The Use of English in Serving Officers and Suggestions on Lifelong Learning in China

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Abstract: English education in China has been fully rolled out. However, few people seriously think about how English learning can be useful to us in the absence of English environment in China. The investigation into the use of English has become a top priority. This article begins with the overview of necessity of the survey on English use in China. Then, an empirical research is designed. The following parts analyze the use of English in serving officers who have learned English in different regions and in all walks of life. Finally, suggestions on lifelong learning in China are put forward.

1. Introduction

China has been reforming and opening up over the course of the past forty years with the spread of English for more than four centuries. The investment in English education is accelerated by the government. Accordingly, English learning has become more and more common in China. Foreign languages are changed into our language resources. Foreign languages come from foreign countries, but they are not foreign things. Foreign language competence is an important facet of individuals’ language capability as well as the language ability of the whole country (Li, 2011). How do Chinese people use English? How are their English proficiency and language attitudes? We find that it is not easy to answer these questions because of lacking the understanding of the current foreign language situation. In China, few experts specialize in the study of language use (Dai, 2015). Similarly, Professor Xi Guo (2005) states that the focus of the Chinese linguists seems to be far away from society. The excitement of Chinese linguistics seem to be far away from society. Till now there is still no foreign language planning in Chinese language planning.

Language planning and language use are not always synchronized. Usually, language use comes first, and then language planning is carried out according to the situation of language use. Although the urgent task of China is to conduct foreign language planning, it is necessary to clearly understand the use of foreign languages in China before formulating relevant policies and regulations. Professor Wenzhong Hu (1999) calls for the investigation of language use at the end of the last century in order to formulate medium-term and long-term plans. Furthermore, Professor Zhangtai Chen (2005) suggests that the first step in language planning is to investigate the needs of society for language and its use, to assess the condition of language life, and to make preparations for language planning.

2. The Survey of Language Use in China

The first large-scale investigation of national conditions in the history of China was conducted on the use of Chinese language and characters by the 134th meeting of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China on January 6, 1997. Its specific work is led by the Ministry of Education and the National Language Committee. In this survey, the use of Mandarin, Chinese
dialects, minority languages and foreign languages of mainland residents aged 15 to 69 with normal language abilities were sampled in terms of urban and rural areas, gender, age, nationality, occupation and education level. Through this survey, the overall data of the use of Chinese language and characters were finally obtained, from which we can understand the status of Chinese language, especially the promotion of national common language, as well as the characteristics, rules and trends of language use in China (Tong, 2006).

It is universally acknowledged that the survey of foreign language use is a dynamic, continuous and long-term process, which should be continuously investigated and analyzed with the development of society. Unfortunately, the current research is limited to the survey data of the last century, which can only explain the use of Chinese language at the end of the last century. We cannot clearly understand the development and changes of foreign language use since the new century. It illustrates the complexity of language. Scholars repeatedly call for investigations into the use of foreign languages.

Based on the use of English in Chinese society, this paper will demonstrate the use of English by serving officers who have learned English in different regions and in all walks of life. A clear understanding of the use of English in China can provide detailed reference for language planning and boost the scientific formulation of foreign language planning. Let the world know more about the real use of English in China[1, 2].

3. Research Design

This paper uses the questionnaire to investigate the English use of the serving officers, which is divided into two sections: background information and English use. In order to better understand the use of English in society and reduce the interference of other factors, the respondents are restricted to those who are native speakers of Chinese along with the experience of English learning. The formal questionnaire began to be distributed in August 2017 in two forms: the paper version and the online version. As of February 2018, a total of 4,135 questionnaires were collected, of which 3,485 were valid. The reliability and validity of valid questionnaires are analyzed.

The basic background information of the serving officers involves gender, age, education level and occupation. Among the 3,485 valid samples, young people under the age of 30 are the mainstays, accounting for 46.8%, and those over the age of 50 constitute only 2.9%. The reason for this phenomenon is that the respondents are required to learn English, but the true popularity and widespread of English in China is initiated in this century. Thence few of the serving officers over the age of 50 have ever learned English.

In terms of educational level, the proportion of bachelor’s degree or above reaches 66.1%, indicating that most of the respondents are well-educated, which objectively guarantees the quality of the survey. In the sphere of occupation, there are three major categories of occupations, namely, professionals, staff and related personnel and other employees, making up 74.8% of the total.

4. Results of the serving officers’ English Use

The English use of the serving officers is divided into three facets: frequency of use, degree of use, and effectiveness of use.

4.1. Frequency of English Use

Here “use” refers to any aspect of listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating. The options are in the form of a three-level Likert scale, which is represented by numbers: 1 = basic unused; 2 = sometimes used; 3 = often used.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>basic unused</th>
<th>sometimes used</th>
<th>often used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>2296</td>
<td>884</td>
<td>305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>65.9</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From Table 1, it can be seen that the overall frequency of people’s English use is very low. The number of people who don’t use English basically exceeds average, reaching 65.9%. While the number of people who use it constantly is only 8.8% with a mean of 1.43, indicating that people do not often use English.

For the frequency of English use among people with various social characteristics, males and females are significantly different (sig=0.095<0.05). Women use English more frequently than men, which means that men are more inclined to use Chinese.

In the aspect of age, the distinction between 30 years old (including 30 years old) and 41 to 50 years old is obvious (sig=0.000<0.05), and the distinction between 31 to 40 years old and 41 to 50 years old are apparent (sig=0.000<0.05), There is no obvious difference between other age groups. People under 40 years old (including 40 years old) use English with the highest frequency, while those between 41 and 50 years old use English with the lowest frequency. It indicates that as people grow older, the frequency of using foreign language gradually decreases and they tend to use their mother tongue.

With regard to educational level, except that there is no noticeable difference between secondary & primary school and junior college (sig=0.210>0.05), the differences among other educational levels are remarkable. People with lower educational level use English less frequently. On the contrary, with the rise of academic qualifications, the frequency of English use is gradually enhanced.

Concerning occupation, major differences are mainly reflected between professionals and other occupations: professionals and heads of state organs, party organizations, enterprises and institutions (sig=0.009<0.05); professionals and staff and related personnel (sig=0.000<0.05); professionals and commercial and service personnel (sig=0.042<0.05); professionals and operators of production and transportation equipment (sig=0.034<0.05). The frequency of English use is the highest among the professionals, while it is the lowest among production personnel in agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry, fishery and water conservancy.

Going back to the national survey conducted in 1997, the proportion of people who did not use English at all was 69.4%, sometimes 23.3% and often 7.3% (Tong, 2006). Nowadays the number of people using English is on the increase slightly. Nevertheless, the overall frequency of English use doesn’t change much. Despite a lot of attention to English education, the use of English is missing in Chinese language planning, which leads to a serious imbalance in the proportion of English learning and English use. To a certain extent, there has been a waste of language resources.

4.2. Degree of English Use

In order to know about the degree of people’s English use, we adopted the form of four-level Likert scale in the setting of options, respectively represented by numbers: 1 = completely unusable; 2 = reluctant to say a few sentences; 3 = general communication; 4 = free to use as needed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>completely unusable</th>
<th>reluctant to say a few</th>
<th>general communication</th>
<th>free to use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>665</td>
<td>1882</td>
<td>787</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen from Table 2, more than half of the people are reluctant to say a few words; only 22.6% are capable of general communication; and even fewer are able to use freely as needed. According to the average score, the result is 2.12, indicating that even though Chinese have learned English, they can only barely say a few words. Such a low level of usage is a far cry from China’s status as a major English learner.

For the degree of English use among people with diverse social characteristics, we notice that the differences between men and women are prominent (sig=0.001<0.05), and female’s level of English use is higher than that of male. Women learn English for a longer time and have more opportunities to contact English, thus performing better in the use of English.
In age side, there is no substantial difference between those aged under 30 and those aged between 31 to 40 (sig=0.120>0.05), and those aged between 41 to 50 and over 50 (sig=0.997>0.05). The impartiality between other ages is crucial. Young people under the age of 30 have the highest level of English use. The frequency of English use decreases as the years go by, and as a result, the use of English becomes worse and worse.

In the way of educational level, there is no chief difference between those with master’s degree and those with doctor’s degree (sig=0.066>0.05). The disparities between other degrees of education are obvious. People with lower levels of education use English less regularly, which leads to low levels of English use. With the continuous improvement of education, characters use English more frequently, accordingly their English level slowly accelerates. People with doctor’s degree possess the highest level of English use.

In the occupation angle, staff and related personnel use English to the highest degree, followed by professionals. Instead, as the frequency of using English is lowest in production personnel, the degree of their use is also lowest.

Results indicate that language competence is closely related to the level of language use. Folks with excellent language skills could use language to a greater degree. On the contrary, if a person’s language ability is weak, the situation of his language use will be very bad. Because the respondents’ English ability is generally at a poor level, their English use will be correspondingly weakened. On the other hand, the frequency of language use is proportional to the degree of language use. If a person often uses a language, he or she can use it to a greater degree and vice versa[2, 3].

4.3. Effect of English Use

In this facet we focus on whether people could hit the mark by using English. The option setting is in the form of five-level Likert scale, which is represented by numbers: 1 = absolutely cannot; 2 = cannot; 3 = not very clear; 4 = can; 5 = absolutely can.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>absolutely can’t</th>
<th>can’t</th>
<th>not very clear</th>
<th>can</th>
<th>absolutely can</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>708</td>
<td>885</td>
<td>1072</td>
<td>745</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We can see from Table 3 that by using English, 45.7% of the people believe they cannot achieve their goals; 30.8% are not clear. Only 23.6% consider that they can make it. The mean value is 2.6, manifesting that people could not acquire the effect basically due to the low frequency and poor English. It infers that the communicative function of English does not play its original role.

About the effect of English use among characters with diverse social characteristics, there are giant distinction between men and women (sig=0.001<0.05). Women use English better than men. According to the previous analysis, women use English more frequently and use it to a higher degree than men, so the effect of their English use is necessarily better than that of men.

In age respect, there is no prominent differentiation (sig=1>0.05) between those aged 41 to 50 and those aged over 50, and the differences among other ages were distinct. Young people under 30 years old use English more frequently and effectively. As people grow older, the frequency of English use is increasingly reduced and the degree of use is progressively weakened. Therefore, the effect of English use becomes worse and worse, which remains at a low level after 40 years old.

In the field of educational level, except for the non-significant difference between the master’s degree and the doctoral degree (sig=0.166>0.05), the differences between the other degrees are evident. People with lower level of education use English less effectively because of its low frequency and poor use. With the advance of people’s educational level, the frequency and the degree of people’s English use accelerates increasingly, consequently the effect of English use is also getting better little by little. People with doctor’s degree enjoy the best effect in using English.

Regarding occupation, staff and related personnel use English to the highest degree on account
of the best English use. Oppositely, production personnel in agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry, fishery and water conservancy use English with the lowest frequency and the worst degree, resulting in the worst effect of English use.

The above analyses imply that the effect of language use is closely related to the frequency and degree of language use. Generally speaking, as the frequency and the degree of language use increase, the effect of language use will become better naturally. In contrast, with the reduction of the frequency and the degree of language use, the use of the language will also deteriorate[4, 5].

5. Suggestions on Lifelong Learning

The research of this paper finds that the proportion of people who do not use English is up to 65.9%, and only 8.8% of people use English frequently. People with different social characteristics show certain differences when using English. The respondents in this study all experienced a long period of English learning at school when they were students. Faced with such findings, we cannot help thinking about the importance of lifelong learning.

As an educational concept, the lifelong learning experience has been developing for more than half a century, which has a profound impact on the educational philosophy and system of each country. The Chinese government attaches great importance to lifelong learning, which can be seen from several important documents. The Outline of National Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020) calls for building an “overpass” for lifelong learning. The Ministry of Education issued the “Ten-year Development Plan for Educational Informatization (2011-2020)” in 2012. It is proposed that informatization of continuing education is a vital support for the construction of lifelong learning system. In February 2019, "China Education Modernization 2035" was published, which is China's first medium- and long-term strategic plan with the theme of education modernization. One of the main development goals for 2035 is to build a modern education system that will serve lifelong learning for all.

The national emphasis and policy support are the guarantee for the implementation of the concept of lifelong learning. Take English education as an example. The country has invested a lot of financial and material resources to improve people’s English ability. From primary school to university, as well as the professional title test, English test is a compulsory subject. People have attached importance to English learning since they were young, but they rarely have the opportunity to use English after joining the work, so that many people’s English level has deteriorated. In response to this problem, the country should conduct targeted research in different industries and different fields, and formulate lifelong learning plans for English subjects.

Schools of all levels and types, as the specific places for the implementation of lifelong education, should do a good job of connecting and communicating with each other. English education should have clear goals at every stage, and the goals of English education in different stages should be orderly cohesive. When the school’s learning resources are open to the society, people can choose the learning resources at different stages according to their actual conditions to ensure the quality of learning. In this way, a lifelong learning system and a learning society will be better.

The individual is the ultimate practitioner of lifelong learning. For the English education that we have been exposed to since childhood, we should build our own learning system, make clear the learning objectives, and practically apply the knowledge we have learned in real life and work. Only in this way can we continuously improve our language expression ability and application ability, and better adapt to the development of the information society and the global integrated society. The systematic construction of lifelong learning is gradually taking shape, and we need to broaden our knowledge continuously and take action[6].

References


