The craze for English-medium education in China: driving forces and looming consequences

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The problematic of the use of English as a teaching medium in China

Introduction

Although the organised promotion of English-medium instruction in contemporary China started only at the turn of this century, the use of English as a medium of instruction in China's educational institutions has gathered great momentum in the last few years and is now sweeping across the educational landscape. Despite being exalted by the mainstream educational discourse as a highly commendable reform initiative and a cornerstone of quality education, the spread of English-medium instruction has given rise to many thorny issues that deserve serious attention. Drawing on Bourdieu's sociological theory, this paper presents a critical review of the reform initiative. It examines the driving forces behind the runaway expansion of English-medium instruction and analyses the implications and consequences of such instruction for mainland China.

The spread of English-medium instruction in contemporary China

The last two decades have seen much policy attention to the linkage between the quality of education and mainland China's further development in economic, scientific, political, and sociocultural domains (Chinese Communist Party Central Committee & State Council, 1993, 1999; Ministry of Education, 1998). Various top-down and bottom-up initiatives have been promoted and implemented at an ever quickening pace to reform education at all levels and to achieve the goal of quality education (Hu, 2005b). One recent initiative introduced in the name of educational reform and quality education is English-medium instruction for majority language students in non-language school subjects at the primary and secondary levels. This type of language provision is widely known in mainland China (hereafter China) as 'bilingual education/instruction' (*shuangyu jiaoyu/jiaoxue*). The so-called Chinese-English bilingual education is provided for majority language students and differs from what is traditionally regarded as bilingual education in China, namely the education of ethnic minorities in their native languages and Chinese, the majority language (A. W. Feng, 2005; X. Ye, 2003; W. J. Zhang, 2002; Zheng, 2004). It also differs from most forms of bilingual provision



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for minority language students that are typically denoted by the term in international contexts (Baker, 2006; Hu, 2008).

Although only a few well-resourced schools located in socioeconomically advantaged areas were experimenting with English-medium instruction as a means of improving the quality of English teaching in the 1990s, organised promotion of Chinese-English bilingual education started at the turn of the century as part of Shanghai's drive to become an international metropolis (Hu, 2002; W. Lin, 2001; Shen, 2004). Within the space of several years, this form of language provision has gathered great momentum and is sweeping across the educational landscape of China. It has become one of the hottest topics in the Chinese language education literature. As an illustration, an online search through the Periodical Database of the China National Knowledge Infrastructure Net – the largest database of academic periodical publications – found 1,817 bibliographic entries for the period of 2000 to 2005 that matched the descriptors 'bilingual education/instruction' and 'English language teaching'. Indeed, as A. W. Feng observes, 'from kindergartens to tertiary institutions, bilingual education has become part of the everyday vocabulary not only of educationists but also of ordinary people' (2005: 529–30).

The promotion and spread of English-medium instruction have met with scepticism and criticism from a small minority of educators and researchers (e.g., Gu & Dong, 2005; Gui, 2004; Xu, 2004). Such critics have drawn attention to the multitude of constraints that can frustrate the optimistically-envisioned goals of mass Chinese-English bilingual education, and that can turn the initiative into a disastrous waste of human and economic resources. Others have raised concerns over its potential negative educational and sociocultural consequences. Their voices, however, have been drowned out by an overwhelming academic discourse constructed by an ever-growing contingent of vocal advocates. Those advocates hail Chinese-English bilingual education as the vanguard of educational reform, a cornerstone of quality education, a vital means for China to interface with the rest of the world, and an indispensable resource for the country's endeavour to achieve national development and modernisation in the era of globalisation.

This paper presents a critical review of the Chinese-English bilingual education initiative from a sociological perspective. It consists of three major sections. The first section briefly discusses French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's (1986, 1991) theoretical work which informs the current critical review. The second section examines some of the major driving forces behind the runaway expansion of English-medium instruction. The final section analyses the implications and consequences of such instruction for China.

Bourdieu's theory of social practice

As this article draws on Bourdieu's sociological notions of *capital*, *field*, and *distinction*, it is useful to outline at the outset these notions and their relationships as formulated in his theory of social practice. Bourdieu (1991) uses *field* (and sometimes 'market') to refer to a structured social space in which individuals or institutions act. This structured multidimensional space is 'constructed on the basis of principles of differentiation or distribution constituted by the set of properties active in the social universe under consideration' (p. 229). The set of properties current in a field comprise material and immaterial resources, or various forms of *capital*, that 'govern its functioning in a durable way, determining the chances of success for practices' (1986: 242). Thus, individuals or groups are 'distributed … according to the overall volume of the capital they possess and … the relative weight of the different kinds of capital in the total set of their assets' (1991: 231). For this reason, a field is also an arena of struggles in which the occupants seek to preserve or change the status quo, that is, the current distribution of capital. The composition and volume of capital, 'like trumps in a game of cards, are powers which define the chances of profit in a given field' (1991: 230).

In Bourdieu's sociological theory, there are several types of capital. *Economic capital* comprises material goods and resources that can be quantified and thus have numerical values in the form of money. It can be accumulated, bequeathed, and invested. *Cultural capital* consists of knowledge, competencies, and other cultural resources that individuals come to possess. It can exist in one of three states: 'in the *embodied* state, i.e., in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the *objectified* state, in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries,

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instruments, machines, etc.) … and in the *institutionalised* state [i.e., in the form of qualifications, certificates, and credentials granted by authorised institutions]' (1986: 243). The acquisition and accumulation of cultural capital require socialisation and inculcation as well as investment of time and economic capital. Cultural capital 'derives a scarcity value' and 'yields profits of distinction for its owner' (1986: 245). *Social capital* 'is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a "credential" which entitles them to credit' (1986: 248–9). Simply put, social capital consists of resources afforded by social networks and group membership.

An important property of the various types of capital is their mutual convertibility. Thus, cultural capital in the form of academic qualifications can be cashed in for economic capital yielded by lucrative employment or social capital that a powerful position affords. For various types of capital to be current and to be deployed to procure profits, they must be acknowledged by players in the field as having convertible value and symbolic power in the form of prestige, status, and reputation. In other words, they need to be recognised as *symbolic capital*, 'the form assumed by these different kinds of capital when they are perceived and recognised as legitimate' (1991: 230). Symbolic capital then is 'another name for distinction' (p. 238). In this definition, *distinction* is nothing but capital recognised as legitimate. Importantly, holders of distinction, or symbolic capital, 'are able to impose it as the only legitimate one in the formal markets (the fashionable, educational, political and administrative markets)' (pp. 56–7) and thus secure 'a profit of distinction' (p. 55).

Bourdieu's constructs of capital, distinction, and field, together with their interrelationships, offer a sociological vocabulary for analysing, and a useful framework for understanding, the propagation and spread of Chinese-English bilingual education in China. Knowledge of English has become cultural capital *par excellence* and one of the most powerful forms of symbolic capital in the country. Access to such knowledge is inexorably intertwined with the availability and deployment of other types of capital, creates relations of power, and leads to both symbolic and material profits.

Driving forces behind the bilingual education craze

Several driving forces have been identified behind the craze for Chinese-English bilingual education in China. Hu (2008), for example, discusses two major driving forces: 1) an entrenched modernisation discourse that links national development to English proficiency and 2) a misleading academic discourse that embraces bilingual education unreflectively. This critical review focuses on another group of driving forces: the vested interests of stakeholders and major players in the field of English language provision.

In light of Bourdieu's theory, it is not difficult to see that Chinese-English bilingual education in China is a site of struggle where different stakeholders and players compete to maximise their various forms of capital and to redefine their relative positions in the economic, educational, and sociocultural markets. It can be argued that major promoters of Chinese-English bilingual education, such as local governments in Shanghai and Guangzhou, have been driven by a desire for a maximal profit of distinction and to maintain their positions as centres of power. These large urban centres were able to occupy their leading positions because of their economic power. However, a large crop of cities have been quickly catching up in the last three decades as a result of the central government's reform and opening-up policies. To distinguish themselves from the upstarts and to take the lion's share of the available capital (i.e., capital as conceptualised by Bourdieu), these older power centres are determined to join the rank of *international* metropolises rather than remain merely *domestic* centres, knowing that capital accrues to the most powerful (Bourdieu, 1991). An obvious strategy for them to retain their powerful positions is to exploit their existing advantages. One such advantage has been their much greater resources for ELT. Thus, as current holders of distinction, they have imposed English proficiency as a legitimate and prestigious form of symbolic capital. This strategy is clearly reflected in the discourse of the Shanghai Education Commission's action plan for the 21st century: 'To develop world-class

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foreign language teaching programs in Shanghai is a prerequisite for turning the municipality into a world-class international metropolis' (cited in Hu, 2002: 33). The upstarts, however, have refused to be mere onlookers.

The same psychology of distinction also underlies the strong enthusiasm for Chinese-English bilingual education showed by district educational departments and prestigious schools. Thus, the principal of a highly prestigious school in Shanghai gloated about his school's high quality bilingual programme on the one hand and insinuated at the low quality of startup programmes elsewhere (W. Lin, 2001). Other schools struggle to set up bilingual programmes because their interests are at stake. For example, the principal of another school in Shanghai knew that his school would remain on the periphery of the field if it did not take action to offer bilingual programmes (Pi, 2004). Similar vested interests sent universities vying to offer bilingual courses after the Higher Education Department of the Ministry of Education announced that the number of bilingual courses offered would be taken into account in the assessment of universities (Zheng, 2004). This led to 48 bilingual courses at Fudan University, 164 at Zhejiang University, and 216 at Wuhan University (W. Huang, 2004; Wang, 2006; Zheng, 2004).

Many teachers welcome Chinese-English bilingual education because it brings with it opportunity for them to procure more economic, cultural, and symbolic capital than they normally can hope for. These are typically junior teachers who have not established themselves and have to slog their way slowly and patiently up the professional and social hierarchy. Thanks to their possession of greater English proficiency than most of their more senior colleagues, bilingual education offers them a much sought-after opportunity to appreciate in value, to attain 'distinction' (Bourdieu, 1986) in the eyes of their superiors and colleagues, to be recognised, and to be better remunerated. All these are possible because to encourage teachers to teach bilingually, most schools offer various incentives: honorific rewards, promotions, salary increases, bonuses, subsidies, favourable formulae for workload calculation, sponsored training at home or abroad, grants for Chinese-English bilingual education research, and many other rewards (Li, 2006; Shen & Feng, 2005; Xu & Zhang, 2003; Zheng, Tian, & Li, 2006).

Parents and older students support Chinese-English bilingual education because English proficiency has become a most valorised form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986, 1991). It is a passport to a host of economic, social, educational, and professional opportunities and resources (Hu, 2005b; Li, 2006). For example, promotion for professionals depends crucially on passing a national English test. 'Failing in this test,' Y. J. Jiang (2003: 4) bemoans, 'even a Nobel Prize winner will be rejected for promotion to professor, senior researcher, chief physician, or even class-I teacher in a school.' Consequently, parents, especially those from a middle-class background, want their children to learn English well for an improved future (J. Lin, 2003). They are willing to pay higher school fees or donate generously in order to get their children into bilingual schools (A. W. Feng, 2005). Two incidents show how the signboard of bilingual education can work wonders for schools because of parents' eagerness to give their children a head start in English learning. A kindergarten in Beijing was on the brink of closure because of its small enrolment (Liu, 2002). To get out of the difficult situation, the kindergarten declared itself a bilingual education kindergarten and did some publicity work. Immediately parents queued to enroll their children in the kindergarten. In the second incident, 1,000 parents were queuing up in the sun outside of a little-known primary school in a small town for places in an 'experimental bilingual education class' (J. Lin, 2003). Some of them had rushed there the night before from large cities like Guangzhou and Shenzhen!

Finally, many other individuals, organisations, and businesses have self-interests in Chinese-English bilingual education because it is a gold mine. Indeed, English proficiency has become a very expensive commodity in China. According to Y. P. Zhang (2003), there were 3,000 English language tuition centres in Shanghai alone. In a tuition centre that had an enrolment of more than 2,300, a 48-hour course charged ¥7,300 (more than US$900). Another tuition centre charged ¥9,980 for a 6-month course. These were hefty amounts in a country whose GNP per capita was below US$1,000 in 2003. The New Oriental School in Beijing, the largest private English-teaching school in China, had an annual income of US$25 million in 2001 (Y. J. Jiang, 2003). In the craze for English, publishers also make big

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money. According to a report quoted in Niu and Wolff (2003: 30), 'of the 37 billion yuan annual book sales, ESL [English as a second language] takes up as much as 25% of market share'. The drive for Chinese-English bilingual education has also created a highly profitable market for reprinting textbooks published overseas. Given the huge economic profits, it is little wonder that various Chinese-English bilingual education services have been springing up everywhere (W. Lin, 2001; Nian et al., 2002).

Looming consequences of Chinese-English bilingual education

Because of the driving forces discussed above, there is no sign that the Chinese-English bilingual education craze will dissipate or even abate in the foreseeable future. The runaway expansion of English-medium programmes requires serious consideration of the consequences of bilingual education for China. What educational, economic, and sociocultural consequences has it already produced? What potential consequences may it give rise to? This section tries to answer these questions.

Educational consequences

Chinese-English bilingual education has been promoted ostensibly to make English learning more effective and to greatly raise students' English proficiency. Has this objective been attained by the extant bilingual programmes? At first sight, the few available formal evaluations suggest that this would be the case. However, as Hu's (2008) critical review makes clear, the studies suffered many of the problems plaguing evaluation research on bilingual education discussed in the literature (Greene, 1998; Swain, 1978; Willig, 1985). A close scrutiny of the studies raises doubts about the validity of their findings and suggests that the effectiveness of the costly bilingual education efforts fell far short of the claims.

What, then, are the chances for the goal of mass Chinese-English bilingualism to be achieved in the foreseeable future? A rational answer would be in the negative, given the poor English proficiency of most 'bilingual' teachers, the actual extent of English use in the classroom, the dubious quality of bilingual learning materials, the lack of curricular standards, the general lack of professional training in bilingual education among teachers, the lack of a threshold English proficiency in students to benefit from bilingual instruction, and so on. Research (e.g., Swain & Johnson, 1997) suggests that only under favourable conditions can the potential benefits of bilingual education be reaped, and a full additive bilingualism achieved. Cummins (1998), a strong advocate of bilingual education, has pointed out that students from French immersion programmes – programmes widely considered in China to be models of highly successful bilingual education – lag behind native speakers of the immersion language in spoken and written competence, especially in the grammar of the target language. If this is the case in Canada, it is more likely that Chinese students will develop half-baked bilingualism, or semilingualism, given China's limited resources for Chinese-English bilingual education.

It is also important to consider how Chinese-English bilingual education, now a synonym for quality education in China, may affect students' academic achievement in the long run. Although there is no report of systematic longitudinal research conducted to examine the effect on academic attainment of learning non-language subjects in English, there are already some indications that the use of English as a medium of instruction may very well affect students' academic achievement negatively. One of the few evaluation studies admits that bilingual instruction may 'injure subject learning' and calls for strategies to prevent this from happening (Shen, 2004). Many teachers have also complained that they have to reduce or simplify curricular content to accommodate bilingual instruction because their students lack the academic language competence to understand complex topics and engage in higher-order thinking in English (Pi, 2004; B. Z. Ye, 2002). Jin and Zhuang (2002) report that in one school after half a semester of bilingual instruction in mathematics, the teachers had to re-teach major topics in Chinese because the students had performed poorly in assessment. Such examples suggest that Chinese-English bilingual education is carried out at the expense of curricular content. As Liu (2002) observes, while bilingual education has been pushed forward as a way of correcting the evils of 'costly and ineffective' approaches to English language teaching, it has made the teaching of other school subjects costly and ineffective. In light of Hong Kong's unsuccessful English immersion education, Gu and Dong

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(2005) draw attention to potential problems that may result from a mass shift in the medium of instruction and call for great caution in promoting Chinese-English bilingual education in mainland China.

There are other real and potential consequences of great concern. Safty (1992) argues that in evaluating bilingual education programmes, it is important to examine wider educational issues such as school integration, teacher employment, and staff morale. There is every possibility that the craze for Chinese-English bilingual education will bring along, if it has not already done so, unwelcome consequences in these respects. To solve the problems of bilingual teacher shortages, many local governments and schools have redefined what it takes to be a qualified teacher. As A. W. Feng (2005: 540) points out, 'qualified educators from preschool up to tertiary levels now need to be bilinguals who can teach their subjects in a foreign language, particularly English'. In some schools, teachers are classified according to their ability to teach bilingually: those who are 'qualified', those who are 'sub-qualified', and those who are 'probationers' (Shen, 2004). While such policies create golden opportunities for the minority of teachers who possess the much sought-after English proficiency, they can pose serious threats to the majority who do not have such capital. The latter's prowess is threatened with depreciation because they cannot display it in English. Thus, they face losing their symbolic capital in the form of professional recognition and reputation (Bourdieu, 1986, 1991). Marginalisation and dislocation loom real. All this can have a demoralising effect on teachers who cannot hope to teach bilingually and cause resentment for those who occupy privileged and envied positions afforded by bilingual education. 'Divergence of interest and conflict within the group,' Safty (1992: 27) notes, 'will result if a segment is perceived as having acquired prestige and social mobility not previously available or accessible to the rest.'

Socioeconomic consequences

Massive promotion of Chinese-English bilingual education in China also has huge economic and financial consequences for the central government and local governments at various levels. It entails tremendous governmental spending because of its requirements for teacher training, teacher employment, instructional facilities, and learning materials development (X. Y. Zhao, 2004). Su (2003b) reports that between 2000 and 2003, Shanghai alone sent nearly 2,000 teachers to English-speaking countries for training and recruited about 1,600 expatriate teachers for its primary and secondary bilingual programmes. In addition, 400 teachers were sent to universities in Shanghai for training. This translated to governmental expenditure of millions of dollars. Bilingual education also means more expenditure on the part of schools. For example, Zhejiang University spent more than one million yuan in 2002 in setting up bilingual courses (W. Huang, 2004). Schools that are serious about bilingual education have to expend their often limited financial resources on school-based training for their bilingual teachers, on wage hikes, bonuses, and/or subsidies for their bilingual education teachers, on recruiting new staff for their bilingual programmes, and on equipment and other facilities needed to create an 'English environment' conducive to bilingual education (J. Lin, 2003). Even some advocates admit that bilingual education is expensive and suggest that it should be implemented on a restricted scale (Su, 2003a; Sun, 2002; Zhang & Liu, 2005). It is difficult to justify the huge spending on bilingual education, whose effectiveness in China has yet to be proved, when numerous schools in the vast rural areas of the country are poorly equipped for basic education and when the great majority of children in these underdeveloped areas do not go beyond a nine-year compulsory education (Hu, 2005a).

Even more disconcerting are some of the sociocultural consequences following from the drive for Chinese-English bilingual education. Even before Chinese-English bilingual education was officially promoted, English proficiency was already a commodity of strong exchange value (Bourdieu, 1986) and a gatekeeper of opportunities to procure various forms of capital, economic, cultural, and social (Z. J. Feng, 2002; Hu, 2005b). The Chinese-English bilingual education craze has further consolidated its status as symbolic capital, that is, as a most valorised form of cultural capital. Mastery of English has come to be regarded as a defining characteristic of talents in the 21st century (A. Y. Huang, 2005; Shen & Feng, 2005), an essential part of 'a perfect character' (Qian, 2003), and a sign of distinction. It is now a widespread belief that 'everything is low

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but English is high' (Xu, 2004). This belief is well illustrated by a news report of a group of children standing under the Oriental Pear, the television tower in Shanghai, and shouting in unison 'No English, no future!' (Y. J. Jiang, 2003: 3). Hu (2005b) provides a further example of how English has been perceived as synonymous with competitiveness and quality as well as how the demand for English has often been created artificially.

Conclusion

It is all too obvious that English has become the language of social and economic prestige and has the power to confer greater possibilities on those who can command it. On the face of it, the explosive growth of Chinese-English bilingual education seems to offer opportunity for a large segment of the Chinese society to acquire the scarce symbolic capital of English proficiency. However, this opportunity exists only in theory. Researchers (e.g., Valdés, 1997; Walsh, 1995; Yau, 1988) notice that it is generally students of higher socioeconomic levels that benefit most from successful bilingual education programmes in USA, Canada, and Hong Kong. Expectedly, there are also indications that Chinese-English bilingual education in China is becoming a service to the elite (Gill, 2004; P. Zhang, 2002). This is happening because, as Bourdieu (1986, 1991) points out, the educational system serves as a principal institution for the accumulation, production, distribution of cultural capital and for the reproduction of social inequality. Thus, at the school level, a minority of elite schools can take advantage of their much greater volume of various types of capital – greater financial resources, excellent infrastructure, wider social networks, well-trained staff, and high-calibre students – to offer bilingual programmes of a quality that the majority of schools with limited capital cannot hope to emulate. At the personal level, students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds can benefit more from bilingual programmes than those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds because of the much greater resources their families can invest in creating conditions of success for them (A. W. Feng, 2005). Thus, Chinese-English bilingual education not only perpetuates the existing unequal and hierarchical distribution of power and access to cultural and symbolic capital but is creating new forms of inequality and further differentiating the Chinese society. ■

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