

# An Analysis of English Learning in Chinese Higher Education from the Perspective of Linguistic Imperialism

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**Abstract:** Linguistic imperialism has gradually become a phenomenon or topic concerned deeply by many linguists, such as Robert Phillipson, along with the process of globalisation. This paper aims at figuring out whether the English learning and teaching in Chinese higher education can be a typical example of Linguistic Imperialism proposed by Robert Phillipson. This paper analyses the relationship between Linguistic Imperialism and English learning in Chinese higher education from the four major perspectives: characteristics of the context, past language learning plan and policy, current language learning plan and policy and the English varieties in Chinese higher education.

**Keywords:** Linguistic Imperialism; Chinese higher education; Robert Phillipson; English Learning

## 1. Introduction

According to the national survey conducted by the Chinese government, just in the year 2018, there are more than nineteen million students studying in universities for their bachelor's, master's or doctor's degree in China (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019). A large amount of students at universities in China are not only required a good mark in the university entrance English examination to enter universities but also at least a pass in the College English Test 4 (CET-4) to graduate (Bolton and Graddol, 2012). Due to this situation, Guo and Beckett (2007) claim that the language English is devaluing the language Mandarin in higher education and gradually obtaining the hegemony in Chinese higher education; however, Pan and Seargeant (2012) suggest that English will not displace or threaten Asian local language or culture, and countries such as China force students to learn English is mainly because of the demand of nation development (Tsui and Tollefson, 2015, pp: 18 – 19). Linguistic imperialism, in this paper, refers to a phenomenon that English becomes the dominant language in culture, education or media of a country whose first language is not English due to the military, economic, cultural or political power (Phillipson, 2012, pp: 203 – 225). This paper will argue that English in higher education of the Chinese mainland is not a typical case of Phillipson's linguistic imperialism; nevertheless, in some respects, such as the population of students learning English, this context can still reflect English's hegemony in some degrees. In order to demonstrate this argument, this paper will firstly introduce the key characteristics of the context and analyse the past and current language learning plan and policy of higher education about English in China and the English varieties existing in this context respectively.

## 2. Characteristics of the context

The paper will focus on the context – English in higher education which contains all the students studying in universities regardless of their English level on the mainland of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Unlike Hongkong which had been under British colonial rule for more than 155 years (Lai, 2019), China's mainland had experienced semi-colonial rule for seventy-nine years but has never been completely or formally colonised by any country (Osterhammel, 1986, pp: 291). Semi-colonial history left a limited influence on the spread of English in the mainland of China (ibid.). Therefore, when analysing the spread of English and linguistic imperialism in mainland China, considering the historical factors is necessary; taking other factors, such as economic power and cultural power, into account is more important, as Phillipson (2017, pp: 318, 320-321) points out that globalisation and British council's activities, as well as EU's policies in education, promote the spread of English. Moreover, English is a compulsory course in Chinese higher education. Every student in Chinese universities, except English majors who will have more professional courses in English, have to attend the course named University English at least 6 hours a week and use the coursebook designed by some key universities in China, such as Shanghai International Studies University (Bolton and Botha, 2015). However, according to the statistics from the EF English Proficiency Index (2019), Chinese students are overall regarded that have a moderate proficiency of English, ranked 40 out of 100 countries and regions. Compared with the effort the Chinese government has made to encourage people to study English, this is not the desired rank. In addition, English in Chinese universities, typically, is examination-oriented, in other words, passing the semester final exams and the CET – 4 or 6 is the primary purpose for many non-English majors (Bolton, and Botha, 2015).

## 3. Past language learning plan and policy

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English can occupy a prominent position in Chinese higher education that can be primarily regarded as a historical choice, and from this point of view, English learning and teaching in current higher education in China cannot reflect Phillipson's linguistic imperialism very well. Language learning plan and policy refers to the official statements, policies and rules about the language learning purposes, functions, methods and acquisition (Spolsky, 2012, pp: 3). Phillipson (2017) suggests that economic power and political power are also some of the powers that can force English to become dominated in one country, and becoming dominant in education, media and politics is one of the defining features of linguistic imperialism. At the beginning of the establishment of the People's Republic of China, problems like whether or not to learn a foreign language and which language to learn were all decided by the Chinese government (Liu, 2015). For example, Russian was highly regarded as a required second foreign language in Chinese higher education during the first seven years after China was founded in that only Russia was willing to help China improve science and technology (Mao and Min, 2004). At that time, it seems that the Chinese government had no choice except asking university students to learn Russian, which can be seen as a step of Russian's linguistic imperialism. The boom of learning Russian did not last for a long time, from the year 1978, due to the economic reform policy of Chinese government, English teaching and learning as a foreign language has appeared in higher education in Mainland China (Feng, 2009). Advocating English over other foreign languages can be viewed as the Chinese government responded to the trend of economic globalization and the current situation of Europe and the United States dominating the lifeline of the world economy. When considering the reason why the Chinese government let English replace Russian in higher education, this paper deems that this action can somehow reflect Phillipson's linguistic imperialism. An adverse argument to the one above is that developing nations promote English because of their needs of development, and this action will not endanger their local language and culture (Quirk and Widdowson, 1985). In addition, no matter Russian or English, none of them endangered or displaced the status of Chinese or became dominant in higher education. In conclusion, from the perspective of past language learning plan and policy in higher education, including its reasons and results, mainland China is not a typical example which can reflect Phillipson's linguistic imperialism.

#### **4. Current language learning plan and policy**

Economic and political power typically can be regarded as the essential reason of Chinese current proactive English language plan and policy in higher education; however, due to many factors, such as the rising population of speaking Chinese all over the world and government's policies of promoting Chinese in universities, English does not become the dominant language in Chinese university education. Because of the economic globalisation and China's reform and open-up policy issued in 1978, English is regarded as the bridge and a method to connect China with the world by the Chinese government (Gil, 2016). In this situation, there was a high demand of people who master English; hence, the Ministry of Education of China issued several English learning plans and policies to strengthen the English status in the Chinese mainland (ibid). In terms of higher education, Guidelines for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Teaching (the Ministry of Education of China, 2001 cited in Feng, 2009) requires all universities in China to teach in English, as a medium of instruction, for at least 5 per cent to 10 per cent courses. The government calls this practice 'bilingual education'. What is more, passing the CET-4 exam to obtain an undergraduate graduation certificate and passing the CET-6 exam to get the permission of attending the postgraduate entrance examination are two important rules that still apply nowadays; nonetheless, Wuhan University of Technology, China University of Geosciences and Zhongnan University of Economics and Law has cancelled the rule that students can get their bachelor's degree only if they pass the CET - 4 (Cheng, 2016). This action may be a signal that the importance of English in universities is somehow decreasing. One opposite argument to the one above is that the Chinese government worries about the integrity of the Chinese nation and system (Adamson and Morris, 1997) and intends to expand the influence of Mandarin, so the Chinese government has issued many policies to encourage students to learn more Chinese in universities, such as 'Implementation plan of Chinese classic recitation project' issued in 2019 (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China). In addition, since globalisation connects the world, languages such as Japanese, French and Spanish are also popular among students in universities. As a matter of fact, English is not the only language students can learn to pass the university entrance examination; languages like Japanese and French are also on the choice list (Zheng, 2010). Another noteworthy point is that even though English now occupies a large proportion in universities' foreign language teaching and learning, student's English ability has not achieved the desired effect (Li, et al., 2016). According to the study of Bolton and Botha (2015), more than 50 per cent university students held the view that they can use English fluently and only 22 per cent of students who participated in this survey had the habit of reading in English outside the classroom. Mandarin is still the core language in higher education (Bolton and Botha, 2015). A large number of university students said that they were learning English purely because they had to attend English examinations that their teachers and universities forced them to; and they would not use this language in their daily life (Zhao and Campbell, 1995). This report was published in 1995, which means China's English higher education revealed this shortcoming 25 years ago. As exam-oriented English learning has intensified in China education system during these years, it is worth considering how much English in universities can benefit the students and the universities themselves in both long turn and short turn. To conclude, although current language plan and policy still stress the importance of English in higher education, English fails to become the dominant language and the importance of English is in danger of decreasing due to the factors mentioned above.

#### **5. English varieties: Standard English and China English**

Since attending the university entrance English examination, which is mainly aimed at checking students' ability in grammar and vocabularies of the 'standard English' (Davey et al., 2010), is necessary for every student in China, 'standard English' is the most common one of English varieties in China's higher education. 'Standard English', in this paper, refers to the British English or American English showed on the textbooks which have a complete grammar system. It could be said that university students have no choice – they have to learn the 'standard English' to support their learning, such as academic writing. In this case, the content of the textbook used in mainland China's universities is more about western countries and cultures, and the focus of these textbooks is

grammar in writing, listening and reading instead of speaking skill which the students may need more in the future (He and Mckay, cited in Conteh and Meier, 2014, pp: 61 – 72 ). For example, Appendix 1 is part of the reading from the textbook ‘College English – Extensive Reading’ used by university students except for English majors. The topic is the four seasons of England recorded in Mr. Walton’s diary. Here comes a problem that this reading contains some knowledge that Chinese students may be confused, such as the sowing date which is different with it in China and traditions in preparing for Christmas; and the textbook does not require teachers to tell students about these details. Furthermore, the textbooks paying attention to western traditions and cultures probably will lead students into ‘Chinese Breakfast Paradox’ which means students will find that there are differences between what they learn and what they need particularly in the examination, such as most students may think it is easier for them to describe western breakfast than Chinese breakfast in English (Xu et al., 2017). In this situation, scholars proposed the conception – China English (ibid.) which will be analysed in the next part. There are many reasons forced the government and the university to advocate standard English instead of other English varieties. From the perspective of the whole country, on the one hand, the Chinese government wants more talents to cope with the globalisation in the economy and develop international trade. Therefore, the government issues policies to ask students to learn the ‘standard English’ in universities and take part in relative English examinations. From the perspective of universities in China, for one thing, all the universities should follow the laws and policies issued by the government; for another thing, it is because of the western countries’ academic power. There is no denying that English is almost the universal language in science, as there is approximately 80 per cent of academic papers from 239 countries in SCOPUS are written entirely in English (Huttner-koros, 2015). It is hard to define whether academic power is one of the sources that can cause linguistic imperialism in that Phillipson does not use this term in his books; however, the strength of military, political and economy of western countries contributes the English becoming dominant in academic paper and publications. Therefore, in this paper, academic power is one of the reasons that promote English to become dominant in other cultures. Moreover, American English and British English are highly used worldwide and can be regarded as the power of these two countries, and western countries are also willing to accelerate the spread of English globally (Phillipson, 2017). For example, the British Council labelled the language as ‘the world’s common language’ (British Council in Phillipson, 2017, pp: 321). America and Britain promote the language English to poor nations through their military power in the past. Now, these two countries make English everywhere with their economic power and political power. Considering the reason why the mainland of China advocates standard English (British or American English), this phenomenon can be seen as a case of Phillipson’s linguistic imperialism; nevertheless, the appearance of China English makes the question complex.

China English refers to a localised English which combines the core of standard English and features of Chinese, such as pronunciation and syntax; it is also increasingly suitable to express Chinese culture and ideology (He and Li, 2009). The emergence of China English itself can be seen as a resistance to English’s linguistic imperialism. Since China English is colored with Chinese ideology, culture, language characteristics (He and Li, 2009), using China English can be helpful to avoid or reduce English becoming the dominant language in the area of ideology, culture and education. In CET-4/6 test, even the accessor wants the test-takers to show their perfect standard English grammar, students often ‘create’ their own China English which can be easily understood by Chinese native speakers. For example, in the past years CET – 4/6 tests, some students translate the ‘mobile payment’ into ‘Alipay’ which is an app supporting mobile payment in China, ‘increase investment’ into ‘give more money’ and ‘company’ into ‘unit’. ‘Alipay’, ‘give more money’ as well as ‘unit’, strictly speaking, are not the proper translation of the Chinese meaning; however, almost every test marker can understand the meaning. On the hand, these creative ‘China English’ in the tests shows that the difficulties for Chinese students to express their ideas via English; on the other hand, this phenomenon shows that English does not change students’ thinking patterns – they tend to translate word by word directly. Outside the examination, Chinese university students also use plenty of China English. Xu (2017, pp: 93–95) analyses some university graduations’ daily emails and finds that Chinese students tend to add more lexical modifiers than native speakers and the email styles are also influenced by cultural differences. For instance, as China is a country with large power distance, students tend to use formal sentences in email or even WeChat; while in the countries with lower power distance such as Britain and America, students are more likely to choose fewer formal alternatives (ibid.). Xu (2010, pp: 282–298) suggests that teaching and learning China English is a good way to narrow the difference between English and Chinese culture and ideology. Xu (2010, pp: 282–298) views China English as a future power which can influence the standard English and the English-speaking community. Even though Xu’s idea ignores factors such as the difficulties of recognising China English worldwide, his arguments somehow show that China English can reduce the influence of English on local Chinese culture and avoid linguistic imperialism.

In conclusion, this context cannot be seen as a typical case of Phillipson’s linguistic imperialism in that China English prevents standard English which represents the western countries’ power becoming dominant in higher education in China’s mainland.

## 6. Conclusion

To conclude, even though the spread of English in higher education in the mainland of PRC contains some features of Phillipson’s linguistic imperialism, such as the reason of designing the past and current language learning plan and policy, the reason of promoting standard English and the semi-colonial influence, universities of the Chinese mainland can just reflect the linguistic imperialism to a limited degree. Since English never become the dominant language over Chinese in universities. What is more, English leaves a limited influence on university students; a large proportion of them are forced to learn English due to the examination and hardly use English in their daily life. Moreover, the development of China English reduces the influence of English on Chinese education and to some degrees, prevent the hegemony of English in higher education. According to the prediction of Xu (2017), there exist possibilities that standard English will be replaced by China English in the mainland of PRC in the future. Questions, such as whether China English will affect the status of Chinese in higher education, how to balance the development of standard English and China English, and whether there are possibilities that China English will hegemony other languages or cultures, might be worth thinking



and discussing.

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