

English language ideologies in the Chinese foreign language education policies: a world-system perspective

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Abstract This paper investigates the Chinese state's English language ideologies as reflected in official Chinese foreign language education policies (FLEP). It contends that the Chinese FLEP not only indicate a way by which the state gains consent, maintains cultural governance, and exerts hegemony internally, but also shows the traces of the combined force of the dominant actors both from above to below state levels in what Wallerstein defines the modern world-system (1974, 1989, 2004a, 2004b). To this end, the paper analyzes ideologies embedded in the Chinese FLEP and how state authorities use FLEP for the purposes of political and cultural governance. The issues are approached by investigating the role of the state, its interaction with the other actors in the modern world system and the individual struggle between social constraint and personal freedom.

Keywords English language ideologies · Foreign language education policies · World systems analysis · Globalization · China

Introduction

This paper investigates the Chinese state's English language ideologies (ELI) as reflected in official Chinese foreign language education policies (FLEP). Ideologies

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concerning language policy are approached by investigating the role of the state, its interaction with the other actors in the world system, and the individual struggle between social constraint and personal freedom. The paper analyzes how state authorities use language policy for the purposes of political and cultural governance by critically exploring: (1) the status ascribed to English and the functioning of the state power operating in Chinese FLEP; (2) the strategies of cultural governance reflected in FLEP; and (3) the issues of choice and inequality which emerge from the current FLEP. In addition, this paper explores the linguistic landscape which the Chinese state hopes to construct, and analyzes how socio-political factors in a globalizing China have influenced the state's ideologies towards English and how its political ideologies have affected its language planning.

Point of departure

States, the modern world-system and language planning

The starting point in this discussion is some clarification of relevant theoretical issues and concepts. The investigation and analysis are situated in the framework of Wallerstein's analysis of the modern world-system (1974, 1989, 2004). Wallerstein defines the current world as an integrated modern world-system. Accordingly, the unique features of this system are that its priority is the endless accumulation of capital and it is an 'interstate system' of unequally powerful and competing states, positioned in a hierarchy from core, semi-periphery to periphery. In the interstate system, states first exercise power internally to gain consent for the legitimacy of their governance; however, the states' relative strengths depend not merely on the degree to which they can effectively exercise authority internally but also on the degree to which they can compete with the other states in the environment of the world-system in order to move to a more central position in the hierarchy. That is, all states' power are driven or constrained by actors both above the state level (e.g. transnational agencies and the other states) and below the state level (e.g. civil organizations) (Wallerstein 1983, 2004b). To borrow a metaphor from Blommaert (2005: 219) on the role of state in the globalizing modern world, "the state is a switchboard between various scales. It is an actor that orient between the (transnational) world system and (national) 'locality'. —(And) such dynamic orientations are two-way and are the centre of many state activities." Based on Wallerstein's theory, this paper contends that language policies manifest how the state acts and responds in the interconnected modern world-system. It argues that language policies not only indicate a way by which the state gains consent, maintains cultural governance, and exerts hegemony internally but also are a product that show the traces of the combined force of the dominant actors both from above to below state levels.

Language ideologies

For Gramsci, ideology is 'the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc.' (1971: 377). He used the term "hegemony" to describe

the way the bourgeoisie makes its ideas the most natural (i.e. dominant) ideas of society and thereby develops consent. And he argued that the bourgeoisie uses a mixture of persuasion, and, when this does not suffice, coercion (through the police and the army) to maintain its power. Bourdieu's notions (1991: 23) of 'symbolic power' and 'misrecognition' further elaborate on Gramsci's 'hegemony'. For Bourdieu, the term 'symbolic power' refers not so much to a specific type of power, but rather to an aspect of most forms of power as they are routinely deployed in social life, that is, as 'invisible' powers which are 'misrecognized' as such and thereby 'recognized' as legitimate (ibid). Hence, symbolic power is not exercised coercively, but routinely. And people consent to particular formations of power because the dominant groups generating the discourse represent them as 'natural' and 'legitimate' (Mayr 2008: 13). The more consent can be generated among the population, the more legitimacy dominant groups will have, and the less coercion they will need to apply. Althusser argued that ideology is not simply imposed upon subordinate classes by a dominant class. Rather, it is a dynamic process of production and reproduction (Rivkin and Ryan 2004). Drawing upon the elaboration of the concept of ideology by the above three scholars, this analysis recognizes ideologies as sets of ideas which, on the one hand, visibly present a view of the social world from a particular perspective, but also, on the other hand, can indicate a widely accepted, and therefore, (to the individual subjects) 'less apparent' way of thinking and acting which is the normative result of the hegemonic practice of a governing power. Therefore, while ideologies can be transparent to some extent, it is important that we do not ignore the fact that they also take a more opaque shape by the means of education, media and religion for example. Ideologies (and language ideologies) are thus about power relationships, and, as Johnstone (2008: 53) has said, "they are well suited for use by the dominant to make oppressive social systems seem natural and desirable and to mask the mechanisms of oppression".

Language policies and foreign language education policies

Language policies (LP) inform practical language teaching and language use in education and other crucial spheres of public life, and involve the choice of what languages are to be used and how they are made legitimate by the state for purposes of gaining consent and cultural governance. In particular, the discussion in this paper will be centred upon Chinese foreign language education policies (FLEP), which have had the teaching of English at the centre, in the last 3 decades (Lam 2005). To draw a demarcation line, while LP are concerned with decisions made about languages and their uses in society, FLEP refer to the fulfilment of LP decisions concerning the teaching and learning of foreign languages in educational settings (for example, schools and universities). Issues to be discussed in this paper include the official ascription of status, the objectives and the standard of English language learning, and the teaching of culture. In addition, the problems of choice and inequality which have accompanied the implementation of the current FLEP will be discussed. In general, the analysis here follows Shohamy (2006: 76) in considering FLEP as "a form of imposition and manipulation of language policy as

it used by those in authority to turn ideology into practice through formal education". My view about FLEP is that they reflect the state's ideologies towards foreign languages (English in particular) by imposing principles and regulations on language teaching, learning and use in centralized educational systems. FLEP emerge in response to important forces in the modern world-system: globalization, political conflicts, changes in government or in the structure of local economies, to name a few and are connected to political, social and economic dimensions.

Hence, one major purpose of this paper is to explore the important connections between foreign language policies in education and their broader sociopolitical significance and implications. The analysis in this paper will follow the approach of critical analysis of language policies (Tollefson 2006). The English education policies to be discussed are selected from four levels of syllabi; namely, the 2003 version of *English Curriculum Requirements at Compulsory Education Stage (in general for students below age 16)*; the 2003 version of *English Curriculum Requirements at Senior High Education Stage (for students aged 16–18 in general)*; the 2007 version of *English Curriculum Requirements for University Students (non-English major students)* and the 2000 version of *English Teaching Syllabus for English Majors at Institutions of Higher Learning*. The extracts from syllabi discussed and presented in this paper are either originally in English or translated by the author. In the latter case, a certified translator was hired to help with proofreading. These four syllabi are selected for analysis not only because they were the most up-to-date policies when this paper was written but also because they are the authoritative guidelines which reflect policy makers' fundamental assumptions about the nature, functions and processes of language teaching and learning. These four syllabi lay down teaching and learning objectives, delimit instructional contents, and circumscribe the processes and methods of instruction. More importantly, they clearly express the government's policy and ideologies on ELT at a particular stage of social and national development (Silver et al. 2002).

FLEP and their ideological implications

According to scholars such as Yuan (2000), Lu (2003) and Hu (2007), China in general has adopted a "top-down" approach in formulating foreign language policies. That is, the state organizes research institutions or 'expert teams' (usually national foreign-language educationists) in policy making, but does not take into account the opinions, views and needs of other sectors of the society such as companies, organizations and institutions with foreign language requirement on their employees. Hence, Hu (2007: 370) claims that "the feasibility of the policies has been questioned as it was inferred that the policy might have been imposed on schools and students without any grass-roots consideration of its impact on them". Nevertheless, though the policymaking process is so far under-researched, it could be argued that the language policies are a product of the state ideologies, and they are informed by the state's interaction with various actors both above and below state levels in the integrated modern world-system. To put it in another way, FLEP in China are the outcome of the state's definition of the value and functions of

English according to its own needs, and the standard and purpose of ELT are also localized to meet the need of state development. In what follows I justify these assertions from the following perspectives: the ascribed status of English, the objectives and standards of ELT, the culture issue and issues of choice and inequality.

The ascribed status of English

Status planning refers to “deliberate efforts to influence the allocation of functions among a community’s language” (Cooper 1989: 99). In *English Curriculum Requirements at Compulsory Education Stage* (for students about Age 7–16), the importance and status of English–Chinese society is explicitly laid out on page 1:

The informatization of social life and economic globalization have increased the importance of English. As one of the most important carriers of information, English has become the most widely used language in various sectors of human life.

(My translation)

Similarly, *English Curriculum Requirements at Senior High Education Stage* (Age 16–18) specifies on its first page:

Language is the most important tool for human beings to think and to communicate; it is also the pre-requisite for people’s social activities and it is significant for people’s all-around development. With the globalization of social and economic activities, foreign language competence has already become a basic requirement for people around the world. Therefore, learning and mastering foreign languages, especially English, is of critical importance.

(My translation)

The above excerpts first point to the backdrop of the policy; that is, with the informatization of social life, economic globalization and the globalization of social and economic activities, English and English studies become important to Chinese society. In addition, the importance of English is distinctly announced like these: ‘it is critically important because it is the most widely used language’, ‘one of the most important carriers of information’, ‘the most important tool for communication’, and ‘it is significant for people’s all-around development—and this has become a basic requirement for people around the world’. Similar views are also found in numerous official discourses. To quote two examples given by Hu (2007: 361), Lianning Li, the then Director-General of the Department of Basic Education under the Ministry of Education, in 2001 said that “the first reason to teach English in primary schools is to satisfy the escalating demand for English created by the further opening up of the country”. Likewise, Hu also pointed out that in an interview with an official of the Ministry of Education regarding the teaching of English in primary schools reported by Li in 2001, the official stated that “as a result of informationization and globalization, learning and mastering a foreign language has become a basic requirement that citizens of the twenty-first century should fulfil —”; this was a reason for promoting English on a large scale.

The above examples illustrate that in this age of globalization it is held officially by the Chinese state that an adequate command of English by Chinese individuals is necessary and important for the sustained development of the country. This presents a counterargument to the linguistic imperialist view advocated by Phillipson (1992, 1996), who proposes that the dissemination of English has essentially been manipulated and led by the United States and Britain, which reside at the central position of the world-system, either politically, economically and linguistically. If, to these central countries, English is a vehicle for maintaining their dominance and sustaining the dependence of the peripheral countries, it seems the Chinese FLEP are enacted principally out of the central government's construction of national self-interest, with the purpose of extending global influence and gaining a competitive advantage economically. Hence, in the Chinese context, we see that the spread of English does not follow a one-way direction from the centre to the (semi)periphery; rather, the direction is two-way and the ideologies of 'English for national interest, for globalization and internationalization' are embraced as much in the (semi) periphery as they are in the centre (Ricento 2000).

The ideology that 'English is for globalization, informatization, economic and social development', as repeatedly mentioned in the above text, could be interpreted by locating the right time for such ideology to emerge. As Blommaert (2006: 244) indicates, "language policy is invariably based on linguistic ideologies, on images of 'societally desirable' forms of language usage and of the 'ideal' linguistic landscape of society". In other words, non-linguistic socio-historical, socio-political factors usually play a crucial role in the emergence of dominant ideologies. In addition, Blommaert (1999: 73) argues that "if we want to make sense of the ideology, we have to establish its historicity". This 'historicity of ideology' could be viewed as a series of complex social and political factors happening at a particular time in history which led in certain language ideologies and made them dominate. Therefore, in order to locate the 'right time' for an ideology of language to emerge, we need to unravel the confluence of socio-political factors made it the 'right time'.

After China initiated reform and opening-up policies from 1978, English education gradually gained a steady footing and began to expand. Hu (2005: 9–11) contributed its expansion to several factors. First, at the state level, with a new leadership set up and consolidated, a utilitarian view towards education and national development was advocated and qualified foreign language personnel were needed for national modernization. Second, at a super-state level, China faced unprecedented challenges to sustained economic development, an imperative for integration into the global economy, internationalization and technological development. As a result, a comprehensive education reform was started in the mid 1980s. Last but not least, as the previous ELT was below the standard due to various social and political constraints, a progressive public voice emerged which advocated the improvement of ELT in schools and emphasized education for individual development, creativity and the exploration of education itself. Hence the status of English as described in Chinese FLEP is due to the interaction between the state and the other factors and the policies were formulated taking into account the interrelated social, economic, educational, linguistic, and political forces. This is an example illustrating how the Chinese state functions as what Blommaert called a switchboard between various

scales. The FLEP formulated in China in the early 2000s is a way of responding to the interaction and of reaching a compromise position.

The objectives of English education

A study of the objectives of English education reveals that English is endowed with instrumental and pragmatic value, and in China English education carries two layers of significance: that is, for individual development and for social development.

First, as defined in *English Curriculum Requirements at Compulsory Education Stage* (on Page 6) and *at Senior High Education Stage* (on Page 6), the objective of English learning at primary and secondary school level is to develop students' comprehensive language use competence.

The overall objective for English education at the basic education stage is to cultivate students' comprehensive comprehension in language use. This comprehensive language use competence is formed on the overall development of students' language skills, language knowledge, a positive attitude, study strategies and cultural awareness. Language knowledge and skills are the basis for developing comprehensive competence in language use, cultural awareness will guarantee the appropriate use of language; a positive attitude is a crucial factor for students' study and development; and study strategies can improve students' study efficiency and develop their competence in self-study.

(My translation)

Later at college level, more emphasis is put on developing students' listening and speaking competence. According to *English Curriculum Requirements for university students (non-English majors)* (Page 1):

The objective of College English is to develop students' ability to use English in a well-rounded way, especially in listening and speaking, so that in their future studies and careers as well as social interactions they will be able to communicate effectively, and at the same time enhance their ability to study independently and improve their general cultural awareness so as to meet the needs of China's social development and international exchanges.

(Original in English)

The above policy specification exemplifies a switch in focus in ELT in recent decades. If we go back to an earlier period, after English was first announced as the main foreign language in secondary education in 1982, it was still taught as strictly as a foreign language, a subject of study rather than a means of communication (Cheng 1992; Lam 2005). This might be because the Chinese government was keenly aware of the social-cultural values that the English language can bring to a society, and hence these were avoided to the greatest possible extent. However, after 1986 there was a shift of emphasis in FLEP, and the focus has been put on using English for the goal of economic development and national modernization (Hu 2005; Wang and Lam 2009). The above policy statements clearly show that

the role and function of English has already been reconfigured, so that it now seems more economically oriented and the emphasis is put more on the communicative purpose of language learning, on “cultivating students’ comprehensive language use competence, and developing their overall language skills”. The development of these skills, according to the curriculum requirement above, serves to “meet the needs of China’s social development and international exchanges”. To summarize, the significance of English learning is not restricted to its linguistic and communicative usefulness, but is elevated first to a national level and connected to social development, and then to an international level, and boosted to relate to the importance of gaining a stronger foothold in the world-system. This ideological line is recurrently specified in FLEP at various levels. For example:

At the moment, our social and economic development has higher requirements for our people. English education at senior high level is an important process for developing students’ foreign language ability. It should satisfy students’ intellectual and emotional needs, and meet the requirements for employment, further education and future development. At the same time, it should satisfy the nation’s need for economic and technological development. Therefore, foreign language education at senior high level has multiple social and cultural significances.

English is a major subject at senior high school education period. Learning English, on the one hand, can help students’ intellectual development, form positive emotions and values and improve their overall quality; on the other hand, a command of an international language creates good conditions for learning foreign culture, science and technology, etc. and facilitates international exchange. English courses can help improve the nation’s quality, help promote the country’s opening up and international exchange and help improve the overall power of the nation. Therefore, on the basis of compulsory education, senior high education courses should help students lay a solid foundation of language competence for their further study, employment and lifelong study, so that they have a basic command of English to meet the requirement for the twenty-first century.

— *English Curriculum Requirements
at Senior High Education Stage Pages 1–2*
(My translation)

In the same way, the importance of English to China’s social and economic development is also specified as follows:

With a view to keeping up with the new developments of higher education in China, deepening teaching reform, improving teaching quality, and meeting the needs of the country and society for qualified personnel in the new era, College English Curriculum Requirements have been drawn up to provide colleges and universities with the guidelines for English instruction to non-English major students.

— *English Curriculum Requirements for
university students (non-English majors) Page 1*
(Original in English)

As this quotation suggests, English is now seen in the language policies as a language that serves a “purely pragmatic” function. This is in contrast to previous eras, when the learning of English was encouraged by the state as a means to check imperialism in the late nineteenth century, or to serve nation-building and state-consolidation when the People’s Republic of China was recently founded after 1949. The role accorded to English now is that it is a modern language with significant social, economic and political value, and, at an individual level, a symbolic capital needed to attain brighter education and career prospects and a better life style.

Thus, the rise of a pragmatic ideology of usefulness of English can be best understood within the historical contexts, as in the late 1990s and the beginning of twenty-first century, China has witnessed a further integration of interstate relations in the world-system. For the Chinese political leaders, only by being integrated into the world can China become a strong state. Hence, from the beginning of the 1990s, China started to actively engage in the trend of globalization by successfully hosting the Asian Games and the International Women’s Conference, entering the World Trade Organization in 2001 and making the successful bid for the 2008 Olympic Games. Economically, it has also become a more modern, prosperous nation and has become the world’s fastest growing major economy. All these manifest China’s ambition to move towards a more central position in the modern world-system. Therefore, though there are observable debates on whether English should be a compulsory test subject (see [“The underlying issue of choice and inequality”](#) for details) and on the role which English should play in Chinese society and education, these debates, more often than not, are on how English should be learnt and taught (more effectively) rather than on whether English should be learnt and taught at all, because the indispensability of English for China’s development is increasingly recognized and assured.

Furthermore, efforts to neutralize English from earlier assumptions and the curricula that view English as a practical skill, a ‘tool’ for education and employment and China’s development exactly, indicate that FLEP are ideological and that the state is maintaining governance by practising ideological hegemony. According to Blommaert (2008), “ideological hegemony” refers to a complete dominance over the culture and ideas of a society. It is a “soft” power that is used to exercise control over the hearts and minds of the people. As hegemonic practices come to be built into the institutions of society, they tend to reinforce privilege and grant it legitimacy as a ‘natural’ condition (Fairclough 1989); people accept the new ideology as a non-ideology, and misrecognize it as a normal state of affairs (Bourdieu 1991). Thus, the assumption that English is a tool for getting ahead in social life and that teaching English is empty of ideological content is exactly an exemplification of ideological hegemony. And requiring individuals to learn English for education and jobs and for social development often helps to sustain existing power relationships. The belief that learning English will help people gain

advantages is therefore at the centre of the ideology of Chinese FLEP. And the individuals, the product of power, accept English as a neutral tool and misrecognize the state's cultural governance as legitimate and for their own benefit.

The standard of English learning

After examining the assigned status of English and the objectives of ELT in the Chinese FLEP, it is necessary to further investigate the way the state defines the standard of English teaching and learning. It is worth pointing out that no matter which level the policy regulation is at (primary, secondary or tertiary), Chinese institutional policies do not grant clear privilege to any type or variety of English. Instead, these varieties are all generalized as 'the language in English speaking countries'. And the requirement for English learning is to acquire 'correct, natural, appropriate fluent pronunciation and intonation' without any specification of which country's language model is to be followed. The policies distance themselves from any particular cultural model. They do not follow the powerful and pervasive discourse which defines British or American English as the standard and puts their English at a more central level in the English linguistic system, and there is no attempt to impose linguistic hierarchies. For example:

In terms of language skills development, *the English Curriculum Requirements at Compulsory and Senior High Education stage* (on Pages 13–22) clearly state the following:

Band 4: have correct pronunciation and intonation

Band 5: have natural, appropriate pronunciation and intonation within proper context

Band 6: can use appropriate pronunciation and intonation to express ideas and intentions

Band 8: can use appropriate intonation and correct rhythm in speech

Band 9: can read general English newspapers and magazines—read general English literary works in their original form

In terms of language knowledge development:

Band 5: have basically correct, natural and fluent pronunciation and intonation

Band 8: gradually achieve fluent communication through proper pronunciation and intonation in a natural manner

(My translation)

The English Curriculum Requirement for University Students (non-English majors) (on Page 3) states that "(students should) be able to understand general articles in newspapers and magazines from English speaking countries; be able to translate general articles in newspapers and magazines from English speaking countries with the aid of dictionary; and be able to understand radio or TV programs from English speaking countries in normal speed," without specifying which those English countries are.

(Original in English)

Some scholars have put forward the idea of the ‘worldliness of English’ (Pennycook 1994) and asserted that the global spread of English has been facilitated by the cultural, economic, and political dominance and power of the US and the UK (Pennycook 1994; Phillipson 1992; Crystal 1997); nevertheless, FLEP in China distance themselves from any particular cultural model and try to maintain a functionalist perspective, which stresses the usefulness of English, and seems to present ELT as natural (unrelated to colonialism), neutral (unconnected to cultural and political issues), and beneficial (to people’s personal development and the country’s opening up). Hence, not specifying a particular variety of English as the legitimate form is a deliberate effort to neutralize the role and the function that the language plays (nevertheless, language policies may not be successfully fulfilled in implementation). By doing so, a so-called ‘neutrality of English’ is established, as it is what is ideal to the state and state governance. This point will be further elaborated in the section to follow.

Second, by emphasizing the neutrality of English and the teaching and learning of Standard English, the policy intentionally ignores or avoids the fact that “China English” has been developed as a particular variety of English: there is an implicit lack of recognition of China English or suggestions on the handling of China English in ELT in the policies. Though the concept of China English is gaining momentum and its definitions and examples have been discussed by various scholars (Kirkpatrick and Xu 2002; McKay and Bokhorst-Heng 2008), the policy makers in China seem to adhere strictly to a belief that the native speakers of English are the best teachers and English-speaking countries set the standards. This action is in contrast with their counterparts in some other countries. Taking South Korea as an example (McKay and Bokhorst-Heng 2008), “Konglish” is openly acknowledged, widespread and even codified in dictionaries by the government and wider society at large (though there is debate as to the role and use of Korean English). The Chinese government’s wilful ignorance of China English, according to Adamson (quoted in McKay and Bokhorst-Heng 2008: 112), is an “ideological politicking around English” and occurs so he argues, because “accepting China English officially would be an open acknowledgment that English has expanded into non-pragmatic and social-cultural spheres”.

The culture issue

Concomitant with the wide recognition of English as a global language is the globally rapid development of the ELT enterprise (Phan 2008). Nevertheless, ELT is still described as a product of colonialism, and in particular by Phillipson (1992) as a form of “linguistic imperialism” because it is a soft form of hegemony through which the ‘Centre’ (English speaking countries) imposes its own cultural political and economic power and values upon the ‘Periphery’. In addition, Coleman (1996) claims that such specific culture/political/economic values and beliefs may be in conflict with those of a language learner’s native culture and may, thus, threaten the learners’ cultural identity and integrity.

It is true that such lines of thinking were evident and foregrounded in the previous Chinese FLEP, and that the Chinese governments were keenly aware of any potential linguistic and cultural threat. For example, in the late Qing Dynasty (mid 1800s–1911), when the study of English was introduced to China, the official guideline for learning defined ‘Chinese knowledge as the foundation and Western knowledge for utility’ (zhong xue wei ti, xi xue wei yong 中学为体、西学为用). And languages were to be learnt divorced from any cultural and ideological implications, under state sponsorship and strict state supervision. This attitude and the associated utilitarianism of English learning and teaching, have been kept in China since then, though they have taken different forms. Even at the beginning of China’s enactment of the Reform and Opening policy from the end of 1970s to the middle of 1980s, it was still taught as strictly a foreign language, a subject of study rather than a means of communication (Cheng 1992; Lam 2005). This was because, although English was no longer seen as an immediate threat, it was still regarded as a potential source of ‘spiritual pollution’ (jing shen wu ran 精神污染) (An 1984; Yue 1983). Hence the social-cultural values embedded in English were still avoided as far as possible. However, since the middle of 1980s, due to the increasing needs for modernization and internationalization, the issue of the so-called ‘negative influence’ was shelved and placed in the background, and, though the idea that “*languages are rich with cultural connotations*” is still acknowledged, it is clearly indicated in both *English Curriculum Requirements at Compulsory Education Stage (below age 16): 2003* (on Page 25) and *English Curriculum Requirements at Senior High Education Stage (Age 16–18): 2003* (on Page 21) that:

In foreign language teaching, culture refers to the history, geography, local customs, tradition, life styles, literature and arts, code of conducts, value system etc. of a target country. Knowing and understanding the culture of the English speaking countries can help students appreciate and use the English language, deepen their understanding of their home culture and cultivate their global outlook. In teaching, teachers should gradually expand cultural coverage in keeping with students’ age and cognitive competence. At the initial stage, students should have a general understanding of the cultures of English speaking countries and the cultural differences between China and the other countries. The culture knowledge to be introduced should be related to students’ daily lives and arouse more interest in English study. At more advanced levels of English learning, teachers should help broaden students’ horizon by introducing more aspects of foreign culture, and enhance students’ cross-cultural competence through fostering the awareness and appreciation of cultural differences.

(My translation)

The above policy defines culture, prescribes the importance of teaching culture and suggests ways of addressing culture in teaching in a general way. More specifically, the teaching requirement points out the critical significance of the handling of Chinese culture in English language education, and clearly lays out that “by the time students graduate from Junior High School and Senior High School (Band 5 and 8 requirements), they should have a deepened understanding of Chinese

culture”. Similarly, in *English Teaching Syllabus for English Majors at Institutions of Higher Learning: 2000*, the principles for teaching state that:

Cross-culture communication skills should be emphasized in teaching. Students should develop awareness and tolerance of culture differences and be flexible in handling cultural differences. — Students should be familiar with Chinese culture and traditions, have a certain level of artistic cultivation; they should be familiar with the geography, history, current development, culture and tradition, customs of the English-speaking countries and have knowledge of the humanities, science and technology in them.

(My translation)

It is true that the English language carries within itself western culture, value and ways of thinking, and that ELT today is still quite often recognized as a way to promote the global expansion of English and its embedded cultural values (Pennycook 1994). Hence, the issue of teaching about target-language culture is often a sensitive and complex one. However, it is noteworthy that the FLEP presented above obviously accentuate the need to teach cultural knowledge and raise students’ awareness of cultures in English-speaking countries. But emphasis is also put on enhancing the competence of ‘appreciating cultural difference’, ‘increasing cultural tolerance’ and ‘deepening the understanding of Chinese culture’. It should be noted that though we cannot make the judgement that the anxiety about the ‘spiritual pollution’ associated with foreign cultures and languages and ELT has been thoroughly removed, the increased ‘liberalization’ of official thinking is apparent in the above official policy statements, and the constructive and instrumental role which English can play in Chinese society and culture is highlighted.

Moreover, while the negative colonial connotation of English and ELT seems to be avoided English language education is regarded as a tool for cultivating patriotism and spreading Chinese culture. As Chris Weedon (1987: 21) points out, “language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed.” In a similar way, Blommaert (2006: 224) asserts that “language policy produces and regulates identity”. Hence, we may assume that the state, by underscoring the necessity of cultivating patriotism and promoting Chinese culture via English education, may be contending that under the trend of cultural globalization, an individual’s identity can be constructed and reconstructed only by developing their global cultural consciousness, and that the state’s governance could be reinforced and strengthened via ELT. It could be argued that the Chinese FLEP show their engagement with western culture precisely in the way that they hope to bring foreign language and cultures in close contact and to take foreign language education and policies as opportunities to help learners consolidate their own subjectivity and cultural identity so as to create a desirable societal scenario for cultural governance.

The underlying issue of choice and inequality

As mentioned above, since the mid-1980s, after the implementation of the Opening and Reform policy, English language education has gained a stronger foothold and has become a subject of paramount importance in China. As summarized by Hu (2005: 5), “proficiency in English has been widely regarded as a national as well as a personal asset”. However, while the FLEP are implemented, the ideologies which go with them also arouse discussions and debate as to what kind of social effects they will generate. Amongst the various issues, I address two: compulsory English education, and differentiated standards for ELT.

First, it should be noted that though the teaching of English in primary schools resumed after the 1980s, it was not designated as a compulsory subject until 2001. On January 18, 2001, China’s Ministry of Education issued *The Ministry of Education Guidelines for Vigorously Promoting the Teaching of English in Primary Schools*, which made it clear that students should start to learn English as a compulsory subject in grade 3 (age 8) and the timeline for implementation was that, “starting from fall 2001, primary schools located in cities and county seats should gradually teach English; starting from fall 2002, primary schools located in towns and townships should gradually teach English” (MOE 2001 quoted in Wang 2002; Lu 2003; Hu 2007). According to Hu (2005), this compulsoriness is first of all based on an egalitarian ideology in Chinese education and in language learning. It could be interpreted as: if all people learn the same dominant language, then they will not suffer economic and social inequality. However, several researchers have expressed concerns about whether the *de facto* imposition of English education creates or reproduces social inequality (Ricento 2006; Chen 2007). Although, Chinese is obviously the dominant language, the freedom to choose a foreign language and the potential threat that English may have on the individual’s mother tongue still need to be taken as serious issues. However, an investigation of the Chinese FLEP reveals that the ideologies embedded in the FLEP have been inextricably linked to the political, economic, and social development of the country: the Chinese FLEP are based on the ideology of creating ‘a desirable social scenario’ and that the compulsory education policy, implemented at the moment, is to facilitate economic development and national modernization and internationalization (Hu 2002). It is believed that the key to equal opportunity for China on the world stage and for non-English speakers is to shift to competence in English as rapidly as possible. Hence, individuals or groups are subordinate to the national interests and their linguistic choices are not totally free, but rather between predefined alternatives, and their rights are, in fact, constrained (Tollefson 1991).

Second, as shown below the *College English Curriculum Requirements* (on page 19) have specified and assigned different standards of English teaching and learning, which vary from basic to intermediate to advanced, for different regions (such as cities, towns and countryside) taking into consideration the significant disparity in language teaching developments (for example in key or non-key universities). Hence, apparently, the FLEP have been tailored to regional differences, so as to maximize teaching and learning efficiency.

As China is a large country with conditions that vary from region to region and from college to college, the teaching of College English should follow the principle of providing different guidance for different groups of students and instructing them in accordance with their aptitude so as to meet the specific needs of individualized teaching.

The requirements for undergraduate College English teaching are set at three levels, i.e. basic requirements, intermediate requirements, and advanced requirements. Non-English majors are required to attain to one of the three levels of requirements after studying and practicing English at school. The basic requirements are the minimum level that all non-English majors have to reach before graduation. Intermediate and advanced requirements are recommended for those colleges and universities which have more favourable conditions; they should select their levels according to the school's status, types and education goals.

Institutions of higher learning should set their own objectives in the light of their specific circumstances, strive to create favourable conditions, and enable those students who have a relatively higher English proficiency and stronger capacity for learning to meet the intermediate or advanced requirements.

(Original in English)

Though the above specifications seem to meet practical concerns of the social and regional differences in China, by dividing ELT into different levels, it cannot be denied that the FLEP create unequal access to English provision, which leads to education inequality (Lu 2003). That is, due to various social and economic constraints, ELT in national or regional key schools will be strengthened first, and students in economically developed areas will therefore be the major beneficiaries. Consequently, these English-proficient personnel will have better chances and opportunities than others to become central in national modernization (Ross 1992; Soto 2004). What is more, although, at the moment, there is no clear evidence on whether social classes will be reshuffled according to people's varied English proficiency, English proficiency is increasingly recognized as a passport to better education, employment and success. The supreme status of English may lead to people who are unable to secure high qualifications in English education feeling excluded from their society (Nunan 2003; Phan 2008). Lastly, there is increasing concern (Epstein 1993; Hu 2005) that the unequal access to English education in China will only continue or even be aggravated as more and more economic benefits and social prestige are given to English proficiency.

Conclusions

This paper has investigated Chinese FLEP, and discussed the state ELI and its social implications. Four levels of Chinese education (from primary to tertiary levels) have been critically explored, relating to the status ascribed to English, the objectives and standard of ELT, the handling of cultural influence and the issues of choice and inequality. Examining the ascribed status of English shows that in Chinese FLEP,

the supremacy of English as a global language and as a language of international communication is unquestioned, and taken to be an obvious matter of common sense. The objectives of ELT clearly lay out the functional usefulness of English at two levels: individuals' overall language use competence, and the state's development and international exchange. An investigation of the standard of ELT reveals that the FLEP see to establish the 'neutrality' of ELT and at the same time, try to avoid the formulation of China English. And the necessity of studying foreign culture is straightforwardly addressed with the purpose of raising students' awareness of English-speaking cultures while accentuating the need to consolidate native cultural identity and patriotism.

Based on the above examination, I draw the following conclusions. In the Chinese FLEP, there is an absence of ideological resistance to the promotion of English as the popular perception is that there are both personal and national advantages to be gained from its adoption. Hence, the spread of English in China does not necessarily follow Phillipson's hypothesis of a one-way diffusion of English. Instead, it is characterized by a two-way absorption, and the Chinese state's active embrace of the language in education is understood as a measure to keep up with the time, to internationalize and globalize. That is, English is seen to be of overt instrumental usefulness at an individual level, and as a symbolic capital for attaining better education and career prospects and a better life style. In short, it is a global language with significant social, economic and political value. Furthermore, I find that the Chinese FLEP define English by generalizing it as 'a language of all English speaking countries'. In this way, the policy in general distances itself from promoting the cultural model of any particular English-speaking country in ELT, and maintains a neutral and merely functionalist perspective. The functional role that English should play is also exhibited in that, if anything, ELT is endowed with the mission of cultivating patriotism and spreading Chinese culture.

However, the ready acceptance of English in the Chinese language policies also points to some emerging social problems, as it is possible that the general public will be influenced by this dominant official discourse that portrays English as a beneficial language for modernization and opportunity. It could be argued that the general public can find by themselves the multi-faceted benefits which English can bring to them without the pressure from above. Nevertheless, considering the role which the government plays in decision making, I would rather counter-argue that the embrace of English by the public in general is, in Blommaert's word (2010: 2), "auto-policing" and could be seen as a measure taken out of an awareness of political preference and practical considerations of personal development. It is usually based on the belief that "we individuals, rather than being left out or left behind, could gain benefits by following the policies and taking advantages of them". In fact, the *de facto* compulsory study of English at the basic education level puts young individuals in a passive position. And when different language learning standards in ELT are imposed, those who are less proficient in English may feel excluded from pursuing further education and career advancement.

Drawing upon Wallerstein's world system theory, the analysis of English in Chinese FLEP has exemplified how the state functions as a switchboard in the interstate world-system, reacting to forces both from above (to increase global

competitiveness) and from below the state level (i.e. for state development and cultural governance, to strengthen its citizens' nationalism/national identity). It has shown that by building up a common-sense ideology that English is beneficial at all levels of society, the Chinese language policies firstly, are an apparatus for the state's political and cultural governance. More exactly, they are a product emergent out of the interaction with super-state forces in the modern world-system and they are usually formulated to guarantee the state's competitiveness in the interstate system. Hence in researching language policies, there is a need to investigate the role of the state as it interacts in the world system as well as to relate the analysis to their ideological implications. Faced with the global spread of English, a variety of language education policies are drawn up in different parts of the world, especially in what Kachru et al. (2006) defines the outer and expanding circles. The English language may be either embraced or resisted at certain times in a certain country, and for various reasons. Such reasons are ideological and may include nation building, integration into the world economy, individual development, identity maintenance, national language preservation, linguistic ecology etc. And adopting a world-system perspective in analyzing language policies may be rewarding in that it offers insights in seeing how those policies are both an outcome of power and ideological struggles and an arena for those struggles.

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