

# English in China in the 2020s- 2030s: Potential changes in attitudes and practices?

Keynote Presentation

“一带一路”文明交流互鉴与应用型外语人才培养国际研讨会会议

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**Abstract:** As China continues to develop, how might its relationship with the English language continue to develop? This presentation tries to conduct an initial theoretical exploration of dimensions in which China's attitudes and practices relating to the English language may develop in the near future, considering a range of issues including the following.

First, the amount of time and resource allocated to English language learning in the education system may reduce.

Second, the importance allocated to scores from English language assessments among decision-makers (at schools, universities, and employers) may reduce.

Third, the style of assessments used for English language assessments may become more "communicative", thus leading to improvements in speaking, writing, and general communicative competence.

Fourth, the criteria used for evaluating use of English – both in formal English language assessments and in informal decisions by employers – may change so as to de-emphasize "native speaker" norms derived from North American and British varieties of English.

Fifth, other changes in society – domestically and overseas – may lead to a change in the types of motivation most common among China's English language learners and other stakeholders.

Sixth, China's leadership in the so-called "fourth industrial revolution" may lead to significantly greater use of computer-mediated communication as relates to English.

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First, the amount of time and resource allocated to English language learning in the education system may reduce. Second, the importance allocated to scores from English language assessments among decision-makers (at schools, universities, and employers) may reduce.

- Some of this trend appears to have begun in 2021.
- The weighting given to English test scores during university admission decision-making may further reduce.
- Some of the time and resource may instead be devoted to learning other foreign languages.
  - More multilingualism (in line with the “multilingual turn” e.g. Meier, 2016), more “plurilingual competence” (Council of Europe, 2020).
- With less “washback intensity” (Green, 2013), it is likely that English learning will become less exam-oriented.

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Third, the style of assessments used for English language assessments may become more “communicative”, thus leading to improvements in speaking, writing, and general communicative competence.

- Continuing challenges of resource, scale, and high stakes (Fan & Frost’s (2021) interview with Prof. Jin Yan).
- Machine scoring of speaking and writing may allow more testing of speaking and writing, with washback leading to more speaking and writing in curricula.



Fourth, the criteria used for evaluating use of English – both in formal English language assessments and in informal decisions by employers – may change so as to de-emphasize “native speaker” norms derived from North American and British varieties of English.

- For example over phonology, decision-maker norms may settle on a more flexible set of norms, not localized to a specific foreign region, as has happened in Singapore.
- ““Chinese English will become a standard variety of Asian Englishes, and it will be an associate official language in China”” (a quote from a postgraduate applied linguistics student in Xu, Deterding & He, 2017)

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Fifth, other changes in society – domestically and overseas – may lead to a change in the types of motivation most common among China's English language learners and other stakeholders.

- English learning in China has at times been associated with an integrative motivation for learning more about specific regions (e.g. the US).
- With continuing changes, the motivation may become more associated with motivation to communicate with people in a broader range of foreign countries, often via English as a lingua franca.

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# Sixth, China's leadership in the so-called "fourth industrial revolution" may lead to significantly greater use of computer-mediated communication as relates to English.

- More computer-mediation in communication (e.g. hard copies become almost totally obsolete)
- More advanced computer-mediated communication
- More advanced machine translation, especially for reading and writing
- More advanced computer-augmented communication, especially for reading and writing
- The trend may be for tech companies to roll this language support out for free as part of their broader package (e.g. Gmail, WeChat), rather than having to pay for it (e.g. Grammarly)
- Synchronous listening and speaking interaction may become the privileged mode of communication for many contexts
  - Spoken fluency may become more important
  - Ability to fluently produce highly grammatically accurate English (e.g. relating to articles "the", "a"; prepositions) may become less important, since this is tolerated more in English as a lingua franca speaking/listening interaction than in reading

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# Summary: So perhaps English in China in the 2020s-2030s may be...

- Used more as part of a “multilingual repertoire”.
- More focused on communicative competence than on any other “linguistic competence” construct.
- More computer-mediated and computer-augmented.
- More focused on interactive speaking and listening.
- That speaking and listening may be less focused on any foreign phonological variety of English (e.g. general North American English) and settle around local norms.
- More based on an English as a lingua franca motivation and interest in all countries beyond China than by an interest in specific majority-English-speaking countries.
- **What am I missing? Look forward to your comments and suggestions. 😊**

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