
The statistics of English in China

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An analysis of the best available data from government sources

Introduction

In the mid-1980s, Crystal (1985) lamented that there were no reliable figures available for the number of learners to whom English is taught as a foreign language in many regions of the world, and that 'China has always been excluded from the statistical reviews, because of the shortage of information from inside the country' (Crystal, 1985: 9). More recently, Bolton (2008: 6) similarly notes that because of 'the absence of accurate language surveys' academics have to make educated guesses regarding the total number of those learning/known English. The figure of the total English learners/users in China has been estimated to be somewhere between 200 and 350 million (cf. Bolton, 2003: 48; Kachru, 1997; McArthur, 2003; Zhao & Campbell, 1995; Graddol, 2006: 95). Fortunately, a national language survey in China conducted at the turn of the century does provide some hard statistics on the number of English language learners/users in the world's most populous country, and also sheds some light on the realities of use of English and English proficiency among the Chinese people.

The proposal for this national survey entitled 'Survey of Language Situation in China' (hereafter 'the national survey') was approved at the No. 134 Meeting of the Premier Office of the State Council on January 6, 1997. The implementation of the survey was coordinated by eleven ministerial-level government organs: the Ministry of Education, the National Language Commission, the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, the Ministry of Public Security, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Culture, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television, the National Bureau of Statistics and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Part of the national survey findings were published by the Steering Group Office for Survey of Language Situation in China (hereafter the SGO) in 2006. The scale of this survey is the largest of its kind in the history of China and provides the most authoritative data

to date for an understanding of language situations in different parts of China (SGO, 2006: 299). The population studied comprised residents of Chinese nationality in Mainland China (viz. the Chinese territory excluding Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan).

The national survey, utilising a probability proportionate to size (PPS) sampling method, covered a total of 165,000 households from 1,063 municipalities, districts and counties. Given the 'very good' representativeness of the sample (SGO,



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2006: 325), its findings are believed to be generalisable to the whole population (for a technical report of the statistical calculations, see SGO, 2006: 327–38). Although the data collection of the survey had been planned to be completed within one year (i.e. in the year of 1999) (SGO, 2006: 343), due to the size of the task and the unpredictability of field study, the data collection phase turned out to consume over two years (viz. from September 1999 to March 2001) (SGO, 2006: 361). It took about five years for the majority of data to come out in a collated form (SGO, 2006), partially because of the outbreak of SARS in 2003, and partly because of the delay in the release of the fifth national census data needed for data collation (Wei and Su, 2011b). In 2007, the National Language Commission started to sponsor research projects on further analyses of the survey data (SGO, 2006: 357), and in-depth analyses of the results in journal papers are now beginning to appear (Wei & Su, 2008, 2011a, 2011b).

This article aims to inform international academia about this national survey, and to discuss results of the survey relevant to the learning and use of the English language in China. In the following sections, along with the national averages, data about Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin and Chongqing are provided, for two main reasons. First, each of these cities is a *zhixiashi*, namely a city with a status equivalent to a province and reporting direct to the central government, and a *zhixiashi* is usually more socio-economically homogeneous than a province. Second, the selected cities, especially Shanghai, are in the forefront of ELT reforms in China and often capture research attention (Hu, 2002; Zou & Zhang, 2011).

How many million English learners?

The national survey reveals that out of those with junior secondary education qualifications or above, 67.4% in China had studied at least one foreign language (SGO, 2006: 118). The fifth national census conducted in 2000 shows that some 48.7%¹ of the national population (totally approx. 1.27 billion) held junior secondary or above education qualifications, so some 32.86% of the national population, totalling 415.95 million, had studied one or more foreign languages (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2001). As Table 1 below shows, among the people with foreign-language learning experience in Mainland China, as many as 93.8% had studied English, 7.1% Russian, and 2.5% Japanese, while only 0.3% of respondents reported learning any other foreign language. That is to say, among 415.95 million Chinese foreign-language learners, 390.16 million had learnt English. English had

been studied by an overwhelming majority of foreign-language learners in different regions of China, with the proportion ranging from a low of 82.7% in Heilongjiang Province to a high of 98.7% in Hainan Province (SGO, 2006: 119).

In terms of the number of learners of foreign languages, English is the most popular foreign language in China, with Russian and Japanese ranking second and third respectively. Wei & Su (2008) suggest that for the foreseeable future, English will retain this status, while the relative status of Russian and Japanese in the country may change in favour of the learning of Japanese. Based on an analysis of a sub-sample from the Shanghai population, Wei & Su (2008) note that over 50% of Japanese learners fell within the below-35 age group, compared with fewer than 2% of Russian learners within this category, and suggest that amongst the younger generation in Shanghai, Japanese has overtaken Russian as the second most popular foreign language.

Frequency in the use of English

Partly because English has no official status in Mainland China, a low degree of English-using frequency among the Chinese is hardly surprising. According to Table 2, only 7.3% and 23.3% of the people that had studied English claimed to use English ‘often’ and ‘sometimes’ respectively. In other words, only 30% of the Chinese with English learning experience used this foreign language in their daily lives, although the corresponding percentages for the selected cities, ranging from 31% in Chongqing (for often/sometimes) to 46% in Tianjin, were higher than the national average.

Unfortunately, the English use data from the national survey, elicited with only one questionnaire item, did not provide information regarding various dimensions of ‘use’ (e.g. reading, listening, speaking, and writing). A better understanding of the use of English has yet to be achieved with more comprehensive data. Other studies, though based on non-random samples, provide some complementary information concerning how the Chinese use English. For instance, according to a survey involving 260 parents of primary and secondary students in Shanghai, 52% of the respondents did not know English, 24%–33% knew English but rarely used it when reading, watching TV, or listening to radio, and only 15%–24% used English in such activities on a weekly basis, despite the readily accessible online or printed materials in English and hours of English programming each day from radio stations and TV channels.

Table 1: Foreign languages learnt by respondents that had studied foreign languages

	English	French	Russian	Spanish	Arabic	Japanese	German	Others
Mainland China	93.8%	0.29%	7.07%	0.05%	0.13%	2.54%	0.13%	0.16%
Beijing	85.37%	1.44%	19.40%	0.23%	0.00%	5.68%	0.58%	0.25%
Shanghai	91.74%	0.62%	11.71%	0.07%	0.00%	6.13%	0.55%	0.14%
Tianjin	92.98%	1.40%	9.15%	0.11%	0.00%	5.13%	0.11%	0.02%
Chongqing	94.88%	0.33%	7.50%	0.13%	0.01%	2.29%	0.32%	0.2%

Source: SGO, 2006: 119

Furthermore, only 8.1%, 5.0% and 3.8% of the respondents used English at work at least once per day, per week and per month (Wei, 2010).

Spoken and reading proficiency in English

The English proficiency of the Chinese can also account for their limited use of this language reported above. Table 3 reveals that 1.8% of those that had studied English claimed to be able to act as interpreters on formal occasions, 3.53% to converse quite fluently, 15.61% to conduct daily conversations, 61.54% to say some greetings, and 17.54% to utter a few words; put differently, 21% reported possession of a spoken competence in English which allowed them to sustain a conversation beyond initial greetings whereas the corresponding percentages in the selected cities were generally higher.

In contrast, the reported reading proficiency of respondents was better than their spoken proficiency, perhaps as a result of the traditional teaching methodology that did not pay sufficient heed to listening and speaking and hence tended to produce ‘deaf-and-dumb’ English learners (Wei and Su, 2008). According to Table 4, among those respondents that had studied English, 3.26% claimed to be able to read English books and periodicals freely, 12.67% to read books and periodicals with the aid of dictionaries and other tools, 12.8% to understand simple reading passages, 43.23% to understand simple sentences, and 28.04% to recognise only a few English words. In other words, 72% of those that had learnt English could at least understand simple written sentences in English, and, if a more stringent criterion were adopted, it might be inferred that some 29% respondents possessed reasonable English reading proficiency. As with the results relating to spoken proficiency, the results for reading proficiency were generally higher in the selected cities than the national average (for further analysis, see Wei & Su, 2011b).

In the early 2000s, Crystal (2003: 68) observed that ‘no one knows the (English) proficiency realities in China’. While the data reported above shed some light on the English proficiency of Chinese people, they have all the usual limitations of self-reported information. To tackle the issue of the disparity between self-rated and actual proficiency, it was originally suggested that a sub-sample of respondents be selected and evaluated (Wang, 1999), although, because of insufficient resources, this suggestion was not eventually adopted. In future research, in order to investigate English proficiency more accurately, it will be desirable

Table 2: Frequency in the use of English among respondents who had studied English

	often	sometimes	seldom
Mainland China	7.3%	23.3%	69.4%
Beijing	15.79%	30.12%	54.09%
Shanghai	14.72%	19.8%	65.48%
Tianjin	8.24%	37.86%	53.9%
Chongqing	6.41%	24.66%	68.92%

Source: SGO, 2006: 122

Table 3: The self-rated proficiency in spoken English of respondents who had studied English

	Able to act as interpreters on formal occasions	Able to converse quite fluently	Able to conduct daily conversations	Able to say some greetings	Able to utter a few words
Mainland China	1.80%	3.53%	15.61%	61.54%	17.54%
Beijing	2.52%	6.25%	18.39%	59.92%	12.91%
Shanghai	2.03%	9.64%	14.72%	48.22%	25.38%
Tianjin	2.23%	8.19%	28.34%	50.43%	10.82%
Chongqing	0.59%	2.72%	18.49%	64.27%	13.93%

Source: SGO, 2006: 120

Table 4: The reported proficiency in reading English among those who had studied English

	Able to read books and periodicals freely	Able to read books and periodicals with the aid of dictionaries and other tools	Able to understand simple reading passages	Able to understand simple sentences	Able to recognise a few words
Mainland China	3.26%	12.67%	12.80%	43.23%	28.04%
Beijing	6.85%	21.89%	13.69%	31.59%	26.31%
Shanghai	7.61%	17.26%	12.69%	23.35%	39.09%
Tianjin	4.51%	21.81%	21.47%	29.15%	23.05%
Chongqing	4.37%	13.79%	11.62%	40.48%	29.74%

Source: SGO, 2006: 121

to adjust and/or complement self-reported data with more objective measures.

Conclusion

Graddol (2006: 15) notes that Asia, especially India and China, probably now holds the key to

the long-term future of English as a global language. In his latest book on English in India in the *English Next* series, Graddol (2010: 14) concludes that China may already have more people who speak English than India. It is hoped that the data provided above can assist international researchers in their assessment of English in

China. According to Liu & Hu (1999), China represents a fruitful context for researchers at home to evaluate research findings relating to second language acquisition in a non-Chinese context because it has the largest number of English learners in the world. Similarly, one may argue that China, with its 390 million learners of English in Mainland China alone, provides an excellent context for the study of English as a global language and research on world Englishes.

Two lines of inquiry deserve research priority. The first concerns the needs for different foreign languages in China (cf. Hu, 2011). In terms of numbers of learners, English is set to remain the first foreign language in China in the foreseeable future, and it seems clear that more research is needed in this field. The need for English and/or other foreign languages in China has yet to be systematically investigated to the extent that informed policy decisions regarding the educational provision of various foreign languages can be made. The second line of inquiry pertains to documenting foreign language information in a more comprehensive fashion. In addition to self-rated proficiency data, other data including more on smaller varieties, objective measures of proficiency and longitudinal data concerning each foreign language are needed (cf. Wen, Su & Jian, 2011). ■

Note

1 In our earlier paper (Wei & Su, 2008), we adopted the percentage of 58.64% provided in SGO (2006: 324). We believe the current percentage (48.72%) is more precise. Therefore, in this paper the figures based on this current percentage are an improved version.

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