

A Critical Analysis of Debates on the Role of English in China's English Education Policy

Rui Wang

School of Foreign Languages, Southwest University of Political Science and Law, Chongqing, People's Republic of China

Xinyan Liao

School of Foreign Languages, Southwest University of Political Science and Law, Chongqing, People's Republic of China

Abstract—Ideological debates concerning English in relation to indigenous language and culture have triggered controversies in China for over a century. While China embraces the economic benefits of English, discourses framing it as a threat to local culture persist, creating a dichotomy between nationalist perspectives and neoliberal instrumentalism. This paper evaluates these perspectives by analyzing key debates on English language policies, including the status of English in the Gaokao, English-Medium Instruction (EMI), and the value orientation of tertiary English education. It argues that such debates often rely on a false zero-sum mentality. Drawing on recent developments in the sociolinguistics of globalization, specifically English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and multilingualism, this study proposes a paradigm shift. It suggests that English policy must move beyond the neoliberal-nationalist dichotomy, recognizing English as a global communicative resource that can coexist with, and even enhance, Chinese cultural identity when decoupled from native-speaker norms.

Index Terms—English language policy, globalization, language ideology, English-medium instruction, multilingualism

I. INTRODUCTION

Recent scholarship highlights how English as a global lingua franca is intertwined with neoliberalism, particularly in global higher education where English is exploited for its market value (Block et al., 2012; Chowdhury & Phan, 2014). For nation-states like China, perceived deficiency in English is often equated with an inability to survive in a globalizing world. However, this presents a dilemma: while China is a major beneficiary of globalization, discourses framing English as a threat to local culture and society persist (Zhou, 2007). The tension between the pragmatic value of English and the preservation of indigenous identity has dominated English teaching discourse. Although English is compulsory, the public sector retains control, evidenced by restrictions on foreign names and signboards, reflecting a desire to prevent cultural erosion.

China's position is unique due to the sheer scale of both Mandarin and English speakers within its borders, creating a complex competition between national identity and global economic drives (Majhanovich, 2014). As China undergoes drastic socio-economic changes, conflicting language ideologies emerge. How does China reconcile nationalism and neoliberalism? This paper explores theoretical and political discourses on the role of English in China, focusing on recent educational debates. To contextualize these debates, a brief diachronic account of English in the Chinese education system is provided.

II. A HISTORICAL REVIEW: FLUCTUATING DISCOURSES AND PERPETUATING AMBIVALENCE

English language teaching was introduced to China by missionary schools in the early 19th century, immediately sparking conflicting views: seen simultaneously as tools of Western cultural imperialism and as contributors to Chinese modernization (Deng, 1997). This tension between accepting English for modernization and preserving indigenous culture has been a long-standing issue.

Until the late 1970s, English held minimal status, often resisted by nationalists fearing unwanted cultural transfer (Adamson, 2004). The Reform and Opening-up policy marked a turning point, positioning English as a key tool for accessing technology and knowledge. This instrumentalist view led to the depoliticization of ELT (Hu, 2005), though worries about cultural "corrosion" persisted, exemplified by the 'Campaign Against Spiritual Pollution' in the 1980s.

Entering the new millennium, English became a gate-keeping language for upward mobility, igniting an unprecedented "English fever." However, this craze faced backlash for allegedly wasting resources and deteriorating students' native language proficiency (Xinhua News, 2013). Consequently, proposals emerged to reduce English's weight in standardized tests or even abolish it in the Gaokao (Beijing Review, 2014). Recent policies also suggest backgrounding English in favor of Chinese in higher education (Wang, 2016). This historical trajectory reveals a

continuing ambivalence: language education in China is characterized by fluctuating discourses where English is oscillating between a strategic asset and a cultural threat (Y. Gao, 2015).

III. IDEOLOGICAL DEBATES AROUND THE ROLE OF ENGLISH IN EDUCATION

Globalization has intensified the role of English as a global lingua franca, emphasizing its instrumental value for modernization and mutual understanding (Crystal, 1997; Graddol, 2006). Conversely, critical perspectives frame English as an instrument of imperialism that disrupts local linguistic ecologies and threatens indigenous languages (Phillipson, 1992; Mühlhäusler, 1996). This tension between English as a beneficial resource and a cultural threat has fueled intense ideological debates in China regarding its relationship with the Chinese language and culture. Recognizing that such debates reflect broader sociopolitical struggles (Blommaert, 1999), this paper examines these conflicting language ideologies within the Chinese context to elucidate their role in national development and identity formation.

A. *The Debate on the Status of English in Gaokao*

What has been seen as the key propellant for the popularity of English in China is its inclusion in Gaokao as one of the three major examination subjects, because its dominant position lies in its weight in various levels of exams, with Gaokao having the greatest impact (Zhao, 2016). Currently, English and Chinese subjects, along with mathematics, share the same weight (150) in Gaokao. However, the Beijing Municipal Commission of Education was recently reported to have a plan to raise the value of the Chinese language by shifting points from English to Chinese in college and senior high school entrance exams (Zhao, 2016; Zheng, 2014). This proposal has generated heated debates and mixed responses from the academic circle and the public. Whilst this move has been seen as a timely development to cool down the nationwide blind mania for English, it is claimed as a failure to take into account the nation's demand for foreign language ability when facing the challenge of globalisation and internationalisation of higher education (Zhao, 2013).

The proponents of de-emphasising English in Gaokao have attributed the worsening of Chinese students' native language proficiency to the over-emphasis on English. A prominent example is the attack on the national fever for English learning by Wang Xuming, former spokesman of MOE, who argued that English learning has not only cost learners too much time and money, but has also deteriorated the learners' Chinese language proficiency (Xinhua News, 2013). In this view, the prevalence of English has negatively affected the native language. This implies a zero-sum mentality that the gains in English learning have been offset by the losses of Chinese learning (Zheng, 2014). With this mindset of native speakerism, some Chinese scholars have strongly supported the move to de-emphasise English in Gaokao, even labelling it as a measure to enhance 'cultural self-confidence' (Sheng, 2014). Some scholars (e.g., Zheng, 2014), however, suggests a bilingual ideal to come up with a bicultural identity consisting of a local identity with the mother tongue and a global identity with English (Kramsch, 1998). However, one of the biggest challenges for Chinese learners to become such competent bilingual users is the deprivation of actual English usage experiences that discourages them from seeing the connection of English with their real lives, as English has been learned as a school subject – rather than as a means of communication – in China, where English has no official status (Zheng, 2014). A possible solution is to shift the focus from language as a course content to language as a medium of instruction. Although the necessity of such shift has been supported by a number of research (Cai, 2014; Li & Wang, 2010) to enable students a Chinese-English bilingual learning experience, the proposal of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) is not without controversy in China.

B. *The Debate on the Medium of Instruction in Higher Education*

As early as 2001, the MOE had published guidelines for improving the quality of undergraduate English teaching, requiring that 'within three years 5–10% of undergraduate courses offered by tertiary institutions be conducted in English' (Hu & McKay, 2012, pp. 346–347). It was criticised by China Youth Daily (the official newspaper of the Communist Youth League of China) as being politically incorrect, for promoting EMI amongst non-English majors can be an unlawful practice against the education law which stipulates that all educational institutions should use Chinese as the medium of instruction (Li, 2006). It had appealed for an end of any form of bilingual instruction that embodies a residue of colonialist ideology. Some scholars (Geng, 2005; Ma, 2006) also showed concern about the status of Mandarin as a medium of instruction and opposed the use of EMI courses or programs in higher education, which aroused a heated debate on EMI policies.

Considering the demand of the global spread of English and internationalisation of higher education, other scholars (e.g., Cai, 2015) however argued that, EMI – as a manifestation of bilingualism in an essentially monolingual country – is the only way to meet the opportunities and challenges of globalisation through 'Englishnisation'. They have supported the use of EMI as not causing 'language shift', i.e., giving up the mother tongue for English, as long as the vernacular domains are well used and kept (Zhang, 2018). Against the background that more institutions in non-English-speaking countries have now offered English courses to overcome linguistic disadvantage (OECD, 2004), the necessity and benefits of EMI seem too great to be ignored by China. As such, the Chinese government has to take an eclectic view regarding EMI to respond to the pressure of internationalisation of higher education; that is to say,

China has kept a rational ratio between EMI and Chinese-medium instruction (Zhang, 2018).

In effect, EMI in true meaning in tertiary education has not yet been popularised in China; it has been primarily adopted by a limited number of top-tier universities and Sino-foreign cooperative (regional) ones, particularly offshore branch campuses from English-speaking countries. Recent research has suggested that EMI policies in China have met some difficulties in teaching practices (Zhang, 2018), and EMI is not a favourable source of language learning (Hu & Lei, 2014; Jiang et al., 2019). Consequently, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has been proposed as a bridge course linking English for General Purposes (EGP) to EMI. In fact, using English in specialised areas corresponds closely with the implementation of bilingual instruction in higher education institutions (Xu, 2012). Whilst accepting ESP as an important component of tertiary English education in China, scholars and experts have never come to an agreement about whether traditional EGP should be completely replaced by ESP.

C. The Debate on the Value Orientation of Tertiary English Education

College English teaching. There are two types of English education at the tertiary level in China: one is for English majors, whilst the other is for non-English majors, which account for an overwhelming majority of Chinese university students (more than 90%). English education for the latter is known as College English teaching (CET), and its course College English (CE) has been required for university undergraduates of arts, science and engineering since the 1960s. (Yu & Liu, 2018) The last decade, however, has witnessed a nationwide reduction of CE credits in CET curricula. The course decline may have resulted from a constant incongruity between the nation's needs and college graduates' English proficiency, apart from a lack of disciplinary status of CE. A report released in 2014 by Education First (EF), an international education company, revealed that scores obtained by adult test-takers in mainland China (50.15) were ranked amongst 'low efficiency countries', falling behind other Asian countries and regions such as Korea (53.62), Japan (52.88), Hongkong (52.50), Taiwan (52.56), and even Vietnam (51.57). (Education First, 2014; Wang, 2017) The gap between China's urgent need for a large number of competent English users and its reality in a great shortage of so-called 'compound professionals' who are proficient both in their own fields and in English language is often attributed to the inappropriate direction of CET (Cai, 2016, 2017). That is to say, CET has been taught for general purposes, targeting at the improvement of students' general cultural awareness and the accumulation of language phenomena and teaching the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. It is believed that the devotion of limited credit-bearing CE courses to the appreciation of English literature and understanding of foreign society, history and cultures is misleading, and it obliterates the distinction between CE and English courses for high school students and English majors (Yu & Liu, 2018). Therefore, CET should be redirected to ESP, providing students with necessary foreign language skills needed in their academic studies and future work (Yu & Liu, 2018). This has eventually developed into a debate on the value orientation of CET, particularly whether CET should be instrumentally-oriented or humanistically-oriented.

ESP-oriented instrumental value. Instrumentalists have insisted on the complete replacement of traditional CET featuring EGP by ESP or EAP (English for academic purposes) for academic universities, in order to equip students with English as a tool to cope with their academic studies and future work (Cai, 2017). The discourse of linguistic instrumentalism promises both national and individual economic benefit from English language proficiency, which corresponds to a broader neoliberal discourse of human capital, i.e., skills deemed necessary for knowledge economy (Kubota, 2011). This perceived usefulness of English is congruent with the conceptualisation of English as a 'linguistic capital' (Bourdieu, 1991), as it can be easily converted to other forms of capital, such as cultural (educational qualifications) and economic capital (better employment and career development) (Pan & Block, 2011). In this view, the instrumentalist value of CE may rely upon empowering future scientists, engineers, and businessmen, at least in terms of improving their economic condition. It can be said that the ever-growing demands for English language education have largely been driven by such self-vested and widespread sociocultural perception of English proficiency as the most valorised symbolic capital with a strong exchange value in China (Hu & McKay, 2012; Pan, 2015).

EGP-oriented humanistic value. The pragmatic perception implicit in the instrumental value of English has been opposed by many other scholars who believe that English learning should go beyond instrumental value and recognise its humanistic value as well, since language, as an inseparable part of culture, is also the carrier of culture and human thought (Xu & Fan, 2017). They argued that instrumentalism has failed to realise that English education, like other humanistic disciplines, constitutes as an important source to cultivate students' humanistic qualities and enhance their wholistic development, including cognition, affect, attitude, values, and character (Zhang, 2010). This humanity-oriented view of English education is said to be traced back to an emphasis on cultivation of moral and cultural qualities and neglect of instrumentalist utility in traditional Chinese culture, an idea expressed in the Chinese phrase *zhongdaoqingqi* (Cai, 2017). This is explicitly reflected in language policy statements, in which English learning is supposed to 'improve their [students'] comprehensive cultural literacy' (MOE, 2004, 2007). The importance of culture and cultural issues in CET has been further elevated in a recent language policy document, indicating the government's emphasis on the humanistic value of English. For instance, English for Intercultural Communication (EIC) was embraced in the most recent CET curriculum document 2015/2017 Guidelines along with EGP and ESP to form the three course categories in CET, with the aim to nurture students' awareness and appreciation of cultural differences. The new guidelines claimed to 'enhance intercultural communication awareness ... improve their comprehensive cultural quality' in the overall teaching objective description (MOE, 2015, 2017). These discursive constructions of

English learning to cultural enrichment and intellectual development in policy rhetoric are seen as ostensible reasons for English language education, whilst the underlying language ideology is deeply imbedded in self-interest that various stakeholders can reap from English as a highly valorised form of cultural capital (Hu & McKay, 2012). Indeed, the ESP-oriented reform on CET has met some resistance from teachers, experts, administrators and policymakers who have a vested interest in traditional CET-based textbooks, teaching and tests) (Cai, 2016).

Therefore, it is advisable to take a cautious attitude towards the seemingly positive signs towards ESP (i.e., the pragmatic use of English), because the policy documents may simply pay lip service to the notion of ESP, given its ambiguity in defining teaching objectives in policy discourses (Xu & Fan, 2017). Therefore, the conclusion needs to be re-examined in which the instrumental usefulness of English to the nation is placed at the forefront of the discourse, overshadowing any potential socio-political effect the language might have on Chinese language and culture (Pan & Seargeant, 2012). In effect, the discourse on the perceived threat of English learning to national identification has already been existing even at the height of English mania (Gao, 2015). To counter the powerful cultural politics of the global spread of English, the government highlighted the cultivation of national awareness in all levels of education, especially in foreign language disciplines. A close examination of foreign language plans and policies enacted in recent years shows that the integration of national consciousness has become one of the distinctive features of the development in the field of foreign language with such expression as Socialist Core Values, humanistic connotation, Chinese feelings, Chinese style, Xi Jinping socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era (Xu, 2021).

The paradox of the debate. Some scholars (e.g., X. Gao, 2018) have expressed their puzzle about the ‘humanism vs. instrumentalism’ debate, wondering why these two aspects need to be put to opposite sides to create a pseudo proposition. If humanistic quality is defined as the quality that an individual social being is expected to possess, which is further determined by what kind of society we wish to live in, the cultivation of humanistic quality should not be dependent exclusively on foreign language education. Furthermore, proficient use of language as a resource to achieve one’s personal or professional goals contributes to the development of humanistic quality. In this sense, the instrumental role of language has helped lay a solid foundation for improving one’s humanistic quality (e.g., X. Gao, 2018).

The resolution to this puzzle lies in the politicized nature of teaching English culture in China. While current policy encourages cultural awareness, it simultaneously emphasizes “appreciating differences” and “deepening understanding of Chinese culture” (Pan, 2015). This suggests that the promoted “humanistic value” is not merely for personal development but serves a patriotic agenda: exporting Chinese culture and enhancing national soft power. As Wang (2013) noted, College English Teaching (CET) must elucidate China’s achievements and socialism with Chinese characteristics to the world. Consequently, CET is endowed with the mission of cultivating patriotism alongside language skills.

This dual mandate reflects a broader struggle between economic globalization and nationalism, where students are urged to compete globally while maintaining loyalty to China (Law, 2014). The recent integration of *sizhengjiaoyu* (ideological and political education) into English Language Teaching epitomizes this trend, blurring the lines between neoliberal utility and nationalist ideology. Rather than viewing globalization as a threat to identity, the Chinese discourse frames English as a strategic resource for sovereignty construction and national storytelling (Gao, 2017). Thus, the function of English in China can never be “purely pragmatic”; it is inherently expanded to include the transmission of political ideas and the consolidation of national identity (Pan, 2015).

IV. DISCUSSIONS

In this section, the three areas of controversies will be further discussed to offer implications for future English language policy and language ideology in China and beyond in the globalized context.

A. Establish Functional Links Between English and Chinese

As China has proudly established itself as the world’s second economic powerhouse, it may arguably aspire to assert the importance of its national language on the world stage. To that end, the Chinese government had set up a total of 475 Confucius institutes and 851 Confucius classrooms in 126 regions and countries by the end of 2014 since its launching of the promotion of Chinese and culture in 2004 (Chinanews, 2015). This effort to promote Chinese language and culture has not only exemplified China’s ambition to enable what Giddens (2000, pp. 34-35) calls as ‘reverse colonisation’ (i.e., non-Western countries influence Western culture and development), but has served as an important measure to counterbalance the powerful cultural politics of the global spread of English (Pan & Seargeant, 2012). Therefore, English is being embedded in the new world system and social orders under neoliberal globalisation, and employed as a useful resource for constructing desirable national identities and images with a globally competitive edge.

Given the impact of shifting economic power relations on the foreign language domain, it is natural for China to promote its national language and culture worldwide through foreign language education. The issue is whether it is necessary to impose or prioritise the task of spreading Chinese culture on all non-English majors in policy discourse, especially those majoring in science and engineering, when ‘instrumentalism’ has become a predominant ideology of internationalisation in higher education today (Stier, 2004). The Chinese government has been convinced that EGP needs to be strengthened rather than weakened, because an essential part of EGP is cross-cultural education that is supposed to cultivate students’ world vision, enabling them in the future to explain China’s position and values.

Furthermore, having received cross-cultural training in the course of CE, students are expected to become leaders rather than followers in the process of participating in global 'governance', through playing an inspiring, shaping and influencing role in international affairs (Wang & Wang, 2019).

This clearly explains the two purposes of learning English in China: 'getting to know Western culture and spreading our national culture' (Bianco et al., 2009, p. 286). The latter seems to become more salient, instead of obscure, at the age of globalization. Although it can be a possible strategy in language policy to establish functional links between English and Chinese to enable a sustainable ecosystem of language (Gao, 2017; Mühlhäusler, 1997), it should not be overused to the extent that languages are simply appropriated to promote political goals overseas. These functional links are supposed to construct 'a mutually supportive system' (Mühlhäusler, 1997, p. 5) in a linguistic ecosystem supporting both English and Chinese. Perhaps, the perceived links may also be strengthened through creating a multilingual classroom where English and Chinese each has different roles to play, or promoting the awareness of the role of the Chinese variant of English in intercultural communication. According to García (2019), for foreign language education to enter the multilingual education realm, it needs to give up being a mechanism of political states. That said, it has to be admitted that it would be a long shot to 'shed the strong link between language and nation-state that has been at the core of foreign language epistemologies' (García, 2019, p. 1). However, policy makers might be informed and guided by robust research results in addition to political considerations. For instance, empirical research suggests that Chinese is of much help in both teaching and learning in bilingual instruction classes (Xu, 2012), and that more value should be placed on home culture as a resource to challenge the dominance of Anglophone culture in English teaching classrooms, because 'effectively understanding other cultures requires adequate comprehension of one's own home culture' (Liu & Fang, 2017, p. 33). In addition, as non-native speakers have become the overwhelmingly majority in contemporary English communication, cultures other than the native speakers' should be brought into the field as well (Dahmardeh & Kim, 2020). These research-based discourses are represented as more 'natural' and 'legitimate', thus indicating a widely accepted and 'less apparent' way of thinking and acting (cf. Pan, 2015).

B. Encourage a Bilingual User Identity

Like many other countries in the expanding circle, Chinese universities have currently faced contradicting pressures for internationalisation on one hand and nationalism on another. The above discussion shows that the Chinese education system is still facing a dilemma of using English or Chinese as the medium of instruction. Whilst the instrumental role of English is foregrounded both in policy and in public imagination (Pan & Seargeant, 2012), there is a concern that people might lose their identity if English is viewed as more important than their mother tongue. Likewise, if Chinese people spend too much time and energy in learning English, it will naturally jeopardise their Chinese studies (Xinhua News, 2013). Hence, the reduced points from English will be given to Chinese according to the English-Chinese weight shift plan in Gaokao. Although controversial and still unimplemented, the proposed Gaokao reform has clearly shown the country's worry about the status of Chinese language, culture and traditional values alongside the unprecedented development of English in China. Whilst the reasons behind the policy change are seen as politically driven by Western media, stating that Chinese policymakers had regarded the reform scheme as a matter of national pride or cultural confidence in highlighting the fundamental importance of the mother tongue in the curriculum (Kaiman, 2013), the underlying discourse on the state's decision to de-emphasise English can also be related to the perception of the language as a threat to national language and culture (Zheng, 2014). This mentality is probably resulting from the practice of 'teaching English as a native speakers' variety in the non-native Chinese context with the expectation for the learners to be like a (monolingual) native speaker of English' (Zheng, 2014). Trying to impose native-speaker norms on non-native speaking learners is not only unrealistic and unattainable, but also a cause of sentiments of frustration amongst teachers and students (Morley, 1991). Should we then be able to use the language effectively as a form of communication only if we conform to native-speaker norms? The answer is a resounding 'no'. Widdowson (2015) has demonstrated how English users are capable of effective communication without conforming to the norms of native English speakers, taking as a role model the former Secretary General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-Moon. Therefore, there is a need for all language education programs to build legitimate multilingual subjectivities, without reference to the social construction of native speakers (García, 2019).

People's language ideology needs to be updated through raising their awareness of the developments of English as a global language and 'the possibility to approach English as an additional language resource to be part of the globalisation processes' (Zheng, 2014, p. 38). Since the development of English as a lingua franca (ELF) has blurred traditional boundaries amongst different languages (Blommaert, 2010; Seidlhofer, 2011), English should not be seen as an 'isolated subject' and in conflict with Chinese learning. The ultimate goal of language learning in today's globalised world is multilingualism connecting with the conceptualisation of ELF with a global culture, rather than a monolingual native ideology attached to Anglophone cultures and traditionally defined ethnicity and nationality (Seidlhofer, 2011). Foreign language education can no longer be constructed as teaching a separate alien language that belongs to a distant nation with a distinct culture (García, 2019). Recognising the ELF paradigm or Global English Language Teaching (cf. Galloway & Rose, 2018) is useful in reconciling tensions between nationalism and globalisation, because it argues for individuals to be fluent bilingual (or multilingual) speakers, whilst retaining their national identities through accent and special skills required for international communication (Baker, 2015). The maintenance of native cultural identity can also be achieved by 'productive bilingualism' (Gao, 2015) transcending the binary dichotomy between a native

language and a foreign language. This concept of bilingualism is symbolized as “1+1>2”, meaning that that use of the target language and the native language positively reinforce each other, and deeper understanding and appreciation of the target culture goes hand in hand with that of the native culture (Gao, 2001).

In recent years, more scholars have called for abandoning the native-speaker myth and establishing a legitimate bilingual user identity among Chinese learners. Qiu (2024) finds that teaching practices guided by the ELF paradigm can significantly reduce learners’ anxiety and improve their practical communicative effectiveness. Additionally, Tang (2025) notes that the latest primary and secondary school English policies have gradually focused on multilingual competence rather than monolingual native-like proficiency, which helps reshape public language ideology and reconcile the tension between nationalism and globalization in language education.

C. Redefine Communicative Competence From the Perspective of ESP-ELF Kinship

There is also a need for revisions or adaptations to English language policy and ELT courses in China to reflect the latest theories on global spread of English and the sociolinguistics of globalisation. Recent EMI researches (e.g., Fang, 2017) have been conducted from a multilingual perspective with a focus on ELF conception accentuating communication strategies. It is a strategic capability rather than traditional ‘competence’ that needs to be cultivated for using linguistic resources, adapting them as appropriate to various contexts and for various purposes of global communication (Widdowson, 2015). It is therefore crucial to explore the effectiveness of implementing EMI with an ELF-informed ideology. For instance, it is important to challenge the traditional native-speaker model in which the standard British and American English variants have been upheld as the only acceptable pedagogical models. To that end, there is a need to reconceptualise communicative competence from the perspective of English as an international language (EIL), as the global learning of English needs to be based on its global use (Seidlhofer & Widdowson, 2019).

English should be introduced as a tool for communication and access to information (Ramanathan, 2013) rather than subject knowledge. Therefore, higher education may need to prioritise English for communicative purposes especially in specialised fields. The predominant ingredients of ‘ELF approach’ such as context, target situation and learners’ needs/wants are also the components that form the backbone of the ‘ESP approach’. As such, ‘ELF approach’ can be understood as an embodiment of the ‘ESP approach’ (Ramanathan, 2013). I thus propose that ELF-informed teaching should start with prospective ESP users, such as students in Business English or Engineering English program. I also suggest a trial implementation of ELF-oriented teaching in EMI programs to explore its feasibility and suitability on Chinese learners in Chinese higher education (as cited in Yu & Liu, 2022).

This ESP-ELF kinship perspective enables us to reflect on traditional mode of cultivating students’ communicative competence dominated by normative mindset, realising that the ultimate goal of the ELF model is to produce ‘expert users’ (House, 2005) instead of native English speakers. In other words, the purpose of most English learners is specific, namely, to learn the language which enables them to become members of expert communities and to communicate with other members from different cultures. After all, it is the ability of using ‘expert English’ rather than native-like English that largely determines our position in the international community (Yu & Liu, 2019, 2022).

V. CONCLUSION

This paper has reviewed several ideological debates on the role of English in China, focusing on entrance examinations, English-Medium Instruction (EMI), and the value orientation of tertiary English teaching. Specifically, the controversy over whether College English Teaching (CET) should be instrumentally or humanistically oriented has persisted for decades. In line with the arguments put forward by Gao (2018) and Cai (2017), this debate centering on instrumentalism and humanism can be regarded as a pseudo-proposition. These orientations align with Cook’s (2007) distinction between ‘external’ goals (information acquisition) and ‘internal’ goals (human quality improvement), forming a complementary rather than dichotomous relationship.

The debates on the status of English in China’s education system and the value orientation of tertiary English teaching as reviewed in this paper show that the pendulum of China’s position on English has been oscillating between national ideas and neoliberal instrumentalism or functionalism. This study has elucidated the correlations between the aforementioned debates and diverse language ideologies. It further contends that, within the contemporary context of global economic integration and geopolitical dynamics, the formulation of English language policies and the implementation of pedagogical practices ought to be grounded in cutting-edge research advances in the sociolinguistics of globalisation. Describing globalisation from the perspective of linguistic imperialism and ‘linguicide’ (Phillipson, 1992; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000) is no longer relevant to the contemporary reality of language use, as these approaches have assumed that there is a place for just one language at a time: wherever a ‘big’ and ‘powerful’ language such as English ‘appears’ in a foreign territory, small indigenous languages will ‘die’ (Blommaert, 2010). In this sociolinguistic space, an either-or dichotomy has been imposed upon foreign language and indigenous language, suggesting that English learning and use are necessarily at the cost of Chinese learning and use. Since English in the world today has been deterritorialized, i.e., no longer associated with any particular geographical or national entity, the defense mechanism and response strategy formed in the semi-colonial history (Gao, 2015) are no longer the inevitable choice for China and other countries in the outer circle with a colonial history (see Haidar & Fang, 2019, for a comparative analysis of the role of English in Pakistan and China). Language and cultural self-confidence should be built within the

framework of ‘a Community of Shared Future for Mankind’ (Xi, 2017) instead of the ‘zero-sum game’ in which learning/appreciating other languages/cultures is equivalent to the loss/depreciation of one’s own language/culture.

The inexorable spread of English as a lingua franca requires us to update our traditional understanding of target culture which was seen as ‘a foreign invader seeking to impose a new order on alien lands’ (Sybing, 2011). As it, in many cases, has already taken root in non-Western countries, the paradigm in foreign language education must evolve into one that recognize that multiple cultures are already present in the local contexts (Sybing, 2011). Therefore, teaching foreign languages should be more about integration with the global community than assimilation with native speakers (McClelland, 2000; Dahmardeh & Kim, 2020). In effect, the pedagogical goals of ELF (or EIL) place more emphasis on the learner’s ability to communicate ideas and culture with others and do not require the learner to learn the cultural norms of English. In a word, by viewing English as a lingua franca rather than as a language owned by native speakers, it would be seen as less threatening by Chinese and be more readily accepted as the second language of education (after Chinese itself).

We must be reminded that, due to globalisation, languages no longer remain independent of each other, because people resort to different linguistic resources to accomplish different communicative tasks in today’s extraordinarily diverse contexts. It can be said that we have benefited more from being a bilingual or a multilingual, rather than a monolingual. Therefore, the English-as-a-threat mentality should give way to a complementarity between support for the benefits of English as a global means of communication and the importance of multilingualism (Crystal, 1997). I contend in the paper that Chinese and English can coexist with different functions in a multilingual environment and language education should aim for this. In order to reframe foreign language education through a multilingual framework, teachers of English need to attend to the diverse needs and goals of students who will use English in different settings in order to help them participate with flexibility in intercultural communication (Sharifian, 2013).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply grateful to my colleagues at Southwest University of Political Science and Law for their stimulating discussions and unwavering encouragement throughout this journey. Special thanks go to the anonymous reviewers whose insightful comments significantly sharpened this paper. Finally, I owe a personal debt of gratitude to my family for their endless patience and belief in my work during the long hours of writing.

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Rui Wang was born in Xiaojin, Sichuan, China, in 1983. He received the Ph.D. degree in English Language and Literature from Southwest University, Chongqing, China. He is currently an Associate Professor and Vice Dean at the School of Foreign Languages, Southwest University of Political Science and Law, Chongqing, China. He has completed research projects funded by the Ministry of Education and Chongqing Municipal Government. He is the author of two monographs, four textbooks, and six translated works, and has published nearly ten academic papers.

His current research interests include Legal Translation Studies and Legal Linguistics. His email address is <mailto:wangrui@swupl.edu.cn>

Xinyan Liao was born in Chongqing, China, in 2002. She is a postgraduate student majoring in Foreign Language and Literature at the School of Foreign Languages, Southwest University of Political Science and Law, with a research focus on legal linguistics.