

Should China English Teaching Be Encouraged at Present in China?

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Abstract: Since “China English” was put forward by Ge Chuangui in 1982, more and more linguists, researchers, and English educators have begun to pay their attention to this new variety. With the study of China English and foreign language teaching in China, some scholars suggest that China English should be taught in universities or colleges. Although this paper admits the objective existence of China English, the author does not agree with popularization of China English at present. The purpose of this paper is to clarify inappropriateness of China English teaching, and to point out serious consequences of abuse of China English.

1. Introduction

Ge Chuangui (1982) is the first to coin the term “China English” in a paragraph of about six hundred Chinese characters. In that paragraph, he suggests that much attention should be drawn to distinguish China English from Chinglish. Since then, various topics and problems concerning China English have been studied by many Chinese scholars, linguists, and English educators (see, e.g., Jia Guanjie & Xiang Mingfa 1997; Jiang Yajun 1995; Li Wenzhong 1993; Wang Rongpei 1991). Their definitions about China English are not the same, but some common characteristics can be concluded: China English is a ‘nativization’ of normative English used by Chinese people mainly in China to express China-specific things for international and intranational communication.

In recent years, more and more interdisciplinary study concerning China English has been carried out, such as China English and translation, China English and applied linguistics, and China English and second language acquisition. Some proponents of China English suggest teaching China English at present in universities (see, e.g. Li Huihong, 2008; Ye Weiguo, 2008). This seems to be a fairly interesting and quite significant topic, and is worth careful study as this might not only help to realize some difficulties of teaching China English, but also hold some invaluable implications to English language teaching in China as a whole.

This paper, on the basis of China English’s present study and its existing problems, discusses the inappropriateness of China English teaching at present. Furthermore, the author gives some explanations to clarify this argument. The purpose of this paper is to point out existing problems of China English, the unscientific theory to encourage China English teaching, and the necessity of

further systematic study of China English in the future.

2. Present Study of China English

Ge Chuangui is the first to put forward the term of China English. In the journal of Translation and Communication, he (1982) writes:

No matter what times in China, there are always China-specific things to convey when we speak or write in English. For example, Four Books (四书), eight-legged essay (八股文), xiucai (秀才) and so on. These translations do not belong to Chinese English or Chinglish, but China English.”

In the same year, he published another paper Reflection on ‘From Chinglish to English’. However, at that time, the notion of China English did not attract much attention.

Later, in 1989 and 1991, Sun Li’s and Wang Rongpei’s two papers became the corner-stone of latest study concerning China English. Especially after 2002, the research of it has developed at a fast pace. According to Han Ling’s statistics (2007), from 2002 to 2006, there are 248 papers on the results of China English having been published. This number is more than 6 times than past twenty years. Though there are so many researchers and published papers studying China English, several problems concerning the study of China English should be noticed and mentioned here:

Firstly, the definition of China English is not in agreement, and the study theory is weak. Most Chinese still treat China English, Chinese English and Chinese Pidgin English as the same variety of English. They think these three varieties occur as a result of negative transfer of Chinese (Hu Xiaoli, 2008). The study of China English lacks profound ideological system and authoritative theory, so it fails to shoulder the responsibility for prevalence of Chinese culture. Secondly, the research methodology is not clear. How to study China English? Should language research be descriptive or prescriptive? Which methodology is the best choice? All these questions are still in doubt. Recently, descriptions about nativization of China English at every level (phonology, lexis, syntax and discourse) are in the ascendant (see, e.g., Du Ruiqing & Jiang Yajun, 2003; Wang Weibo, 2002; Pan Zhangxian, 2005; Li Shaohua, 2006). But the method of exemplification cannot fulfill the requirement of exactness and universality of qualitative and quantitative analysis in scientific research. The macroscopic study has already been excessive, but the elaborate analysis and valuable models at microscopic level are in urgent need of further research. Thirdly, the study and development of China English is imbalanced. Some fields concerning China English have been studied excessively, but for other domains, researchers have not even touched yet (Hu Xiaoli, 2008). Furthermore, because of special situation in China, China English should be investigated in 4 areas: mainland, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Macao. Because of different diffuse, function, status, and variation of English in these areas, researches about China English should be done respectively.

On the basis of such study context, the author contributes the following whole part to discuss various reasons for infeasibility of China English teaching at present.

3. Reasons for Inappropriateness of China English Teaching

3.1. The Difference Between TEIL and TEFL/TESL

In 2002, Trudgill and Hannah’s International English: A Guide to Varieties of Standard English forms contrastive study of TEIL (teaching English as international language), TEFL (teaching English as foreign language), and TESL (teaching English as second language). TEIL is one of concepts in the field of language teaching and applied linguistics, and the aim of it is to teach people from different countries to use English in flexible ways. For example, the American can communicate with British, Arab can talk with Japanese, and a Chinese can make friends with Nigerian. Smith (qtd. from Hu Xiaoqiong, 2007) emphasizes the difference between TEIL and

TEFL/TESL. He argues that TEIL is inclined to be used by all people in different countries, and the way and model of speaking is various in these speech communities. Therefore, during the course of communication, the speaker and hearer should know their differences, cooperate with each other and adjust ways of using English so as to enable communication successful. When teaching English as international language, teachers know different varieties of English clearly, and use flexible ways to teach so that students can be familiar with English varieties in different countries. However, in China, English is taught as a foreign language, and few teachers know different varieties of English, let alone students. At present, China English is still at initial stage, it is not well-known abroad. Chinese students cannot even distinguish American English from British English clearly, let alone Indian English, Singapore English and other varieties. An English edition of an Indian newspaper, for example, might refer routinely to *roti*, *kapra*, and *makan* ('bread, clothing, and dwelling'), a *rail rook* (railway strike), and to such quantities as a *crore* ('10 million) or *lakh* (100,000') (Crystal, 2000, P.360). For the author, more varieties of English means more difficulties of understanding each other. The much easier the international language becomes, the more convenient to communicate.

3.2. The Low Recognition Rate of China English

No matter how fruitful results of China English have been carried out, most Chinese students do not recognize it at present.

According to Hu Xiaoqiong's survey (2007) done among college students (including English major students) about China English, only 9.4% of them heard of it, but could not make clear about the difference between China English and Chinglish. Another report from Wei Lixia and Guo Hongyan (2008) confirms that though Chinese students' recognition rate (less than 50%) is higher than before, when comparing with foreign students' recognition to their English varieties, the rate is still very low.

If you do not recognize something, how can you accept it willingly? At present, as half students have not recognized China English yet, how can they learn it well and use it correctly and fluently?

3.3. Dynamic Relationship Between China English and Chinglish

First of all, it is useful to know how scholars define Chinglish. Li Wenzhong (1993) thinks that Chinglish is deformed variety of English and is caused by interference of Chinese language which does not follow the universal rules of native English, culture and custom. In other words, Chinglish refers to the "Sinicized English" which can be seen in sound, vocabulary and text due to linguistic transfer or rigid translation by Chinese people, thus it is not accepted by native English-speaking speakers.

Except Li Wenzhong, there are other scholars (see, e.g., Jia Guanjie & Xiang Mingyou, 1997; Jiang Yajun, 1995) distinguishing China English from Chinglish in different aspects, such as definition, causation and characteristics. However, opponents also have their voices, and they argue vagueness between these two varieties and challenge the other side's opinion. Xie Zhijun (qtd. from Xu Chenfang, 2008) says both China English and Chinglish are affected by Chinese language and Chinese way of thinking; Zhang Peicheng (qtd. from Xu Chengfang) thinks there is no essential difference between them, and both China English and Chinglish are two kinds of expression for the same thing.

No matter what definitions are given to China English and Chinglish, they are interrelated in some aspects: firstly, both of them are affected by Chinese language, Chinese way of thinking, and Chinese culture; secondly, both of them are used to express Chinese things and have Chinese features; thirdly, most users of them are Chinese. Theoretically, people would say China English

conforms to rules of normative English, but Chinglish does not. However, in the course of practice, it is quite hard to distinguish one from the other. To what extent students can define the limits, and which standard should be used to judge normative rules? This paper doubts the limit and standard between China English and Chinglish. Sometimes, the so-called Chinglish can become China English. For example, “long time no see” once to be regarded as Chinglish, because of its frequent use, it becomes one of native phrases and is accepted by foreigners. These uncertainties of the difference between China English and Chinglish really confuse students and even some researchers.

3.4. Existent Controversies about China English Itself

Until now, there is no uniform definition about China English, and each of them has its own shortage.

Wang Rongpei’s definition (1991): China English is used by Chinese in China, and it is based on Standard English and possesses Chinese characteristics. The first problem is why Chinese do not use mother tongue in China but English; then if Chinese go abroad, won’t they stop using China English? The third one is what is Standard English? According to McArthur (qtd. from Ye Weiguo, 2008), since 18th century, there have been 64 different definitions about Standard English itself.

Later, Li Wenzhong (1993) improves the definition: China English is not affected and interfered by Chinese language, and it is used to express China-specific things. However, if Chinese people think in Chinese ways and live under Chinese culture, how can they use another variety to express themselves without influence of their mother tongue?

Xie Zhijun (qtd. from Xu Chengfang) adds the frequency and users’ level to the content of China English. In the author’s opinion, the reality is much more complicated. When a person uses a language, many things are involved, such as the hearer, the topic and the environment at that time.

As much controversial issues left here to be settled, it is premature to learn China English variety at present.

3.5. The Strangeness to China English for Most Teachers

Li Huihong (2008) indicates that a number of teachers are not familiar with China English, and do not realize the importance and function of China English. What’s worse, some of them ignore the existence of it.

Although many people do researches about China English, most of them are scholars, language educators and experts, ordinary teachers hardly study it. In other words, long time is needed to spread China English to teachers, and more and more time needed to students.

3.6. The Influence of Chinese Language Learning and Knowledge on Students

For most advocators of China English teaching, they discuss the main reason for it is to improve students’ Chinese language ability, and diffuse Chinese culture. Superficially, it seems that China English can play an important role in this respect. However, on the contrary, too much attention paid on English can only lead to the decline of Chinese language level (Li Changyin, 2008) because China English is one of English varieties, not a Chinese variety. The key point in diffusing Chinese culture is to spread much knowledge about China, Chinese characters and Chinese classical works.

In practice of translation, if students fail to translate Chinese things into English, people will blame them for not knowing English well. Actually, this should be due to their scarcity of Chinese knowledge and Chinese culture. For example, when students translate “带下女” and “室女” into English, most of them employ literal translation and express them as “doctor under the skirt” and “home girl”. This kind of translation errors are not caused by students’ inability of English

and scarcity of translation skills. If they know much about Chinese culture and realize the real meaning of these two words, it is easy for them to translate into correct version: “gynaecologist” and “virgin”.

In 2004, people from various circles showed their concern and worry about students’ Chinese language level and their common sense about Chinese culture. On 27, June 2005, a well-known report appeared at several major websites. It was reported that in one competition of Chinese language held in Fudan University, the champion was the team of students abroad. The result shocked not a few people. Li Changyin (2008) commented it in this way: with the marginalization of Chinese, and wide spread of English in the whole country, Chinese culture is doomed to death. Gradually, the Chinese nation would lose their language and national identity. The situation cannot be changed through popularization of China English, but through the public and comprehensive education of Chinese language and Chinese culture.

4. Conclusion

Though there has already produced lots of results about China English, the present study of it is still at initial stage and its system is incomplete. There must be much work to be done in this field. The definition and present research of China English in this paper is just a general description, and further academic studies and investigations need to be done to shape a whole picture of China English. Moreover, it is desired to have a systematic description and analysis of the linguistic features of China English, especially the features shown at the phonological level.

Crystal (2003, P.135) remarked that predictions about language future have a habit of being wrong. By the same token, it is ridiculous to predict the future of China English in mainland of China. No matter how successful it may become in the future, at the moment, it is infeasible and unwise to advocate China English use. As the above stated, no matter which factor is taken into consideration, in terms of teachers’ strangeness, students’ rejection and the influence on Chinese language development, it is fairly an imprudent decision to take measures to encourage China English teaching in recent years.

Many linguists have held the view that language change is a natural, spontaneous phenomenon, the underlying social or linguistic forces that it is impossible or undesirable to tamper with. However, as Crystal (2000, P.366) says, language planning studies have shown that it is quite possible for social groups to alter the course of a language, and the question of desirability is a highly controversial one. It is still unclear how far languages can be permanently influenced by social manipulation, but there is strong evidence that such factors must be taken seriously. Therefore, if things are not consistent with the order of nature and the need of the public, serious consequences would occur. Therefore, all Chinese should think twice before deciding to teach China English in China.

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