

Surviving in the Hegemonic Spread of English: Implications for English Language Teaching (ELT) in Rural China

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Abstract

This paper is intended for examining what make(s) China strive for a universal provision of English language teaching (ELT). More specifically, I attempt to explore in what ways English has been legitimized as a required school course in rural China and why it might perpetuate the urban-rural educational inequalities. I use the concept of “hegemonic spread of English” as a blend on the one hand of the global spread of English, and the current hegemony of English on the other hand. I begin this paper by describing a pervasive belief in the global spread of English, linking it with how English has been taken up in China. I then describe the myth that English language acquisition equals upward social mobility, discussing how rural students tend to have access only to “low-mobility form of English,” which makes their reliance on school success for social transformation becomes difficult. I conclude by indicating pedagogical approaches that take the hegemonic spread of English into account should be introduced and practiced in English language classrooms in rural China.

Keywords: English language teaching (ELT), rural China, hegemonic spread of English

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Introduction

English has been widely perceived as a global language (Crystal, 1997; Nunan, 2003) or international language (Jenkins, 2000; McKay, 2002). The two ways to describe English suggest a global spread of English or “the worldliness of English” (Pennycook, 2014), which is also reflected in terms such as World Englishes (Kachru, 1992; Kachru, Kachru, & Nelson, 2006), global Englishes (Pennycook, 2007), Lingua Franca English (LFE) (Seidlhofer, 2005; Canagarajah, 2007; Jenkins, 2007). There are scholars (e.g., Makoni & Pennycook, 2005; Canagarajah, 2007; Kubota & McKay, 2013) deconstructing the perception of English as a global language, and some scholars (e.g., Graddol, 1997, 2008) proposing the possibility that English may lose its current predominance in the near future. However, their voices have not attracted much attention since there is little sign that the worldwide expansion of English abates. Mainland China (hereafter “China”) is a good example, as “the current popularity of English in China is unprecedented ... the scale of the spread of English in China in recent decades has taken most observers by surprise” (Bolton & Graddol, 2012, p. 3). In China, English is increasingly emphasized as a priority foreign language and a compulsory subject at all levels of education. As stipulated by the 2011 English Curriculum Standard issued by the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), English should be introduced as a compulsory subject in Grade 3 in primary schools. Indeed, China is an important player in the global spread of English because English has made great inroads into its educational systems—both public and private sectors (Hu & McKay, 2012).

The national zeal for learning English does not exclude rural China. Although poorly resourced primary schools, most of which are located in rural areas, are exempted from the obligation to provide English courses, English remains a compulsory subject in secondary education. In contrast with cities where foreigners use English as a L1 or it is used as a lingua franca in global communication, in rural areas English does not serve as a communication tool. It is true that rural areas are experiencing monolingual-to-multilingual changes with marriages involving women from some Southeast Asian countries, and with an increase of domestic migrant workers who bring new languages/dialects¹ to local communities. This is particularly true in those areas located in developed places and adjacent to big cities. However, in these areas, *Putonghua* (or the *Common Speech*, which is a variety of Mandarin Chinese and a national language of the PRC) and the local languages/dialects are often used as lingua franca. I’m, therefore, interested in exploring: In what ways does globalization relate to China’s striving for a nationwide provision of English language education? In rural China, why is English—not used as a contact language—widely taught, or why is its significance always emphasized within and outside of the educational context?

Answers to these questions are closely related to the hegemonic spread of English driven by the contemporary wave of globalization. I use the concept of hegemonic spread of English as a blend on the one hand of the global spread of English as suggested above, and the current hegemony of English on the other hand, where English is the most dominant language in this globalizing world (Tsuda, 2014), and is a “mythical common language” (Macedo, Dendrinos, & Gounari, 2016). I will argue that while there is a pervasive belief in the global spread of English and a belief in the inextricable link between English and upward social mobility, we should never

overlook the hegemony of English against the backdrop of globalization. Below I will develop this argument from three perspectives, i.e., the pervasive belief in the global spread of English, English and social mobility, and critical responses to the global spread of English.

The Pervasive Belief in the Global Spread of English

One main controversy within the academic literature on globalization is whether globalization amounts to homogenization or heterogenization. In this regard, it is helpful to draw on Kumaravadivelu's (2008, p. 37) concept of cultural globalization that refers to "the process of cultural flows across the world." The scholar summarizes three schools of thought on cultural globalization, i.e., cultural homogenization, cultural heterogenization, and cultural glocalization. According to him, scholars who hold the view of cultural homogenization can be called "hyper-globalizers" because they believe there is "an emerging global culture that is rapidly changing the cultural profile of the world" (p. 39). They tend to equate globalization with Westernization, Americanization, and McDonaldization. He calls supporters of cultural heterogenization "localizers" as they foreground the local characteristics of globalization and consider "a multitude of local cultural identities are being revived and revitalized owing to real or perceived threats from the process of globalization" (p. 42). The proponents of the cultural glocalization are called "glocalizers," who believe cultures are mutually shaping each other during cultural transmission. Even though Kumaravadivelu does not discuss how English has been interwoven with cultural globalization (and globalization in general), it is safe to say that cultural homogenization premises a world spread of English, which is inextricably linked to Westernization or Americanization highly embraced by the "hyper-globalizers." The "localizers" attempt to separate "a diffusion of cultural fads from the West" from "cultural domination on the part of West." To put it in another way, despite the fact that they reject the proposition about the cultural dominance of the West, they admit the current spread of Western culture—the English language being an important element.

While Kumaravadivelu focuses on the concept of culture in general, Pennycook (2007) specifies the contrast between homogenization and heterogenization from the aspect of the English language. To explore the relationship between globalization and English, he employs the term "global Englishes," which is intended to blend critical theories of globalization with the perspective of World Englishes (WE) that takes English as a pluralized entity. Indeed, Pennycook's notion of global Englishes is a combination of "the homogeny position on global English" (p. 19), that foregrounds the role of English in homogenizing the world, and "the heterogeny position" (p. 20) on global English or the WE paradigm. It is then reasonable to conclude that both the global Englishes framework and the two positions on global English presuppose the global spread of English.

The worldwide spread of English driven by the current globalization is also discussed by Stephen May (2016) who, in his exploration of the relationship between globalization, localization, and language(s), notices a broad position that takes English as the current world language and the new means of global interchange. May's reference to the "Q value" or "communication value" of languages, which is developed by de Swaan as a method to measure the communicative reach,

significance, and usefulness of languages in the world today, is particularly helpful in understanding the predominance of English in a hierarchy of languages. The Q value is represented by the notion of centrality and the higher the Q value is, the greater influence a language has. Within the Q value paradigm, de Swaan identifies around 100 languages as “central,” twelve as “supercentral,” and English as the only “hypercentral” with the highest Q value.

The broad position documented by May (2016) is helpful in answering the first question put above in the Introduction, i.e., In what ways does globalization relate to China’s striving for a nationwide provision of English language education? China has been involved in the hegemonic spread of English since the late 1970s when the policies of reform and opening up were initiated (Hu, 2005; Pan, 2015). Believing English was a world language that could play a significant role in China’s modernization, China started to revive and expand English language education, which had been confined and even outlawed during the first three decades after the establishment of the PRC (Hu, 2005; Bolton & Graddol, 2012). Since 1990s, China started to embrace English fully with a willingness to have a deeper involvement in globalization, and major events included China’s joining of the World Trade Organization (WTO) as well as being awarded and hosting the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. As a result, more efforts have been made to achieve a universal provision of English language education (Nunan, 2003; Bolton & Graddol, 2012; Pan, 2015). Since 2001, English has been expanded into the primary curriculum, and introduced into tertiary education as a main teaching language in selected courses and a compulsory subject for all students. Therefore, the current popularity of English in China, especially in educational context, is greatly driven by the fact that the language is commonly perceived as an international language associated with modernity and modernization. Despite the fact that great efforts have been made to improve ELT provision and quality in China, there are inequalities—the urban-rural difference being a noticeable one (see, for example, in Nunan, 2003; Hu, 2003, 2005; Zhao & Jiang, 2009; Finifrock, 2010; Pan, 2015)—since, as May (2016) puts it, some people are clearly advantaged by globalization while others are greatly disadvantaged. As mentioned in the Introduction, not all primary schools in rural areas can offer English instruction as a result of limited resources. Other problems in rural English classrooms include teachers’ low professional competence and lack of language proficiency, a dominance of didactic pedagogy and a grammar-translation method, and little exposure to the task-based language learning embraced by the 2011 English Curriculum Standard, etc.

English and Social Mobility

Closely associated with the global spread of English is a wide belief that English language acquisition equals or is a prerequisite of upward social mobility, or English is the language of success. Under the hegemonic spread of English, access to English or lack of it often affects social mobility and life chances of many people who do not speak English as their L1 or L2 (Lin, 1999). Simply put, having access to English is often linked to enjoying a high social status. May (2012) points out that equating social mobility solely with majority languages—national languages and/or the current “world” language (namely, English)—is based on the assumption that the instrumental and identity aspects of language can be separated. In other words, minority languages are more likely to be linked with identity than instrumental value,

whereas majority languages are conceived of as predominantly instrumental with little or no identity value. In the discourse that English is an international language, a new means of global interchange, and a fundamental basis of social mobility, English is perceived as an instrumental or value/identity-free language. English is therefore commodified, and extending access to the language is greatly emphasized particularly “in key domains like science and technology, as well as in education and the wider workplace” (May, 2016, p. 390). This primarily accounts for why debates on provision of English language education often take central stage in the globalised periphery countries and areas.

While English is conceived of as an equivalent of upward social mobility, it is necessary to point out its hegemonic nature against the backdrop of globalization and deconstruct this myth. For a deeper understanding of this argument, I would like to draw on Bourdieu’s (1984) concepts of symbolic power and symbolic violence, which concern how representations of the world and human perceptions are imposed upon the dominated groups. Such groups tend to implicitly accept the legitimacy of those representations and perceptions such as the existing social order. This is where a social structure favored by the dominant groups is perpetuated. According to Bourdieu, this process is achieved through misrecognitions—the symbolic representations of majority language=instrumental value and modernity being a good example. Bourdieu’s idea is echoed in Kramsch’s (2009) arguments that language has the symbolic power of myth, which “highlights the fact that language makes meanings not only by referring to or standing for things in the world, but by evoking or indexing them” (p. 10). According to Kramsch, the indexical capacity of myth brings the subjective dimension of language (e.g., emotions, perceptions, and beliefs), and “when subjective beliefs are made to look as if they were natural, that myth distorts and manipulates” (p. 12). It is widely perceived that access to or speaking English is a symbol of cosmopolitan elites or middle-class status (as observed, for example, in Lin, 1999; Lee & Marshall, 2012; Kubota & McKay, 2013; López-Gopar & Sughrua, 2014). However, it is when this perception is imposed as objective that the predominance of English and the global power relations are perpetuated.

Actually, English acquisition masks rather than redresses deeper structural inequalities. It is existing elites who benefit most from English because of their preferential access to “high-mobility forms of English” with normative accents and standardized orthographies (May, 2016). With little access to English or access only to the “low-mobility forms of English” that are legitimized as English only locally (Blommaert, 2010, p. 195), people who are marginalized in globalization could hardly achieve their goals of upward social mobility.

At this point, I would like to answer the second question put in the Introduction above, i.e., In rural China, why is English—not used as a contact language—widely taught, or why is its significance always emphasized within and outside of the educational context? Gao (2010, p. 35) argues that “Chinese students have strong instrumental and cultural motivation for learning English.” According to him, instrumental motivation refers to learners’ use of the language as an information medium for material purposes such as immediate achievement, individual development, going abroad, whereas cultural motivation refers to learning a language for symbolic purposes such as interests, a desire to go abroad or social obligation (e.g., family expectations). It is apparent that the motivations identified by Gao are mainly based

on the belief that English is a language of success. Indeed, the general ideology that English language learners in China hold is that they will be denied success in education and career development if they are not efficient in English (Pan, 2015). This is especially true in rural China. Being aware that English is significant in succeeding Gaokao (the College Entrance Examination) and job market, rural students, who want to or are expected by parents to achieve an upward social mobility, have to set out on the arduous journey of learning English. Nevertheless, their investment of time, money, and emotion in learning English is less likely to be rewarding. Since 1990s when China started to embrace English fully, there is a low and decreasing rate of rural students who are enrolled into tertiary education and particularly into prestigious universities (Yang, 2006; Chen & Wei, 2013; Wang, 2013). For example, Wang (2013) points out that in 2010, Tsinghua university only admitted 17% students with rural origins while rural students accounted for 62% of all Gaokao test-takers; according to statistics conducted by a scholar at Beijing University, the rate of rural students at Beijing University has fallen from 3/10 in 1978-1998 to 1/10 in 2000-2013². Although there seems no related statistics available to be drawn on, given the considerable proportion English takes up in Gaokao (normally 20%), to some extent a low degree of English proficiency accounts for many rural students' failure to go to universities. Or possibly, the English varieties they are taught do not conform to the national English assessment system that is tailored to urban English pedagogical needs.

With a “low-mobility form of English,” rural students who manage to go to universities are not guaranteed to transform from their social status. These students are more likely to be frustrated by their “deaf English,” which is used to describe the phenomenon that Chinese English language learners can read and write well but are incompetent in oral communication (Pan, 2015), than their urban peers who far outperform them in English speaking tests and job interviews where an English conversation is routine. In a six-month study of 439 Chinese students newly enrolled in a Singapore university, Hu (2005) found that students from more developed areas and those from less developed areas have no clear differences in knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary, but the former outperform their counterparts in higher-level language skills and more communicative language use. The low level of proficiency in spoken English particularly entrenches rural students' disadvantage in “global-scale transnational migration” (Li & Zhu, 2013, p. 517), either through studying abroad, where a gatekeeping strategy of English language proficiency test (e.g., IELTS and TOEFL) with oral module is usually applied, or through working in multinational institutions, in which English is often used as a communication tool. To sum up, with little access to the “high-mobility form of English,” rural students and their urban peers who have more “cultural capital” do not compete from equal starting points. Their social stratification is thus reproduced and rural students' reliance on school success for transformation from their low social status becomes increasingly difficult.

Critical Responses to the Global Spread of English

While the position that highlights the instrumental value of English is broadly held, there are some lines of scholarship challenging the discourse that English is an international language. With his often cited account of “English linguistic imperialism,” Phillipson (1992) is one of those pioneering scholars who point out the

power asymmetry between English and other languages and question the predominant status of English. According to Phillipson (1992, p. 47), the imperialism of English lies in its dominance being “asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages.” While this view has been commonly accepted by those worrying about the increasingly global spread of English, it has also attracted critiques. For instance, Pennycook (2007) argues the contrast between imperialism and local rights tends to inspire nationalist responses. In other words, in response to the threats of English imperialism, the local groups tend to adopt strong nationalist defenses of local language and culture, which might reach extremes and trigger new forms of linguistic and cultural imperialism.

Indeed, the hegemonic spread of English often entrenches nationalism, which advocates nationwide cultural and linguistic uniformity—the idea of selecting and establishing “national” language(s). According to May (2012, p. 135), the deliberate political act of choosing “national” language(s) leads to minoritizing or dialectizing other language varieties within the same nation-states, and “the historical and geopolitical situatedness of national languages also apply at the supranational level.” He specifically compares the current predominance of English with the construction of national languages. English and national languages are often associated with modernity and modernization, whereas non-English national languages and the minority languages and dialects within nation-states are negatively linked with tradition and less value.

In the case of the PRC, selecting and establishing *Putonghua* as an official language endangers many other languages and dialects within the nation-state, and even causes language death. While many Sinitic varieties have been losing speakers and domains of use since 1950, *Putonghua* has been spreading rapidly (Moseley, 2010). The degree of endangerment of those languages will continue to increase, and “the process is accelerating with improvements in education and communications, and economic progress” (Moseley, 2010, p. 72), in which *Putonghua* usually functions as the medium of exchange. At the same time, both *Putonghua* and other domestic language varieties are facing the threats of the hegemonic spread of English. Vigilant about this “linguistic imperialism,” the PRC government put English curriculum reform on its agenda in 2013 in an attempt to lower English’s proportion in basic education. For instance, in 2016, Beijing, the national capital, lowered the points for English in the Gaokao from 150 to 100, while raising the points for the Chinese language from 150 to 180 that accounts for nearly a quarter of the examination (the total points are 750). The new policy aimed to remove the English portion from Gaokao by 2020, so students can apply for college with the higher score from two alternative English exams taken annually. Nevertheless, this de-emphasis on English does not mean the national cult for learning English will cool down sharply as the hegemonic spread of English is still the trend. Given the pervasive belief that English is a language of success, it is not difficult to understand why a resistance to the hegemony of English is resented rather than being embraced by many students and parents. On the contrary, this movement will have a negligible impact on English education in primary and secondary schools in the short term because “the universities have not changed their English admission requirements, but it could affect consumer spending on private test prep tutoring” (Adkins, 2015, p. 10). A boom in private English tutoring may exacerbate the disadvantages of rural English learners because of their lack of

“economic capital.” Indeed, most private English language schools mainly target urban English learners; as observed by Adkins (2015), China has over 50,000 English language schools, which are heavily concentrated in the economically developed areas.

Regarding the hegemonic spread of English, while nationalism is often interpreted as strong nationalist defenses of local languages and culture, it is also criticized for highlighting the uniformity of a nation-state and overlooking its internal diversity. The above mentioned World Englishes (WE) framework that “places nationalism at its core” (Pennycook, 2007, p. 20) is a good example in that regard. Being intended for disturbing the hegemonic spread of English, the WE paradigm was put forward to legitimize localized or indigenized varieties of English. However, this “superficially appealing and convenient model conceals more than it reveals” (Bruthiaux, 2003, as cited in Pennycook, 2007, p. 21), since its categorization of English varieties remains in a nation-based model and fails to capture social and linguistic diversity within nation-states. China English has been placed in the expanding circle (Kachru, 1990; Kachru, Kachru, & Nelson, 2006), where English is a foreign language, as a generalized variety of English resulting from assumptions that English is uniformly used in China as a whole. However, the model does not take account of the fact that the concept of China English (as well as other Englishes, e.g., Indian English, Hongkong English) is internally heterogeneous, whose varieties range in terms of region, class, gender, ethnicities, etc. In this sense, if China English would be legitimized as a variety of English in political, economic, and social activities, and enjoy the same status with Englishes in inner circle (where English is spoken as native language)³ or outer circle (where English is a second language), we should not hurry to give our acclaim, with new forms of language inequalities emerging within the nation-state. To be specific, the possibly legitimized China English seems to be a generic term for varieties of English spoken by urban Mandarin speakers rather than rural Mandarin speakers, or minority language speakers, e.g., Cantonese, Min, or Hakka speakers, to name a few.

Problematizing the generic use of China English brings an endless list of English varieties. Indeed, there is a line of scholarship challenging the long-standing idea of languages as enumerable objects. According to Makoni and Pennycook (2005, p. 141), Phillipson’s linguistic imperialism focuses on the imposition of dominant languages on minority groups, but overlooks that the imposition also lies in how “speech forms are constituted/constructed into languages, and particular definitions of what constitutes language expertise are construed and imposed.” The two scholars enrich their critique of linguistic imperialism with the ideology that languages and the metalanguages used to describe them are inventions rather than discrete and enumerable categories. They then propose the concept of disinventing languages and argue not only “small languages” but also the “mother of all invented languages,” i.e., English, should be disinvented. The discourse of English as an international language is therefore constructed, and so does the WE construction that takes a strategy of pluralizing the invented monolingual languages.

Although Makoni and Pennycook’s ideology of disinventing languages sheds light on the hegemonic nature of the global spread of English, they do not investigate how language communication and teaching can be practiced after disinvention, and in particular, how to deal with English language teaching and learning. To explore this

issue, Canagarajah (2007) first deconstructs the notion of English as an international language by de-legitimizing a need for a common system to enable communication between different English-speaking communities. He then argues that in this postmodern world, speakers of different varieties of English need ways of negotiating difference instead of shared codes such as LFE. Based on this idea, he thinks what is important about English language teaching is to equip students with negotiation strategies, which can help them be aware of and negotiate differences within and across communities of practice, rather than training them to obsess about the correctness of a “common/legitimate” core of grammar.

Kubota and McKay (2013) also discuss pedagogical issues after the disinvention of English. According to the two scholars, because of a growing number of non-English-speaking immigrants in many expanding circle countries such as Japan and China, there is increasing multilingualism in local communities where speech situations counter to the common belief of English as a shared language. However, they do not attempt TESOL professionals and English language learners to throw in the towel and give up teaching and learning English. Rather, they encourage TESOL professionals to critically reflect on their own attachment to English in order to construct a discourse affirming all kinds of diversity, to promote “language awareness, attitudes, and skills necessary for communicating with non-English speakers,” and to scrutinize “racial, class, linguistic, and cultural biases that perpetuate unequal relations of power” (p. 615).

The above scholars’ deconstruction of the myth of English as an international language—albeit from different perspectives—sheds light on the hegemonic spread of English, which emphasizes a need for a globally shared language and conceals inherent hybridity of languages. Nevertheless, given the importance of gaining access to English is still pervasively believed and practiced, I’m not egging rural Chinese students (as well other ESL/EFL learners) on to give up learning English. Instead, we need to learn how to survive in the hegemonic spread of English and consider extremely carefully which pedagogical approaches can be applied to achieve a critical and productive English learning. While Canagarajah’s (2007) as well as Kubota and McKay’s (2013) discussion offers some directions for ELT, it is also helpful to refer to the recent boom of plurilingual/multilingual pedagogy in educational contexts (see, for example, Cenoz & Gorter, 2013; Lin, 2013; Stille & Cummins, 2013; Kubota, 2016; Marshall & More, 2016), which places great importance on hybridity and fluidity of language learning, and plurilingual and pluricultural competence.

Conclusions

In this paper, I have explored the hegemonic spread of English that combines the pervasively believed global spread of English and the hegemonic nature of English against the backdrop of globalization. I have argued that China has fully embraced English in its educational system based on assumptions that English as an international language is closely linked with modernity and modernization. English is often viewed as a language of success, and this is particularly true in rural China, where students and parents take English expertise as an important pathway to upward social mobility. Nevertheless, their limited access to “high-mobility forms of English” constrains their school success. On top of that, I have also argued that the pervasive beliefs of English as an international language and English as the language of success

are constructed myths. However, my stance is not to call on rural students to stop learning English, but to encourage more researches on critical and productive pedagogies that can be situated in the context of rural English classrooms—the plurilingual/multilingual pedagogy being a potential one.

Footnotes

¹ According to Moseley (2010, p. 72), the definition of what constitutes a separate language is a major issue in classifying the languages of southern China, where there are a large number of endangered languages; Chinese linguists tend to classify as dialects what would be regarded as separate languages elsewhere. Actually, the ambiguities surrounding the distinction between languages and dialects are not only seen in the context of southern China, but also northern China. Bearing this in mind, in this article I will not refer to a language variety as a dialect unless it has been commonly accepted.

² More information on

<http://www.chsi.com.cn/ycnews/201307/20130723/444720986.html>.

³ Some scholars (McArthur, 1987; Modiano, 1999) believe traditionally dominant varieties such as British and American English shares the same status with newer varieties such as China English. However, as scholars such as Qiong (2004) and Jenkins (2015) point out, China English does not share the same status with varieties in inner and outer circles and it is apparent that British and American English are still predominant in ELT and a wide range of social activities.

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