Influence of Artificial Intelligence on the Necessity of China’s English Learning

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ABSTRACT

As one of the three major compulsory subjects for Chinese students, English has been receiving the most communicated comments almost all the time. Now it is confronted a big challenge on its necessity today with the development of artificial intelligence in education. This paper will make an investigation of the influence of artificial intelligence on China’s English learning. Since English is an international language and China is expected to be a modern responsible part of the world, Chinese students should learn English in the artificial intelligence era.

INTRODUCTION

English came to China in business before the first Opium War. It has been an important subject in China since the founding of School of Combined Learning in Beijing in 1862. During the 160 years, China saw the confusing development of the language leaning in the following table.

| Time     | Learners                                                                 | Where to learn                                      |
|----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| 1862-1912| Businessmen, students in School of Combined Learning                      | Guangdong, Shanghai, Beijing, and Hongkong          |
| 1912-1949| Important people from business politics and culture fields, students      | Capital cities in China, And Church schools          |
| 1949-1978| Few students                                                             |                                                     |
| 1978-2008| More and more students to every student, most professionals              | every school, every city, and Every province         |
| 2008-now | Every student, some professionals                                       | every school, every city, and every province         |

Table 1. English learners in China since 1862.

The above table indicates that the English language developed into a significant subject for Chinese students with its own importance to the country and
to the world. Before 1949 it was a quite favourable subject for students who would save the nation including its people and who would like to a modern life. Although it came to a stop once for a while before 1978, it is a most important tool for China to understand the world and develop with the world. Up to 1990s, it developed into a compulsory subject for every student.

It seemed that English came to its top when it was determined as the second language for Chinese students. Unfortunately, there always exist different opinions about its roles for kids. Some people think high of it while quite a large percentage of parents regard that their kids are forced to learn the useless language because their future jobs are unrelated to English at all. Its significance has been questioned by more and more people with the development of artificial intelligence.

**DIS-SATISFACTORY RESULTS OF ENGLISH LEARNING IN CHINA**

Ever since the reform and opening up, the Chinese state has paid an increasing attention to the international language English in national Education, which can be seen from the combination of the subjects for Gaokao in China. English took an obviously growing percentage in Gaokao in recent forty years. In 1977, English took only ten percent in Gaokao. Seven years later, be became one of the three key subjects which include Chinese and Maths. At the same time, Private English training schools were shooting like mushrooms all over China, such as New Oriental School by Mr. Michael Yu, Crazy English by Li Yang. It is reported that there are about 400 million English learners in China who spend about 30 billion RMB on English leaning.

However, at such a huge cost, the result is dramatically down, which can be indicated by the EF English Proficiency Index.

![EF EPI 2019 Ranking of Countries and Regions](image)

It is quite disappointing to find that China ranked only 40 in the world with 53.44 at English proficiency, after many other Asian countries like Philippines, Malaysia, India, and Korea. Almost everybody in China has spent a huge amount of money and energy in English study from his playschool to college or university. Unluckily, more than 60% of college students are rather poor in English communication. What a result at such a high cost for in-and-out-of-school English
study and some related artificial intelligence devices! It is quite natural for some scholars and parents to doubt English learning and the education system.

WHY NOT REDUCE THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ENGLISH IN NATIONAL EDUCATION?

The popularity of English education has not been reduced by public opinion, on the contrary, it continues to rise, whether it is from the aspect of official policy, market capital, or social recognition.

After the reform policy of new college entrance examination, English is still the same, even more important for college registration selection. Obviously, English education remains quite significant for Chinese society in the national authority’s opinion.

China has taken an active part in the international cooperation in a variety of trades since its entering the WTO. It was announced by the General Administration of Customs that China’s total value of Export-Import Volume came to 31.54 trillion yuan in 2019, an increase of 3.4% year-on-year in the context of increasing global economic and trade risks and uncertainties. The annual import-export, export and import all hit a record high.

Although some people called for cooling down the current situation of English learning for all, and expected to reduce the proportion of English in various national examinations, in fact, more and more families and individuals spontaneously invested more energy and cost in English study. They don’t reduce the investment in English study because there are calls for “cooling down” and “lowering the burden of English”.

On the contrary, Capital is more optimistic about the development prospects of English education than before. Due to the development and application of artificial intelligence, new types of English education and training have been achieved in recent years, such as VIP kid, 51talk, tutorabc, and DaDa English. Well-known Internet companies continue to increase their number of English education institutions. In 2018, Tencent continued to invest in English learning related companies, such as Kao Chong English. Baici Zhan, Baobao Play English, New Oriental Online; baidu recently invested in children’s English education brand Qkids Jiuqu English, and became its fifth largest shareholder in one fell swoop.

Another voice in the public opinion is relatively rational. They are not opposed to all people learning English, but hope that the education department can fully consider the actual situation in formulating policies and regard English learning as an optional subject, so that those who are interested in English and who have the ability to learn can independently choose whether to study.

The reality says no. China's higher education has developed rapidly in recent years, and the number of people receiving higher education has been increasing year by year. However, compared with the higher education level of western developed countries, there is still a big gap to catch up. If English is set as an selective subject in the basic education stage, a large number of students who neglect English learning would lose the opportunity to become a college student. It may be even difficult for college students to complete their studies. It’s difficult for them to complete a high-level graduation thesis because they could not collect
excellent foreign educational resources through verification and obtain professional knowledge in cutting-edge depth, which always exist in English. From the perspective of the education industry and society, it will not only affect the level of higher education in the long run, but also fail to train high-level talents for the society.

In fact, China is making progress in English proficiency in recent years, which is proportional to English learning input. It has consolidated its progress over the recent ten years, moving to moderated proficiency for the first time in 2019 EF EPI.

CONCLUSION

With the continuous development of artificial intelligence technology, the difficulty of translation technology will eventually be overcome. Is it necessary to learn English?

Google is developing a translation AI that uses its own voice. Compared with traditional methods, the new artificial intelligence has some advantages. In other words, Google pointed to faster inference speed, elimination of compound errors, and better handling of words that do not require translation, such as proper nouns and names. Currently, Google says that the quality of translation using Translatotron lags behind traditional methods. In other words, if you look at the sample audio, the final result is not only quite accurate, but also sounds more natural.

However, just like Wang Sicong's remarks on the Internet, translation software cannot help users convey a deep culture information. What can be solved may only be at the level of meaning transmission, while the artistic conception can only remain in the feeling of cold machine translation, and it is impossible to deepen the understanding of the cultural background.

With the development of artificial intelligence technology, we should first think about how to master the ability to use English in a fast, efficient and low-cost way, rather than finding ways to get rid of the predicament of learning English. After all, in today's more open globalization, we should consider how to make use of the universal language to give priority to the leading technology, concepts and methods in order to better benefit the society and promote social development in China. And if we blindly give up English capabilities, and depend simply on machines, it will be difficult to permeate Western culture and use a global perspective to observe and solve problems.

Without English ability, it would impossible for China to speak accurately in modern society, to show the world the self-confidence of our own nation, and to accurately convey the true Chinese culture to all corners of the world.

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