

Investigating the Effects of English-only Learning in Chinese Education

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Introduction

Background of the research

Due to the rising need of higher education in China, nearly all schools have English lessons. International schools, or separated departments in local schools, are built to meet the needs of both students who plan to study abroad in the future and those who wish to enter top Chinese universities. Teachers are often required to provide an English Only (EO) environment and, instead of local teachers, native English speakers are hired for specific subjects. There also has been research conducted on the benefits of bilingual education. Does an EO environment make a big difference in Chinese education? Could teachers be just as effective if they returned to teaching in their mother language?

The recent Covid-19 Pandemic changed the world in many ways including education. Many new teaching methods such as online teaching have marched to the forefront of the field. The teaching environment in China has certainly changed too, especially for foreign teachers. Some of them face the dilemma of either continuing their job in China or leaving for their home countries. In the city in which this research was conducted, according to information from a government website, there were 1343 foreign teachers from 2019-2020 and this figure fell to 1049 in the period of 2020-2021 due to Covid-19 related policy (Ningbo Municipal Education Bureau, 2021). This situation brings up another question: how much does the decline in the number of native English teachers' affect EO learning environments? The data for this research was collected primarily in EO classrooms but two Chinese/English bilingual classrooms were also included.

Research purpose:

The purpose of this research is to investigate the effects of EO learning in Chinese education. The study is based on an extensive literature review of the theory as well as about other teachers' experiences conducting EO lessons in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms—particularly inquiring how is the EO environment used and how can it be used. The literature review concludes discussing previous studies

about the impact of using the students' first language (L1) or their second language (L2), in this case English, in teaching and the limitations of doing so. More specifically, this research will derive information and results from the following aspects:

1. The current EO learning circumstance in Chinese education.
2. Interviews with teachers about the benefits and problems they have encountered while teaching in EO classrooms.
3. The change of EO learning circumstances in Chinese education after Covid-19 Pandemic.

Literature Review

English is one of the most widely utilized languages in the world, with roughly 1.4 billion first and second language speakers (Eberhard et al., 2022). Therefore, in many places outside of the Anglosphere—countries of the world in which the English language and cultural values predominate—it is of vital importance to learn English and have English classes since elementary school or junior high. Additionally, university students are usually required to achieve certifications of English proficiency, many of which are also required by employers. However, for many reasons, Chinese people (who have Mandarin as L1) are weak in some aspects of English learning (Tan, 2015).

A comparison in phonological awareness between English-L1 and Mandarin-L1 children in Kindergarten level, showed that the Mandarin-L1 children developed proficient levels of syllable awareness compared with their English-L1 classmates in Mandarin. The results were partly explained by the morpho-syllabic nature of Mandarin. In contrast, when learning English, Mandarin-L1 children need much longer time to attain the same level of English syllable awareness as the English-L1 children (Yeong, S.H.M. and Rickard-Liow S.J., 2012). When it comes to higher level English learning, Chinese ESLs tend to use different reading strategies than others too. This has been explained by the fact that Chinese language uses a deep orthography which does not have transparent phonetic-graphic correspondence which makes Chinese people used to pronouncing a word based on its shape.

Furthermore, the Chinese language does not use alphabetic orthography therefore Chinese speakers do not develop enough phonological strategies from their L1 literacy experience. As a result, Chinese-speaking ESL readers relied on holistic visual-orthographic strategies instead of other phonological strategies when reading English.

Given the above, people have come to believe age is a leading factor in the educational success of English learning (Huang, 2005) which explains the trend of starting English learning in EO environment at young age. Previous research also suggested that even though the Mandarin-L1 ESL start English learning in Kindergarten, the child still needs more exposure to oral English before their syllable awareness reaches the same

proficiency as that of the English–L1 child because of the larger amount of ambiguous syllable boundaries and complex trisyllabic structure of English.

Furthermore, if Mandarin–L1 children continue to be in less intensive English environment, there is some possibility that their phoneme awareness and literacy skills in English stay less well developed than those of their English–L1 classmates throughout the rest of their schooling years (Yeong and Rickard-Liow., 2012). In the meantime, another study on non-native speakers gave evidence that English-L2 learners' accuracy in English vowel pronunciation was inversely related to the age at which they received their first extensive exposure to native-produced English (Flege et al., 1997).

Flege et al. (1992) collected data from native Spanish who had grown up in the US since childhood. He found that native Spanish children produced English vowels that were identified as 'correct' more often than were the vowels spoken by native Spanish subjects who arrived in the US as adults. Another study analyzed English vowel pronunciation by Italian-English bilinguals who arrived in Canada between the ages of 2 and 22 years, as rated by native English-speakers. Results showed a strong inverse correlation between vowel production accuracy and age of arrival.

After all the given information above, it cannot be denied that creating and sustaining an environment for L2 learning is significantly necessary. Then, why does learners' first language continue to be used in ESL classrooms? Kohi and Suvarna (2020) performed a study in which 40 English language teachers from 12 countries with different cultural perceptions and backgrounds were surveyed about their amount of L1 use and their reasons for using L1 in EFL/ESL classrooms. Kohi and Survana's (2020) results showed a strong eagerness to use L1 by teacher participants. Their research explored three main purposes for the teachers' use of L1. The first purpose suggested by Kohi and Survana's (2020) study was to support language learning: the survey responding teachers claimed to use L1 mainly to clarify new vocabularies and grammar. Secondly, L1 was used for the purpose of disciplining learnings and to improve class management. Thirdly, teachers responded they preferred to use L1 to accomplish the affective and social functions of language use as well as to enhance relationships with learners.

Kohi and Survana's (2020) study also showed that students' English levels had a strong effect on the use of L1 and that the amount of L1 use is inversely proportional to learners' English level, which meant that in lower-level classes, teachers would use L1 more often than in a L2 class (Jadallah and Al-Quds, 2010). Yan et al. (2016) study about Chinese colleges and middle schools found that, among three thousand students, there were decreases in the use of L2 in senior secondary classroom talk when compared to junior secondary schools. To explain their findings Yan et al. (2016) argued that senior students likely paid more attention to develop L2 skills in

preparation for college entrance examinations instead of daily communication in L2.

At the same time, there were teachers who were keen on using L1 within the classroom. Shin et al. (2020) pointed out that even though many institutional policies either explicitly or implicitly embed maximal or exclusive use of L2, these policies may cause problems between teachers and school management. Some teachers would rather conduct lessons in the way they thought was the best for students, regardless of institutional policy. Tsagari and Diakou (2015) provided an example, where three Greek teachers used L1 according to their own judgment rather than following school or government L2 policy. When teachers were forced to obey those L2 regulations, what happened was the formation of a one-way lesson in which only teachers deliver instruction in L2, while limiting or not accepting students' opinions (Mora Pablo et al. 2011).

On the other hand, there are many reasons for avoiding L1 and creating an EO environment in ESL classroom. Helland (2016) agreed that English-only policies provided students with high amounts of input in English. This approach supported students to learn English more quickly and proficiently with maximum English input and without interference of L1. Lee (2016) believed that not only written exercises, but also more natural language input and communication opportunities would be effective in advancing ESL learners' questioning skills or addressing their learning needs at different stages and exposing students to rich target structures would raise their grammar consciousness. The English-only policy could also be used to recruit more highly motivated or highly proficient students, and schools that were able to use L2 more frequently were usually higher-ranking because they were likely to have additional qualified teachers and better-prepared students. (Yan et al., 2016)

As Shvidko et al. (2015) said: 'A clearer understanding of student perspectives is essential if we are to maximize student language learning' (p. 12). Then, what are learners' attitudes to EO learning? Later in 2017, Elena Shvidko conducted a survey about this and found that 84.2% students considered the EO policy as 'generally positive'. Nine participants pointed out EO policy helped them achieve language goals, they thought in English and were able to practice English all the time. Some thought their English improved faster than others because of EO policy. Negative ideas about EO policy were also expressed in the survey, and they 'were associated with teachers' reactions to students speaking their L1 including: punishment, denying students their agency, the unconditional character of the policy, and the lack of systematic implementation' (p.38). Students noted that the language choice should be a personal decision of each individual learner, and 'the administration of the English language course should by no means impose the rule upon the entire student population' (p.43).

However, there's no doubt that learning in classrooms is not the only source of L2

learning. Teachers should be aware of language learning outside classroom as well, since new technology, such as multi-media, enables students to access a diverse range of resources and motivates students in L2 learning too.

Methodology and methods

Research questions:

This research is going to answer questions about EO learning in Chinese education. First, the research will find out whether teachers stick to an EO environment during lesson time. This would explain the current EO learning circumstance in China, for example, whether EO learning is held back by teachers who use L1 in ESL class. Second, this research will give specific benefits and shortcomings of EO environment to reveal the problems and highlights teachers had met while teaching in EO environment. Last, this research will discuss the influence that covid-19 had on teachers and education as it might lead to the appearance of new teaching problems and methods.

Research methods:

It is generally agreed that educational research should be rigorous and systematic (Anderson and Arsenault, 1988). Due to the limited time available for the study, Quantitative research was deemed unsuitable and Qualitative research was chosen. The later seemed appropriate to the topic being analysed because:

Qualitative methods are used to answer questions about experience, meaning and perspective, most often from the standpoint of the participant. These data are usually not amenable to counting or measuring (Hammarberg et al. 2016).

When considering the use of EO (English only) classrooms amongst international and native Chinese teachers, the amount of L1 and L2 used within the classroom is not controlled by policy, but teachers' preferences. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to analyse the data. IPA is an approach to qualitative research which focuses on how people make sense of a given concept, in this case, an EO classroom. By utilising this approach, the focus of the interview switched away from the 'what' and towards the 'why', as well as towards the identification of value statements centred around the justifications given for certain actions.

Data analysis and collection:

Audio recordings of interviews of six participants were made. Three of the participants were international teachers and three were Chinese teachers. All teachers teach English as a second language at either middle school level or for training schools.

Participants were chosen with ‘purposive sampling’ (Black, 2009) as they were determined to both have knowledge of English and Chinese and have been in China teaching for over three years. Due to their extensive teaching and language knowledge, they were seen as participants able to understand the context of the question and provide an expert narrative.

The interview featured six semi-structured interview questions that were provided to the interviewees a day in advance. Additionally, a number of unstructured follow up questions were asked depending on the interviewee’s answers.

The interview answers were transcribed into word, after which each answer was coded and catalogued. The code used the information found from the literature review and looked for similarities or differences between the responses from the interviews and the research from the review. The patterns found between responses were categorised into themes. The themes based on the responses are discussed in the results section.

Interviews were conducted bilingually, with the majority done in L1. However, clarification on meaning and/or intent was sometimes obtained in L2. To reduce participant reactivity—that people behave differently when observed—at the start of each participant’s interview interviewees were told about their anonymity. Participant reactivity is one of the largest drawbacks to qualitative research as it often results in receiving the answers that people feel should be correct rather than true. Although this cannot be completely removed the analysis of the results has taken participant reactivity into account as much as possible when presenting conclusions.

Ethics:

Approval for both questionnaires and interviews were obtained from the University of Sheffield School of Education Ethics Committee on the 3rd of March 2022 (approval reference number: 045377). The data was collected in accordance with Chinese data protection law found in the National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China website (NPC 2021). The data also aligned with the University of Sheffield’s ‘good research and innovation practices’ policies.

All participants in the study were anonymised at source and provided a unique identification number in case they wished to remove their data from the study. Each participant signed a permission slip before the research took place that identified them of the above and notified them of the date before which they could withdraw their data: 16th April 2022. No minors were interviewed in the course of this research and no data of significant risk was collected.

Outside of the general ethical considerations outlined in the ethics committee application no extra ethical risks were identified. Because the interview process is a collaborative process, despite no risks being identified, proper ethical conduct was maintained and adhered to as ethical standards promote the values that are essential to collaborative work, such as trust, accountability, mutual respect, and fairness (Resnik, 2020).

Analysis

Among 6 participants (A, B, C, D, E, F), there are three native English speakers and three local teachers. Surprisingly, only one of the participants rejected using L1 in ESL classrooms. Most of them taught mainly in English but with some Chinese as a supplement to clarify points when needed. Teacher A illustrated with an example, he stated that even though his school was based on an English curriculum and that he agreed it was important for him to keep teaching in English as much as possible when students had a gap in their vocabulary where he knew the closest translation available for students understanding, he would use L1. This firmly confirmed one of Kohi and Suvarna's (2020) findings regarding teachers' purposes for using L1, namely: to clarify new vocabularies.

Teacher B, a strong advocate of conducting ESL lessons with mixture of English and Chinese, expressed her thoughts about the weakness of EO lessons, in her opinion, not only did students have to learn new knowledge in each class, but also had to deal with various of professional terms in English. She argued that students with weak foundation of English, would easily fail to follow the context and the pressure would lead to in-learning weariness. However, she also mentioned weakness of using too much L1 in ESL class namely that without immersive input in an English class, it would easily cause 'cramming education [...] after all, English is a language, it needs to be listened, practiced and spoken; you can't learn English well without those methods' (Teacher B).

Only one teacher, F, firmly claimed he would teach only in English. He found that if the students relied too much on their first language, they'd 'fall into a false sense of security and underperform on the exams'. He encouraged the students to make notes in their first language and to seek advice after class in their first language however he only taught and kept conversations in class in L2.

Aside from teaching in international department, interviewees were questioned about the school's preference of the language used by teachers. In international department, exams and curriculum were all based in English, and English was definitely the first

choice in class. In the standard department which contained students conducting Chinese state exams, English wasn't as solid. But, in recent year, English listening test's one interviewee claimed that exams had changed into man-machine interaction from written on paper, and an oral test was added as part of the high school entrance examination. Two thirds of interviewees tended to believe that schools preferred English as the main language in ESL classes.

For the benefits of EO lessons, besides the positive ideas mentioned above, high amounts of input etc., teacher C said EO environment could trigger better emotional identification with the language, 'rather than making students learn English for only taking exams, utilizing an EO environment should make students feel more confident about the general effectiveness of their English'. Teacher D was sure that 'benefit is compounded' when considering students' English subject performance, as well as the performance in non-English subjects whose material is also based in English as a second language.

Another teacher's (C) opinion was connected to cultural learning, EO learning could help them integrate into a new culture and 'reinvent themselves', students should be aware that their thinking pattern can change when they enter an English classroom and communicate in English. Teacher C also stated that:

A student who 80% of the times may be an IELTS 5 or 6 may present as an IELTS 4, or even 3, if they are asked a question outside of the syllabus when they haven't had enough exposure to immersive language learning (Teacher C).

Teacher C went on to say 'Chinese language learners, who have learnt almost exclusively in their first language often have large blank spots'. Teacher A seemed to be in agreement, stating that:

Teaching in English all the time provided students with better skills to navigate misunderstandings or gaps in their own knowledge and increase their ability to deal with unexpected situations (Teacher A).

However, most of the participants agreed that EO learn would be more beneficial for students with good English levels, rather than for those who were weak at language learning, as students lost their interest faster when they encountered things that were incomprehensible to them rather than things they could understand. Students whose English skills are below adequate levels may lose access to valuable knowledge during class, this might impede their learning later.

Teacher D also mentioned that in the primary stage where students' English ability was weak, and the time teachers spent on explaining contexts and organizing class would

be relatively longer as well, resulting in the lower efficiency of teaching. Teacher E talked about the challenges EO teaching brought to local teachers. Teachers were all qualified for professional knowledge of English, but more patience and preparation was required for conducting a pure English lesson. Teachers needed to listen and give feedback to students in English and make sure students could follow in time. This sentiment was echoed by all Chinese bilingual teachers.

There was divergence of views when it comes to punishment/discipline of students for L1 language use within EO environment. Some teachers agreed certain discipline was necessary dependent on students' behaviors. Teacher A insisted it was impossible to conduct a good lesson without rules and punishment which played indispensable roles in management. Taking away students' free time in detention or notifying their form tutors would be considered effective to improve their English. Teacher B held an opposite opinion, Chinese students had been shy to speak second language no matter if in class or daily life, punishment would only make things worse. Teacher E put students first, she would discuss the methods of punishment with them and clarified the conditions under which punishment was allowed. Usually, singing an English song, giving a presentation in English or reading an English poem in class would be her choice, physical punishment was never considered.

Last but not least, since Covid-19, some teachers did not feel attitudes to EO learning had changed among colleagues. However some teachers felt middle schools had become a lot colder towards international teachers who taught in L2 entirely. The number of international teachers had been decreasing as more and more went home, and one interviewee thought China had moved away from an international teaching mindset. Language learning in general had become a box to tick for Chinese state exams rather than a genuine subject said one teacher adding that 'perhaps when international travel and business opens up again the attitude towards English Only classrooms will change again'.

Another problem that bothered teachers was that the quarantine and the lock down policy made online teaching both popular with parents and unavoidable for teachers in China. Teacher C complained:

In a physical classroom, I can make use of supplementary teaching methods as needed. It's possible to translate material on the fly, draw an image on the board, or use supplemental papers as necessary. In a digital environment during lockdowns via remote teaching, these facilities are not always readily available' (Teacher C).

The quarantine and Covid lockdown also made class management more difficult for native English teachers as one of the participants mentioned that when he tried to ask

questions while teaching online, what he usually got in return was silence. He could neither check whether students were still listening nor could he make adjustment to his lesson plan without seeing students' reaction face to face.

Discussion

This research has produced 3 main findings.

1. *In current ESL learning, EO learning wasn't held back by using L1 in class in certain circumstances.*

In secondary school in China, English learners could be divided into two groups, those aimed for international education and those following standard Chinese education curriculums. Teachers and schools, therefore, held different preferences for language used in classroom. Schools tended towards EO learning while teachers were more likely to use mixture of languages in class. Since covid-19 happened, the attitude to EO environment would be harder to attain because more native English teachers were leaving school and more classes were being taken over by bilingual local teachers.

Erin (2016) used a variety of techniques to enable her students to fully understand the targeted contexts in her classroom with students who were unfamiliar with the country and school system and found that attaining that level of understanding took time. In her point of view, things could be easier or more direct in some conditions if someone were able to translate or explain in students' L1s, whether this be the teacher, bilingual aide, or other students (p.11). A similar idea was shown in the research, where a majority of participants agreed to use L1 in ESL class with the purposes of clarifying new vocabularies and grammar and for discipline and management. (Kohi and Suvarna, 2020).

2. *To enhance the positive influence of EO learning, the English level of students needed to be considered and punishment should be carefully used.*

In the literature review, Yeong and Rickard-Liow (2012) gave the conclusion that Chinese-L1 children required longer time to reach same English level as English-L1 children at same age. And lower-level students were more hesitant and shy in class. As most students who saw EO learning as a positive method were not afraid of speaking in L2 and making mistakes (Shvidko, 2017), it would make a big difference if teachers established a relationship of trust and an environment in which each student felt comfortable, as learning a new language required students to take certain risks and be willing to make mistakes (Kohi and Survana, 2020). As an EO environment provided irreplaceable convenience for students to learn knowledge outside of their syllabus, it was a pity to weaken EO environment just because students couldn't follow.

Meanwhile, punishment was never an option for language use. However, students were discouraged from relying on their L1 native languages, as over-reliance would only work to their detriment in improving their language comprehension. For this reason, a student who was belligerently using their L1 language despite direction would be disciplined, the connection that students made between their own inherent knowledge and the knowledge that they're exposed to in a second language was vital in creating solid frameworks for understanding, but no student should be disciplined simply for using their native language in class.

3. *Teachers should be flexible and well-prepared in case the teaching environment was changing.*

'The pandemic was an unexpected shock to everyone, but education couldn't simply stop' (Tan, 2015) because of it. Before, most of lessons were given in the classroom, this led to many teaching habits that teachers could not carry out while the environment changed.

English learners like to use the Internet to learn English in preference to more traditional methods, such as sitting in a classroom to listen to a teacher. When learners have a more positive attitude toward learning English, they will be more likely to use e-learning websites (Tan, 2015, p.223).

With the help of new technologies, students had multiple choices of learning methods, so as teachers. Teachers should try to be sensitive to changing needs and try new teaching methods.

Conclusion

This research has given answers to the questions mentioned in the part of methodology. In China, L1 and L2 cannot be simply separated by policy or other reasons in an ESL class. However, EO learning benefits students with better language skills and culture observation. The most important thing is to make sure teachers are helping students in EO environments with proper methods.

Recommendations for future research:

This research only focused on the EO influence from teachers' perspectives in secondary school and it was limited to English education in China. Many other perspectives haven't been included such as attitudes to EO from schools, parents and learners themselves. Further research is recommended to increase the scope of the current study: (1) collect information from different levels of schools such as primary,

high school and colleges; (2) select data from other perspectives such as people who fund ESL learners; (3) study the situation for English education in other non-native English-speaking countries.

Implications for practice:

There is no definite method for teaching in an ESL class. As one of the teaching methods, EO learning needs to be flexible as well. Only by carrying out appropriate methods and making use of the most suitable materials can teachers conduct an efficient English lesson. In the future, we could create more interesting and efficient EO environments to cope with students' status and train their language abilities to be more practical. For schools, this research may inform or guide their future preferences for which languages to use in English classes by showing attitudes from teachers. There is still more to explore in this area.

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Appendix

Interview questions

1. Do you teach in English, Chinese or a mixture of both, and why do you teach in this method?
2. Do you feel your school has any preference to the language you teach in? why do you think they hold this belief?
Since my school's exams and curriculum are all based in English, the school
3. What do you think are the main benefits for students who experience English only classrooms?
4. Do you feel there are any drawbacks to this approach; if so, what are they and why?
5. In your experience have attitudes towards English only classrooms changed since Covid-19? Can you describe your experiences?
6. Do you feel it is appropriate to punish/discipline students for L1 language use within an English only environment? Why?