networks it allows. This is a macro context that educators are not in a position to influence. It is rather the trajectory of the Chinese in the world that will have an effect on each of these factors and thus on the comparative status and utility of languages. And we can already see change. First, as China's economy matures, homegrown companies are developing and high flying careers do not always (or regularly) require English (*Global Times* 05/06/2014). Second, growing investment in scientific research in China increases the likelihood of information being available in Chinese. Third, the Chinese' sense of their own cultural heritage and influence are making them reconsider what is being seen as an overemphasis on English in schools (Sun et al 2016). English is being blamed for an erosion of Chinese literacy skills in young people. We can already see a policy response to these new attitudes. Wang Xuming, a former spokesman for China's Education Ministry, has called for an end to teaching of English to very young chil-

dren, suggesting more time be given to the study of Chinese (WSJ 07/11/2013). The role of English in the Gaokao is under review across the country (Yang 2014). A recent paper by Shao and Gao (2016) documents how a reduction of the weighting of English would be a popular move among the public. Some prestigious Chinese universities (e.g. Beijing Institute of Technology) have dropped the English test requirement from their independent entrance examinations for study in some fields such as engineering and some (as mentioned above) have dropped the requirement of a pass in English for graduation. If these tendencies spread, the question then arises whether a qualification in English will be retained as a prerequisite for academic and professional success in the long term. One could envisage a situation where changing power relations and economic and political success in the wider world increase the value of knowing and using Chinese, affecting the role of English as a prerequisite for Chinese social mobility.

Thus, in conclusion we suggest that the general problems reported in the Chinese foreign language classroom could be compounded by the growing influence of China in the world. The experience of other groups whose economic and political weight were/are significant has shown that the powerful expect others to learn their language. If they do so, the reasons for foreign language acquisition diminishes. Might we expect to see Chinese native speakers developing the same attitudes to foreign language learning that Anglophones currently have, if/as Chinese spreads as a lingua franca?

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¹ The College English Test (CET) is taken by non-English majors at universities all over China, and has about 18 million candidates each year. There are currently two levels: CET-4 and CET-6. The test is developed and administered by the National CET Committee on behalf of the Higher Education Department of the Chinese Ministry of Education.

² http://www.cet.edu.cn/cet_spoken2.htm

³ In 2010, the University of Warwick established a formal link with the National College English Testing Committee, based at Shanghai Jiaotong University, to collaborate on English language testing for CET-4.

⁴ http://www.cet.edu.cn/news_show7.html.

⁵ However, this is actually a very grey area and the necessity of achieving a pass at CET4 is not a state requirement. In 2015, Wu Qidi, the then Minister of Education clarified the situation, stating that the Ministry of Education and Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council had never had a policy explicitly linking success in CET4 with the final degree certificate. However, although a pass in CET4 was not de jure, there is a long tradition among universities requiring students to pass CET4 before graduating and so in many places it had become a de facto requirement.

⁶ Simon (2015) suggests that in 2012, 6.2 per cent of the primary school population was being educated in a private school. The government claims 2.3% in 2012 (private primary school ten years statistics, 2013) from the website of http://edu.china.com.cn/2013-11/29/content_30743550.htm

⁷ In the present political climate where President Xi Jinping has explicitly rejected foreign influence this is a contested subject. We find conflicting statistics for the extent of the phenomenon and a wide range of opinions. There is regular criticism from official sources: e.g. "China Foreign Cooperative Programmes cannot simply 'take and use'". *People's Daily*, 12th November 2015. http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrbhwb/html/2015-12/11/content_1640002.htm

⁸ In 2014, 38% of US citizens possessed a passport, up from 3% in 1974 (Source State Department), but there is some evidence to show that a far smaller percentage use these passports for trips abroad on a regular basis. See Chalmers, W. The Great American Passport Myth: Why Just 3.5% Of Us Travel Overseas! *Huffington Post* 29/11/2012.. In 2016 Forbes suggested that 6% of Chinese now owned a passport. www.forbes.com/sites/danielreed/.../chinese-worlds-biggest-spenders-on-foreign-travel/#5b16dde143b3.

⁹ Google, Twitter and Facebook are all off limits inside China's "Great Firewall." Taken together, the restrictions constitute the world's largest -- and most effective -- state-sponsored censorship program. (Riley 2015)

¹⁰ For example, February 2016 the UK HE Statistics Agency reported a sharp drop in modern foreign language students at university level. 615 entrants for German degree courses and 1775 for French in 2013/14 (www.hesa.ac.uk/pr211).

¹¹ In 2016 no school child in England, Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland has to learn a modern foreign language before they start secondary. And since 2004, when it became optional to take a modern language exam at GCSE, a modern foreign language is only a compulsory subject until age 14.

¹² Traditionally the main modern foreign language in English secondary schools was French. Its survival in the curriculum was largely driven by the availability of French teachers produced by the system. French then became entrenched, as teaching French produced French teachers (Reeves 1997).

¹³ Term coined by O'Neill to designate the emerging economies of the early 21st century. BRICS – Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa. BRIIC – Brazil, Russia, India, Indonesia, China.

¹⁴ The Centre for Economics and Business research is just one assessor that puts China in second position globally. (<http://www.cebr.com/reports/welt-2016/>) And although growth has slowed and the Chinese stock market has stuttered the Chinese economy is still performing more strongly than most of its competitors.

¹⁵ The World Watch Institute monitoring China's attempts to replace fossil fuels with renewables predicts that 15% of energy needs will come from sustainable sources by 2020. (<http://www.worldwatch.org/node/5497>). The Chinese are exporting these technologies world-wide and particularly to developing countries

¹⁶ 'Sustained Chinese heat around the world: over 100 million learning Chinese abroad' (<http://culture.people.com.cn/n/2014/0311/c87423-24597098.html>)

¹⁷ Hanban, the official state language institute was running more than 1300 institutes and classrooms on all continents in early 2016. (http://english.hanban.org/node_10971.htm)

¹⁸ <http://www.yyww.com/n2598c74.aspx>

¹⁹ Lee Kwan Yew, former prime minister of Singapore, gave his opinion, arguing that Chinese would not take over from English, at the 17th International Meeting on the future of Asia in Tokyo 26, May, 2011. However, as he admitted, Chinese was already making some inroads in Singapore.

²⁰ This finding comes from a small research project on barriers to communication in international classrooms Zheng forthcoming.

²¹ <http://www.ef.co.uk/epi/regions/asia/china/>