

中国大学生 英语语言磨蚀研究

于中根◎著

**ATTRITION IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE
AMONG EFL TERTIARY STUDENTS IN CHINA**

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A questionnaire was administered to 340 tertiary students and it included numerous variables in relation to language attrition such as self-assessment of speaking skills, motivation and social activities. The data collected from the tests and questionnaire were analyzed via nonparametric and parametric tests using SPSS. Cronbach's alpha coefficient and MFRM were used to validate the reliabilities.

The results of the questionnaire showed that participants believed that their overall English proficiency (including speaking skills) attrited over the holiday period although the listening and reading test results did not reveal any statistically significant attrition.

Participants showed a lower level of positive motivation and fewer social activities for studying English language during the holiday than before the holiday and this could have contributed to the attrition in some of the linguistic abilities.

The findings suggested that attrition was not an overall phenomenon affecting all language skills. Thus, it might point to students having different threshold levels in learning and maintaining the language skills learnt. Institutions would need to initiate measures that address attrition in order that the problem be minimized. A low level of attrition would lead to graduates having a better language ability to serve the economy that is fast expanding. More proficient graduates in English would help to realize the economic goals and to participate more efficiently both locally and globally.

该研究旨在探明参与者在经过了两个月的暑假后在英语口语技能、快速阅读和深度阅读理解、短对话和段落听力理解以及写作技能方面有没有磨蚀。另外,该研究还试图探明词汇知识及其语言表征的磨蚀。考虑到研究的可行性和有效性,参与各个项目研究的人数有所差别,研究者随机选择了 340 人参与了暑假前后的阅读和听力技能测试,50 人参与了写作技能测试,121 人参与了词汇测试。

340 名大学生完成了同一份问卷调查表。该问卷调查表包括诸如口语能力的自我评估、动力和社会活动这样的与语言磨蚀相关的多种变量。经过测试和问卷调查收集而来的数据都通过 SPSS 软件中的参数和非参数程序进行分析。克龙巴赫 α 系数和 MFRM 被用来测量效度。

测试结果表明参与者的短对话听力水平两个月的假期后有了显著($p < 0.05$)的提升。然而,段落听力技能并无统计学上的显著变化。另外,在两种阅读方式上都没有发现统计学上的显著变化,尽管在快速阅读理解上有稍微的提升而在深度阅读上有稍微的下降。在快速阅读和深度阅读理解技能上、短对话和段落听力理解技能上均没有发现显著的性别上的差异。研究结果同时也表明,参与者经过暑假后,不仅仅在总体的写作技能方面而且在具体的譬如切题性、连贯性、清楚性以及语法写作技能方面,都表现出显著的磨蚀。除语法以外,女性在具体的写作技能方面的磨蚀程度都显著超过了男性。词汇知识也体现了显著的磨蚀。

问卷调查的结果表明:参与者认为,暑假后,他们的整体英语技能(包括口语技能)都经历了磨蚀,尽管事实上听力和阅读测试结果并未显示统计学意义上的显著磨蚀。参与者在暑假期间表现出了明显负面的英语学习动力以及更少的与英语学习相关的社会活动,这可能导致了一些英语语言技能的磨蚀。

研究结果表明,英语语言磨蚀不是整体性的而是选择性的。因此,不同的英语语言技能的阈值可能也是不同的。英语教学机构应该采取不同的措施来应对磨蚀问题,将英语语言磨蚀程度降到最低。较低程度的语言磨蚀能使语言习得者保持更高的语言技能,从而为快速发展的经济作贡献。更多的具有娴熟英语技能的毕业生将有助于实现经济目标,使他们能够在国内和国际更具有竞争力。

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Chapter

1

Introduction

1.1 Background to the Study

This chapter presents the background to this study, among which are issues related to bilingual education and current status of English language learning in China. The chapter also introduces the research problem, purpose, theoretical framework, research objectives, significance and limitations of the study.

1.1.1 Bilingual Education

Bilingual education today has flourished for many obvious reasons. One benefit of bilingual education is that it enables a speaker to function in a world that is constantly narrowing its borders. Another benefit of bilingual education is that it facilitates people from different language backgrounds to communicate with one another. Numerous definitions of bilingualism have been forwarded, among which the most well-known one is that bilingualism refers to the ability to use two languages at native level mastery without any intermingling of languages. (Bloomfield, in Demircan, 1990: 21). Another way to describe bilingualism is to relate it to the use of a second language (other than a speaker's native language) at a particular stage of the speaker's life (Kilimci, 1998: 109). Studies carried out on bilingual children revealed that they developed the use of more flexible structures of the language in their cognitive developments and were more superior in terms of meta-cognition compared with those who were monolinguals (Ben-Zeev, 1977).

In learning a non-dominant language which often happens in a bilingual language situation, speakers need to maintain what they have learnt in both languages in order to become efficient bilinguals. Thus, *language maintenance* is often an issue. Together with it there is also the concern about language shift as the non-dominant language can be subject to a change from a gradual loss to the language not being used at all (Lam, 2007). Eventually, this may result in linguistic extinction (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). It

is clear that a bilingual policy must address these associated issues if the intention is to promote bilingual education that would produce speakers who are bilingually efficient for work functions. The following section discusses the bilingual situation in China to give more pertinent information that is relevant to this study. The section gives insights into China's current English language situation and the English language programs to set the stage for the subsequent discussion on language attrition.

1.1.2 Current Status of English Language Learning in China

In China, also known in Mandarin as Zhongguo "middle nation", Mandarin has been the dominant language of China for millennia, but many other languages are also spoken in China. The languages of China fall into 10 main groups: (1) Sino-Tibetan, including Sinitic (Han Chinese, the majority nationality) and Tibeto-Burman (17 nationalities, more than 100 languages), throughout the country; (2) Manchu-Tungus (Manchu, Xibo, Ewenk, Oroqen, and Hezhe nationalities, seven languages), mainly in the northeast; (3) Mongol in the north central region (5.5 nationalities, including half of the Yugur, seven languages); (4) Turkic (6.5 nationalities and seven languages, with the other half of the Yugur); (5) Austroasiatic or Mon-Khmer in the far southwest (Wa, Bulang, De'ang, and Jing nationalities, also some small unclassified groups, more than 12 languages); (6) Tai-Kadai in the southwest (9 nationalities, more than 20 languages); (7) Miao-Yao in the southwest central area (Miao, Yao, and She nationalities, 27 languages); (8) Indo-European (two nationalities, Tajik and Russian, plus creole Portuguese in Macao); (9) Korean; and (10) Austronesian (the Gaoshan nationality, a dozen languages indigenous to Taiwan, with a few speakers on the mainland) (Zhou, 2006; Bradley, 2006).

However, since 1949, a multilingual China's language education policy has evolved and this has been captured in three stages, culminating in the common language law (CLL) of 2001. The first stage (1949—1957) was pluralistic, when Mandarin education policy and minority language education policy were developed independently. The second (1958—1977) was integrationist, when Mandarin was promoted to marginalize minority languages in minority schools. The third stage, from 1978 to the present, is the one that stresses bilingualism/multilingualism. Legislation has established Putonghua (Mandarin) as the standard national language, with other Chinese dialects, as nonstandard or local minority language. In the last two decades, foreign languages education, particularly English as a foreign language, has been increasingly perceived by policy makers in China and other stakeholders as crucial for the economic development of the country and individual advancement in the society. Using English as well as Mandarin as medium of

instruction (Mandarin-English bilingual education) has attracted much attention among policy makers and academics as it is believed to be a “way out” of the dilemma long experienced in the “much time spent but little achieved” foreign language education (Wang & Wang, 2003: 21). However, China’s greatest challenge has always been policy implementation rather than policy making (Zhou, 2006). In the language education system, English, in fact, is second to Mandarin in China in emphasis, though students learn English only mainly in the classroom. As expected, after class or during the holiday, most students are exposed to and immersed in a predominantly Mandarin environment together with their dialects, which probably could result in attrition in English language learning.

Thus, it is not uncommon to hear this said among the students: “I enjoyed the holiday so much, during which I visited many scenic spots with my family, and meanwhile most of the English knowledge I gained in the last semester was gone with my dear lecturer. Now what I can remember is nothing but ABC.” This is commonly expressed by tertiary students in China after a two-month summer holiday. They keep complaining about their poor memory and regret that they had not persisted in learning English during the holiday, causing the heavy loss of painfully gained knowledge. When they return to campus and pick up the textbooks in English, they find that many words they have come across are not familiar to them any more, and they feel that it is more difficult to understand the context. As a result, in the classroom, students feel less confident than in the past semester as they had not used English for two months. Many dare not use English in class or in public since they feel alienated from the alphabetic language. The problem is further compounded by the fact that Mandarin is nearly completely different from English. The abundance of Mandarin characters in which students are actively immersed during the holiday is enough to plunge them into a word—subtractive bilingual context. It is reasonable to assume that when students return from their holidays, they feel dizzy and frightened at the sight of English which is totally different in script and symbol. Students’ negative reactions towards learning English may be another noteworthy phenomenon. However, as Wang, B. H. (2003a:16), a school principal, noted, “...learning English is the saddest thing in China..., but in order to overtake others in science and technology, ‘we must learn English well, with our teeth gnashed’” (quoted in Feng, 2007:2). These words demonstrate not only a utilitarian attitude, that is, to acquire the language in order to access the knowledge in that language and to build the nation state stronger than others, but it also expresses some sort of resentment in perceiving the need to do so (Feng, 2007). The fact remains that at the moment, all learners in China need to learn

English but most of them cannot manage to achieve a high level of competence in it. However, the rationale among policy makers is that English is useful for the learners' future career and necessary for the international positioning of China as a major player in the global arena (Lam, 2007).

1.1.3 English Language Programs in China

Recent decades have been witnessing significant social development and economic expansion in China, which is due to many factors. However, among the numerous reasons, such as the open-door policy and reformation in the economic system, there is one other significant factor—English language popularization, which contributes immensely to technology sharing, information exchange and intellectual property transfer. This has led to a policy establishing English as a compulsory course for even primary students. As a result, nearly all students begin to learn English, and this is supposed to create a fair English language learning environment leading to English language proficiency being holistically upgraded.

In this fair English language learning environment, a thorough curriculum reform in primary and high schools has taken place (Curriculum of Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2001). The reform launched seems to be against the EFL language education tradition, which overemphasizes the importance of grammar and vocabulary but understates the comprehensive linguistic competence of using EFL (Jiang et al., 2007).

The reform stratified the learner's EFL development into nine grades in nine years of compulsory education and senior high school education (Jiang et al., 2007). According to the new syllabus (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2001), the aim of EFL education is to develop learners' comprehensive linguistic competence in foreign languages. Linguistic competence is defined as consisting of five interactive components: linguistic skill, linguistic knowledge, affect and attitude, learning strategy, and cultural awareness. The reform involves systematic changes in all elements in EFL education, ranging from teachers' professionalism to learners' activeness, from pedagogical philosophy to ways of classroom life, and from teaching materials to equipment and hardware to facilitate EFL education (Jiang et al., 2007).

Since the implementation of the above reform, the number of English language learners has significantly increased and English proficiency has experienced a great change, and this can be seen in the English proficiency of tertiary students. Although it is not clearly stipulated by the Ministry of Education that English be a compulsory course at the college level, college English has evolved to be registered as compulsory in most

colleges and universities in China. One example of a College English program is found in Nanjing University of Posts and Telecommunications (NUPT). Qualified, non-native English speaking instructors in the College English program provide students with four lessons each week of normal language instruction. Each program consists of three lessons (approximately 135 minutes) of “core classes” each week, focusing on the fundamentals of reading and writing, and one lesson (approximately 45 minutes) of “listening class” devoted to listening and speaking skills training.

Also included in this College English program are:

- 1) Two weeks' supervised internship to sample the many facets of working life; this includes featured internship including local companies and government offices
- 2) Access to campus facilities and resources
- 3) Student services
- 4) Learning with textbooks provided in class including the series of New College English. Reading courses, integrated courses, listening and speaking courses and skimming and scanning courses
- 5) Access to computer language labs with free Internet access

Six levels of study, from Level one to six, are available in the College English program. Students increase their reading abilities and cultural knowledge through prescribed textbooks and selected readers.

A vivid description about the current state of China's English education was provided by Feng (2007):

To meet the challenge of globalization and economic growth, China longs for human resources who possess both knowledge in specialized areas and strong competence in a foreign language or international talents. Particularly in metropolitan areas such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, and special economic zones, such as Shenzhen, a school system is being rapidly developed in which a foreign language, in most cases English, and Mandarin Chinese are used as the languages for teaching school subjects. From nurseries to tertiary institutions, bilingual schooling has become part of the everyday vocabulary not only of educationalists but also of ordinary people. Catalytic factors, such as China's open-door policy, its successful bid for the 2008 Olympic Games in 2001 and membership of the World Trade Organization in the same year, have all played important roles in promoting Chinese-English bilingual education. (pp. 2)

Many universities in China are opening a new major that is fast gaining popularity, and that is especially aimed at training students in English skills including listening, speaking, reading and writing. For some English majors there is a combination of language and literature. These majors include courses such as Intensive English Reading, Extensive English Reading, English Listening, Advanced English, British and American Culture, Survey of English Speaking Countries, English Linguistics, English Grammar, English Literature and English Translation. It can be seen that these students receive intense training in English language proficiency and culture.

In China today, the learning of a foreign language is not confined just to the learning of specific courses or majors. It has also evolved to a foreign language (often English) used as a medium of instruction for teaching content subjects in major cities and other developed areas (Feng & Wang, 2007). Wang (2003a:77) proposed that within the framework of basic education, especially in compulsory education, this kind of teaching practice using English be made available in metropolitans such as Beijing, Shanghai, Tientsin, Dalian, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Tsingtao. Liu (2002) and Wang, X. D. (2003) pointed out that content subjects are being taught in English. For instance, the education department in Liaoning Province has tried to offer bilingual teaching in content subjects such as mathematics, science, arts, and selective subjects. To date, the People's Education Press in China has published some bilingual textbooks such as those used in physics, chemistry, history, geometry, algebra, and biology for students at various levels (Feng & Wang, 2007).

The various English language programs in China adopt different approaches. For example, Tientsin practices a "transitional model" for the development of bilingualism, biculturalism, and bi-competence in which the use of English for teaching school subjects is progressively increased from 30% to 60% (Q. Zhang, 2002: 29). In Xi'an, a "partial-immersion bilingual program" is found where pupils are immersed in English language environments for about 15 hours per week (Feng, 2005). In Shanghai, according to Wang, L. Y. (2003: 23), a nearly total "immersion model" is adopted at lower grades, shifting to a partial-immersion bilingual teaching at higher grades, both aiming at the development of additive bilingualism.

Feng and Wang (2007) provided information about the use of several different English teaching models such as those used in the developed areas of Shenzhen and Shunde in Guangdong Province. Among the models is the Integrated English (IE) model which has been adopted in response to the advancement of international English teaching and the influence of China's reform and opening-up policies. The IE is based on six tenets