

To Learn or Not to Learn: Ideology of English Among Chinese Social Media Users

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Abstract

During China's 2021 National People's Congress and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (NPC & CPPCC) sessions, Xu Jin, a CPPCC member, proposed the removal of English courses as a core subject in primary and middle schools. This proposal reignited the debate over the necessity of learning English in China, sparking heated discussions about its importance for Chinese individuals and the nation's development. This research collects and analyzes discourses responding to this proposal posted on Zhihu, a popular question-and-answer social media platform, to examine the ideologies concerning the English language among Chinese social media users. The findings reveal that opponents of Xu's proposal significantly outnumber its supporters. User views reflect significant concerns over the necessity of English learning, the impact of machine translation technology on English education, and the importance of English education for educational equality.

Key words: China; Social media users; English language; Ideology

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INTRODUCTION

English education in China has undergone various developmental stages, with the importance placed on it by authorities and the public fluctuating over time (Adamson, 2004). With the advent of the Reform and Opening-up policy, and as China's economic, trade, and cultural exchanges with the international community expanded, English has gradually assumed a significant position in China's education system (Gao, 2018). Although the enthusiasm for learning English appears to be persistent, discussions and reflections on English education in various schools and English examinations have always remained hot topics (Liu, Lin, and Wiley, 2016).

In recent years, some relatively radical views have been voiced by people from various walks of life through different channels, suggesting the abolition of English in the National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao) or even the removal of English from core or compulsory subject status. Notable figures who have made such proposals include Li Yang (Founder of Crazy English), Zhang Shuhua (CPPCC member in 2013), Li Guangyu (NPC representative in 2017), and Xu Jin (CPPCC member in 2021).

During China's 2021 National People's Congress and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (NPC & CPPCC) sessions, Xu Jin, a member of the CPPCC, called for a change in the current situation of English education, which is now mandatory and state-funded during the compulsory stages of education. He claimed that English teaching and learning take up too much of the students' time while yielding very limited practical results, and that the curriculum is not beneficial for all students. Moreover, Xu argued that artificial intelligence will eventually replace human translation, and reducing the time students spend on English would allow for the development of a more well-rounded education in primary and secondary schools.

Therefore, he suggested that during the compulsory education stage, foreign language courses, including English, should no longer be a core subject with the same status as Chinese and Mathematics. He proposed that the proportion of well-rounded education courses should be increased, while English (or any other foreign language) should not be mandatory in the National College Entrance Examination. Additionally, he recommended that students should be banned from taking various foreign language examinations administered by non-governmental organizations during the compulsory education stage.

Xu's proposal to remove the core subject status of English in compulsory education immediately triggered intense and widespread debate on various social media platforms, including Weibo and Zhihu. Zhihu, one of China's largest and most popular question-and-answer social media platforms, is similar to Quora in the English-speaking world. It allows users to ask questions on a wide range of topics and receive answers from the community. The platform boasts a diverse user base, including professionals, academics, students, and enthusiasts from various fields.

This study takes the responses of Zhihu users to the question "What do you think of Xu Jin's proposal of abolishing the core subject status of English in primary and secondary schools?" (<https://www.zhihu.com/question/447551986>) as the data for discourse analysis. It examines the attitudes and views of social media users towards the English language and English learning in current China, attempting to shed light on the English language ideologies prevalent among Chinese netizens.

LITERATURE REVIEW

With the deepening of globalization, English, as an international lingua franca, is becoming increasingly important. Whether in education, economic exchanges, cultural exchanges, or political interactions, English plays an indispensable role. However, it is common to notice that the attitudes of state authorities, language policy makers, education departments, and the public towards English learning, as well as the status of English in society, are not uniform and are subject to change. The ideologies associated with English are also a key focus of study in different countries and regions.

Pan (2011) conducted a comprehensive analysis of China's foreign language education policy, finding that English not only plays a positive role in individual and social development but also contributes to fostering and spreading patriotism and Chinese culture. Pan's study suggests that through English education, the foreign language proficiency of the populace can be improved, while their sense of identity and pride in their national culture can also be enhanced.

Park (2009), on the other hand, carried out an in-depth study of English ideologies in South Korea. He categorized South Korea's English ideologies into three main types: necessitation ideology, externalization ideology, and self-deprecation ideology. Those who hold the necessitation ideology believe that English has significant economic, cultural, and political value for South Korea and its people. Those who hold the externalization ideology view English as a foreign language that cannot harmoniously coexist with the identity of Korean nationals. Meanwhile, those with a self-deprecation attitude believe that, given South Korea's national conditions and other factors, Koreans are incapable of mastering English. Park's categorization is highly insightful and can serve as a theoretical framework for analyzing the complex English language ideologies in Asia.

Yan (2013, 2020), drawing on Park's categorization, conducted meta-discourse analyses on Chinese netizens' comments regarding Li Yang's proposal to abolish the English college entrance exam and Huang Xiaoming's English pronunciation. Yan's studies indicate that Chinese netizens also exhibit diverse attitudes towards English, with some acknowledging its importance and others holding critical views.

Examining the attitudes and ideologies towards English in different contexts helps to understand the complexities underlying English education policies. As Xu Jin's proposal sparks debates and discussions, it provides an excellent opportunity to analyze the public's attitudes towards English and English learning in China and the ideologies reflected in the discussions.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

On the question "How do you view Xu Jin's suggestion to abolish the status of English as a core subject in primary and secondary schools?", there were a total of 413 responses on Zhihu. This article selects the first 50 responses for analysis, examining each respondent's attitude toward Xu Jin's proposal (support, oppose, neutral) and categorizing their related reasons.

Among the 50 responses selected, 29 users explicitly opposed abolishing the status of English as a core subject in primary and secondary schools, accounting for 58%. There were 17 users who clearly supported abolishing the status of English as a core subject, making up 34%. Additionally, 4 users were neutral, believing that both support and opposition had valid points. This shows that among the Zhihu users answering this question, those who believe English is very important and explicitly oppose abolishing its status as a core subject far exceed those who support it.

All the discussions were around Xu Jin's rationale to remove the status of English as a core subject, such as

English teaching and learning taking students too much time with poor effectiveness, low possibilities of turning the learning into actual use, and the notion that machine translation can meet people's communication needs. The arguments provided by Zhihu users thus focused on one or more of these points.

DEBATE REGARDING NECESSITATION

According to Park's classification, many replies opposing Xu Jin's proposal exhibit the ideology of the necessity of learning English, believing that learning English is important for the development of the country's science, economy, and culture. Examples include¹:

Even if we don't do professional research, just in traveling and daily life, mastering Chinese and English will allow communication with half the planet's inhabitants. It is always a form of competitiveness and productivity.

I hope everyone can use English to broaden their horizons, engage in friendly exchanges with people outside, and understand the world while letting the world understand China as well.

Anyone who has seriously engaged in academic work should know the importance of English. Top-tier literature is in English, and translations often cannot adequately convey the meaning.

The first reply emphasizes the practical benefits of English proficiency in everyday scenarios such as traveling. It also underlines English's role as a key to global citizenship, enhancing individual competitiveness and productivity. The second reply underscores the cultural and intellectual enrichment that comes from learning English. By engaging in cross-cultural communication, individuals can gain a broader perspective on global issues and contribute to mutual understanding between nations. This point resonates well in the context of China's growing role on the world stage, as language skills can help bridge gaps and foster international friendships and collaborations. The third reply stresses the important role proficiency in English plays in scientific research and doubts the reliance on translated works in academic pursuits.

Many users suggested that whether English should be a core subject should not be determined by its practicality. For example:

It may be true that most of us won't use English in our daily lives. But following this logic, math could also be discarded...we could just learn basic arithmetic. Although we use Chinese every day, literature isn't necessary in our daily lives, especially classical literature, so why keep it?

If we don't need to learn English because we have machine

translation, then with the same logic, children wouldn't need to learn arithmetic because we have calculators.

These replies present a holistic and liberal educational ideology, advocating for the inclusion of diverse subjects not solely based on their immediate practical utility but for their broader developmental benefits.

On the other hand, some users claim that proficiency in English does help personal growth and development. For example:

The likelihood of high-paying jobs not requiring English is almost negligible.

...But the one subject that definitely shouldn't be cut is English because English is the only subject that can affect salary levels.

...Having more skills never hurts. Without learning English, one cannot see the world clearly.

These replies reflect a pragmatic and economic-oriented ideology towards education. They emphasize the tangible benefits of learning English, particularly its significant impact on career opportunities and earning potential. This viewpoint underscores the strategic importance of English in the global job market, where proficiency in the language is often a critical factor in securing high-paying positions. Additionally, the broader assertion that English enhances one's ability to engage with the world highlights its role beyond immediate economic benefits, framing it as an essential skill for global communication, professional growth, and personal development.

Many of the supportive replies to Xu Jin advocate for his viewpoint that learning English consumes too much time and offers low returns. For example:

The vast majority of people will never use English in their entire lifetime; Most Chinese people scarcely use English throughout their lives, and recognizing a couple of English phrases occasionally doesn't significantly impact their lives.

...Do we really need everyone to learn the local language for travel? Does every person need to translate academic papers? Clearly, this is an exaggeration. Yet, learning knowledge that is not going to be used takes up a considerable amount of time.

These replies reflect a pragmatic concern that the extensive time and effort devoted to learning English may not yield significant practical benefits for most individuals, and the necessity of mastering English is thus questioned.

The rapid development of machine translation has also become a hot topic in recent years, impacting the perceived necessity of learning foreign languages. This is also clearly reflected in the responses to Xu Jin's proposal. Some netizens argue that machine translation makes it even less necessary for everyone to learn English. For example:

...Using Google, Baidu, or even the built-in machine translation in Word is perfect; it translates instantly without any

¹ All comments from Zhihu users cited in this article were originally posted in Chinese. The author translated them into English.

communication barriers... Machine translation can meet the English needs of most people, so those not making a career out of English don't need to deliberately learn it professionally.

The English proficiency needed for Chinese tech workers is only up to the junior high school level, as papers translated with a web translator or translation software are even more accurate than those done by English majors graduating with the proficiency of a certificate holder of the Test for English Majors Band 8.²

However, more netizens have a cautious attitude toward machine translation, believing that learning English and having corresponding English skills remain very important. For instance:

The performance of translation software currently does not reach the level claimed by the Xu Jin, and users still need to have some discernment ability.

It is common to make embarrassing mistakes when relying solely on translation software.

If machines have completely surpassed humans, why don't companies or governments just put documents through translation tools instead of seeking human translators/proofreaders?

These opposing views reflect the long-time discussion on the value of human skills in the era of technological explosion. It is predictable that the discussion on the importance of foreign language learning will be even more heated with the appearance of generative AI tools.

DEBATE REGARDING SELF-DEPRECIATION

Supporters of Xu Jin's proposal also reflect the *self-deprecation ideology* proposed by Park, which posits that English education is bound to fail to attain its goals due to the teaching methods, national conditions, and student characteristics in current China. For example:

... Language is inherently meant for communication. However, many English courses (both in and out of school) are not communication-oriented but merely aimed at passing exams.

... Our current English teaching cannot continuously and realistically provide a language exchange environment, which is essential to learning a language... This level of comprehension is possessed by only a few during the compulsory education stage, and similarly, it's difficult to cultivate satisfactory abstract grammar skills in primary school... But a few lessons might suffice for high school students who already possess abstract logical thinking...

The problem is primary school students themselves may likely lack the motivation or interest. The current setup of foreign language courses in primary and secondary schools is a torment for both those who like and dislike the language.

2 An English test for fourth year English majors in China. Passing this test is usually viewed as a symbol of high English proficiency.

As for this, opponents of Xu Jin's proposal acknowledge the existing problems in English education but argue that these issues do not justify abolishing English as a main subject or the English component of the college entrance exam. For example:

We studied English courses yet our English proficiency is still poor. This is an issue of teaching methods and content selection, not subject choice.

Indeed, English education in the compulsory education stage requires reform, but the reform should aim at more effectively enabling students to acquire and communicate information in English, rather than denying its importance.

The above debate highlights significant dissatisfaction with China's current English education system, reflecting issues related to an exam-focused curriculum and inadequate communicative language environments. Their divergence lies in whether there is room and whether there are possibilities to improve the situation. Those who hold the self-deprecation view argue that these systemic flaws make achieving language proficiency impractical for many, suggesting a reevaluation of English's status as a core subject and its role in college entrance exams. On the other hand, opponents contend that while reform is necessary, it should focus on improving teaching methods and curricular content to better equip students with practical English communication skills, rather than diminishing the subject's importance. This tension underscores a broader discourse on balancing educational efficacy with practical language use in the context of globalization.

DEBATE REGARDING EDUCATIONAL EQUALITY

Regarding the debate on whether the importance of English in compulsory education should be reduced, many netizens, regardless of whether they support or oppose the idea, focus on the aspect of educational equality. Interestingly, no matter what measures are suggested, the other side believes that educational inequality will be intensified. Those opposing the removal of English as a core subject argue:

Removing English from the college entrance exam...will have no impact on the middle and upper classes, who can afford private tutors for their children, further widening the gap between their children and those from ordinary families, leading to more severe class stratification.

Some people indeed don't need English as a main subject in primary and secondary school... its removal won't significantly affect them...Families that cannot afford private English tutors, and whose children attend regular schools relying on public exams, are simply not considered.

The only result of removing English as a main subject is that English proficiency will once again become a marker of class

and a tool for reinforcing stratification. Families with resources will still have their children learn English through tutoring, foreign teachers, and study abroad, giving them access to more information, broader perspectives, and greater opportunities.

Originally, the state funds English education for all children, giving more people more choices and enhancing social mobility. Yet, some people don't appreciate it, treating it as a burden.

Those advocating for the removal of English as a main subject offer representative opinions, such as:

So let me ask again, is it more important for millions of children to have the right to attend high school, or for thousands of children who don't need extra English classes in primary school but plan to study abroad to secure their future?

English is the most unfair subject. Everyone uses the same textbooks (although many big cities use different ones, like Cambridge versions), but the teachers' levels vary widely, resulting in vastly different learning outcomes.

Even such minimal practicality cannot ensure fairness in selective exams, as English scores remain a critical weakness for students in impoverished areas, causing systemic inequality.

The discussion about whether to lower the importance of English in compulsory education brings to light significant concerns about educational fairness. Those who are against Xu Jin's proposal argue that removing English as a core subject could deepen socio-economic divides, as wealthier families will continue to have access to private tutors, thereby reinforcing social stratification through superior language skills. They believe maintaining English as a core subject helps level the playing field. Conversely, proponents of weakening the status of English contend that the current system is already inequitable, with quality discrepancies in teaching resources disproportionately affecting students from less affluent backgrounds. Both perspectives underscore the need for a fairer education system, but they differ fundamentally on the path to achieving it.

Some supporters of removing English as a core subject also mention the industrialization of English education, believing it is influenced by vested interests. They also highlight the over-commercialization of English education as a problem that perpetuates inequality. Representative responses include:

But if the current importance of English education is really reduced, it would affect countless livelihoods.

English education has become a hugely profitable industry... Breaking the existing monopoly will redirect funds and investors to other industries, like digging machine manufacturing, cooking, and programming.

It is noticeable that views reflecting the externalization ideology—that is, considering English a language of an Other that may pose threats to Chinese tradition and culture—are very rare among Zhihu users. This is possibly because Xu Jin did not stress this aspect in his argument.

His focus was more on pragmatic considerations, such as economic and educational benefits, thereby downplaying or neglecting the cultural and ideological concerns related to English learning. As a result, Zhihu users, influenced by his arguments, may be less inclined to view the issue through the lens of cultural harm.

CONCLUSION

In China, English education starts as early as elementary school and has a profound impact on students' academic and career development, as well as on the development of society as a whole. Reforms in English education always attract widespread public attention and discussion, and online comments serve as important material for studying current English language ideologies in China. Zhihu, as a well-known social media platform, gathers users from diverse backgrounds, making its discussion content significant for understanding public attitudes toward this issue.

Based on Park's classification of English language ideologies, this paper conducts a discourse analysis of Zhihu users' discussions regarding the proposal to cancel the primary subject status of English in elementary and secondary schools. The study explores the attitudes and views of netizens on the social media platform towards the English language and English learning. The findings indicate that a significantly larger proportion of netizens believe that English learning is very important and should remain a main, compulsory subject, compared to those opposing it. Regardless of their stance, their discussions reveal a strong focus on the necessity of English learning and its close relationship with social and personal development, as well as educational and social equity.

Although this study provides preliminary conclusions about the importance of English learning through the analysis of Zhihu users' discussions, some limitations still exist. First, the representativeness of Zhihu users might be incomplete. Most Zhihu users tend to be young, have higher educational backgrounds, and possess strong information-gathering capabilities, meaning their views may not fully represent the attitudes of all social strata. Second, this analysis is primarily based on users' public discussions, without employing other data collection methods such as in-depth interviews or surveys, which might result in insufficient depth and breadth of some perspectives.

To further improve the research, future studies should expand data sources, including discussions from other social media platforms and users from different regions, to obtain more comprehensive public opinions. Additionally, using in-depth interviews or survey methods to explore the views and attitudes of different groups towards English learning can provide stronger support for educational policy formulation.

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