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The importance of English in primary school education in China: perceptions of students

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Abstract

English has become a compulsory subject from Primary Three in China since 2003 and is gradually being introduced even earlier into the curriculum in many schools. This highlights the official importance of English in both primary school education and society. However, although a compulsory subject, there are fewer English lessons than for Chinese and mathematics, the other core subjects. This raises questions about the real status of English in primary school education and whether it is really perceived as important. This paper firstly examines China's current primary school English language education policy and discusses the implications for the primary school curriculum. Adopting a qualitative research design, which included six focus group interviews with students, the study investigated the attitudes of students toward the learning of English in the primary schools. The study was conducted in three different government schools with varied socio-economic status. Findings show the positive attitudes of children toward English education and their support for the early introduction of English; however, some feel that English is not as important as Chinese and mathematics. After reporting and discussing the different perspectives of the students, this paper concludes by considering the implications for English education in primary schools in China and other Asian countries.

Keywords: English education, Importance of English, Primary schools, Students, China

Introduction

As a multilingual country, China represents a complex linguistic society, but one in which English is promoted as the key to modernisation by policy makers. At different periods, English has been highly regarded in military, political and economic terms for nation-building; however, the language has also been seen as a threat to national integrity (Adamson 2002). Therefore, the history of English language education in China has been controversial since it was first introduced into the Chinese education system in 1902 (Gu 1996). In recent years, although English has been the priority foreign language in education as well as in society, the real status of English is under question. First, in schools, in terms of contact hours, it has fewer than the other core subjects. Second, English has no legal status in China (Gil and Adamson 2011). Previous studies on English education in Chinese schools have key emphasis on the language education

reforms (Hu 2012), language policy and planning (Kaplan et al. 2011; Li M. 2011), teaching pedagogy (Hu 2002), and teacher beliefs (Zheng 2015). Kaplan et al. (2011) re-inforces the importance of communities beyond the policy making, underlining the necessary research on the 'bottom-up' responses to English language education policies, however little research has been conducted. Chen (2011) investigates the attitudes of parents toward English education in Taiwanese primary schools and concludes that parents lobby the government to introduce English earlier and strongly advocate for consistency in English language policies. Since Taiwan shares similar socio-cultural concerns in English education in schools, Chen's study provides a good reference and example for further studies. However, her study needs expanding research subjects, namely, other key stakeholders. Students, as English language learners at school, are one of the most crucial stakeholder groups highly involving in the language education process. Hu (2003) examines the endeavours of students to learn English as a foreign language on the effect of socio-economic backgrounds. The regional differences have been identified on English proficiency, classroom behaviours, and language learning and use strategies. However, Hu's study focuses on the context of post-secondary students from China studying in Singapore. For these students, although their backgrounds vary, compared to those rural (migrant) students, they have received much support and resources to continue studying overseas. More importantly, reasons behind the trend of early exposure to English are yet to be investigated. The present study is an attempt to explore the importance of English for students in primary schools in China and how students from different Socio-Economic Status (SES) backgrounds differ in their attitudes toward English. It is crucial to understand young learners' beliefs and real needs in order to benefit the teaching and learning experiences in the current primary school context. In this paper, it aims to answer three questions:

1. Do students believe that English is important in primary school education?
2. Why do they think the way they do?
3. What are the potential implications?

The National English Curriculum

As China's economy was boosted due to open foreign policies and the use of English, the policy makers of the Ministry of Education (MOE) decided to include English as the first compulsory subject in the secondary school curriculum and tertiary level of study. In 2001, the MOE issued a document entitled 'Guidelines for Promoting English Language Instruction in Primary Schools' (MOE 2001) emphasising a new approach for using English for effective interpersonal communication. This document supported the early introduction of English language teaching in China (Gao 2009). Then, after two years of consultation and trials, a new 'student-centred' English language curriculum was announced for all primary and secondary schools (MOE 2003). Most recently, the latest version, 2011 English Language Curriculum Standard (MOE 2011) has been introduced, maintaining the main concept and design of the previous versions.

However, these updates have challenged all of the key stakeholders in the education process, especially learners in primary schools. Thus, students' concerns over learning

English, possibly influenced by their parents are worthy of study. This will facilitate an understanding of what they think of English and why they think the way they do.

The English subject in primary schools

Although English has been officially introduced as a compulsory subject in primary schools, the teaching hours in the curriculum are not comparable to Chinese and mathematics, as will be illustrated below. According to the National Curriculum, English, as one of the three core subjects, starts from Primary Three; however, local education departments and individual schools have flexibility to decide when to include English lessons. Many schools in metropolitan areas introduce English earlier, from Primary One, whilst for those in remote and rural areas, the introduction of English may have to be delayed due to inadequate teaching resources.

Generally speaking, where English starts from Primary Three, based on the National Curriculum in the version of 2011, the weekly lessons for three core subjects in primary schools are required as shown in Table 1 (table designed according to MOE 2011). From Primary Three to Six, students are offered three English lessons per week with 40 min per lesson. However, the weekly contact hours for Chinese and mathematics are greater over six years of study. Compared to the minor subjects, such as PE, science and music, English has a similar number of lessons (MOE 2001). English, based on hours taught, could therefore be regarded as a minor subject. However, the status of English is very contradictory, as in exams, Chinese, mathematics and English are always considered as three core subjects, particularly because they are worth the same marks.

Furthermore, there is a limited selection of English textbooks for local education departments and individual schools. All the available textbooks are designed in accordance with the National Curriculum. This raises an issue for those introducing English earlier than the curriculum requires, as there are no official textbooks to choose from for Primary One and Primary Two. As a result, the structure of English classes in both years varies. Some schools use other commercial materials. Others, for instance, foreign language(s) primary schools sponsored by local governments or community, are more flexible with the teaching content and aim to offer a more interactive approach in a form of task-based language instruction that is derived the spirit of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Littlewood 2007). The CLT approach has been adopted in the education developed areas in China recent years incorporating two perspectives of teaching on: 1) the communicative functions and formal properties of English to engage students in using the language in problem solving activities, namely, task-based language teaching (Hu 2005; Littlewood 2004); and 2) natural interaction in English according to the content-based English instruction (Hu 2003). Despite the National Curriculum has promoted the task-based English teaching since 2001, both approaches are

Table 1 Number of weekly lessons for three core subjects in primary schools

Core Subject	Primary One	Primary Two	Primary Three	Primary Four	Primary Five	Primary Six
English	N/A	N/A	3	3	3	3
Chinese	9	9	7	7	6	6
Mathematics	5	5	4	4	4	5
Total weekly lessons	14	14	14	14	13	14

commonly used in classroom pedagogy and of which one is actually used depending upon the materials, teachers and subject organisation. In short, schools are the decision-makers in terms of what to teach, and how to teach, in Primary One and Primary Two, but the syllabus is fixed from Primary Three.

Urban and rural differences: families, schools and children

The 'one child' policy, introduced in 1978 and officially applied in 1979, has changed the family and social structure in China (Chai 2012). The structure of the family has been transformed into a '4-2-1' model; four grandparents, two parents, and one child in each family (Shwalb et al. 2003). Within this structure, children in urban areas have become the centre of families and are carefully nurtured by their parents and other family members (Fong 2007). At the same time, since the 'open door' policy was implemented in China, social changes and economic reforms have substantially increased individual and family incomes in urban and city areas (Adams and Hannum 2007; Brown and Park 2002; Brown 2003; Hannum 2003; Hannum et al. 2009; Zhang Y. 2011). Therefore, this 'open door' policy has ensured urban parents can invest more in education for their children.

In contrast, there is a different story in rural areas of China. As people in rural areas still largely rely on agriculture, labour is the priority. Prior to the introduction of the 'one child' policy, most rural families believed that boys are the future for family living allowances and development, as boys are necessary for labour in agriculture. At the same time, a specific 'father-son' relationship following Confucian tradition, characterised by filial piety, is considered as the most important cultural heritage and value in rural families (Dong and Simon 2010). After the national implementation of the 'one child' policy, it is not surprising that most of the Chinese residents in rural settings have faced challenges, as a consequence of inadequate labour in rural communities. Children in rural family settings are still unable to access the same educational resources as those born in urban areas. In order to increase their family income and improve living conditions, millions of couples from rural areas seek work opportunities in cities, especially in the developed south-eastern regions. These people are migrant rural workers (农民工 *nong min gong*) who undertake labour and low-status jobs in cities to strive for a better life for their children and themselves. However, these rural workers have to register as rural residents working in cities with fundamentally different welfare systems, in employment, housing and access to schools. Therefore, the majority of the rural migrant workers leave their children in their hometowns to be cared for by the grandparents' generation or parents' generation (relatives and friends) (Zhou and Qing 2007). Some children may be fortunate enough to stay with their parents in cities; however, they have to look after themselves or be cared for by their older siblings. These children are called 'left-behind' children (Li 2002; Lv 2007).

Methodology

This study conducted six focus group interviews with students in three different government primary schools in Nanjing, Jiangsu Province. Each school had students from different socio-economic backgrounds. Expressions of interest to participate in the study were displayed on the school noticeboards. Only those who contacted the

researcher indicating a willingness to participate were considered for the focus group interviews. Two groups were formed from each school, with each group containing four to five students aged 9 to 12, studying from Primary Three to Six. Their participation was approved by their parents/guardians. The three different government primary schools were chosen based on the socio-economic profile of their students. School One is a prestigious and well-resourced government school, which represents the medium SES status of school in Nanjing. This school locates in a new area of the Nanjing West and the majority of students who live nearby and their parents are mostly middle class. School Two is a low SES status school, of which the majority of students have parents who are rural migrant workers. Students (approximately 95% of a total number) match the categorisation of 'left-behind' as mentioned earlier. School Two is also one of the only four government schools where accepts migrant children to study. This school, thus, represents a low SES school within the developed city. School Three is a unique government school providing performing arts and academic curriculum. This school only admits students who are talented in music, dancing or singing and also reside in Nanjing. The majority of students come from relatively high SES status families as their parents are generally well-educated and willing to invest extra time and effort for children in performing arts and academic study. It is important that the three schools represent three different styles and levels of SESs in Nanjing and China to provide an insightful understanding of students and generate reliable and generalised results for analysis. The interviews were semi-structured and designed to seek the attitudes and perceptions of students on the importance of English. Putonghua was the language utilised in the interviews. A thematic approach elicited themes identified from the interview data. The thematic analysis was based on the original data in Chinese. The procedures shown in Table 2 were adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006).

Four themes were identified, namely:

- (1) Early introduction of English
- (2) Importance of English and reasons for English education
- (3) Parental demand and expectations
- (4) Examinations and admission

Results

As the students were under 18, their names and details were protected and coded in the form capital letter S, underline and number. Table 3 shows the student reference number, age, interview group, year of primary school and which school they were studying at.

Theme 1: Early introduction of English

School One

The students from School One, the prestigious school, reported that they had early exposure to English. Table 4 shows the details of their early exposure. Only four students first started to learn English in school with the remaining six students being exposed to English much earlier from kindergarten. One was also enrolled in private tutoring.

Table 2 Procedures for thematic analysis

Procedures	Description of the process
1. Familiarising yourself with your data	Transcribing data, reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (each student group) and the entire data set (all groups of students; six groups), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Table 3 Information about the participating students from three schools (N = 29)

Student name	Age	Interview group	Year of primary	School
S1_S1	9	Group One, School One	3	School One
S1_S2	12		6	
S1_S3	12		6	
S1_S4	9		3	
S1_S5	9		3	
S1_S6	10	Group Two, School One	4	
S1_S7	10		4	
S1_S8	10		4	
S1_S9	11		5	
S1_S10	11		5	
S2_S1	10	Group One, School Two	4	School Two
S2_S2	10		4	
S2_S3	10		4	
S2_S4	10		4	
S2_S5	11	Group Two, School Two	5	
S2_S6	11		5	
S2_S7	11		5	
S2_S8	12		6	
S2_S9	12		6	
S3_S1	8	Group One, School Three	3	School Three
S3_S2	9		3	
S3_S3	8		3	
S3_S4	9		4	
S3_S5	10		4	
S3_S6	9	Group Two, School Three	3	
S3_S7	9		3	
S3_S8	12		6	
S3_S9	11		5	
S3_S10	12		6	

Table 4 Early exposure to English for School One students: time, age and settings ($N = 10$)

Student	Year of primary	Age	Time of first exposure to English	Setting
S1_S1	3	9	Primary One (6-7 years old)	School One
S1_S2	6	12	1 st year of Kindergarten (3-4 years old)	Kindergarten + extra private training classes
S1_S3	6	12	1 st year of Kindergarten (3-4 years old)	Kindergarten
S1_S4	3	9	1 st year of Kindergarten (3-4 years old)	Kindergarten
S1_S5	3	9	1 st year of Kindergarten (3-4 years old)	Kindergarten
S1_S6	4	10	Primary One (6-7 years old)	School One
S1_S7	4	10	2 years old	Home
S1_S8	4	10	Primary One (6-7 years old)	School One
S1_S9	5	11	Primary Three (9-10 years old)	School One
S1_S10	5	11	2 nd year of Kindergarten (4-5 years old)	Kindergarten

Although the students stressed that they were under pressure to learn English, they still preferred to start English early as English was beneficial to them (S1_S1, S1_S3, S1_S7 and S1_S10) and would be useful for their future (S1_S2). In addition, as English was still regarded as a minor subject in Primary One and Two, the students felt there was less pressure, despite the need for assessments and homework.

School Two

Five students interviewed reported that they had first encountered English when they were in their first year of government funded kindergarten. However, as their parents were rural migrant workers, the students might have had to move to different schools in different places dependent upon their parents' work commitments. Table 5 indicates the details about the first exposure of students to English, including the time and formal setting. The other four students started English at various points in their primary school education.

Their experience of early learning English varied: some felt it was very enjoyable while others regarded Primary One and Two English as "task completion" rather than a learning process.

School Three

School Three only offers English from Primary Three, following the National Curriculum. However, this was considered as a 'late' start in Nanjing and the students of School Three were typically enrolled in extra curricula English classes to make up for the 'later' learning of English at school. Table 6 demonstrates the details of their first exposure to English. With the exception of two students, the remaining eight students started English very early and much earlier than it was offered at school. Their first exposure to English happened in either kindergarten or private classes when they started in Primary One. They reported that they had benefited from learning English earlier as they could be more confident when the school started to offer English lessons from Primary Three.

Table 5 Early exposure to English for School Two students: time, age and settings (*N* = 9)

Student	Current year of primary	Current age	Time of first exposure to English	Setting
S2_S1	4	10	Kindergarten (3-5 years old)	Kindergarten
S2_S2				
S2_S3				
S2_S4				
S2_S5	5	11	Primary One (6-7 years old)	Primary School
S2_S6	5	11	Primary Three (9-10 years old)	Primary School
S2_S7	5	11	Primary Two (8-9 years old)	Primary School
S2_S8	6	12	Kindergarten (3-5 years old)	Kindergarten
S2_S9	6	12	Primary One (6-7 years old)	Primary School

Theme 2: Importance of English and reasons for English education

School One

In terms of reasons for English education, the students provided individual explanations, which also showed their perceptions of the importance of English. Their comments included:

S1_S1: learning English is for communication when travelling to other countries after I am grown-up. At the same time, others also ought to understand English.

S1_S2: I have nothing too much [to say]. I think I feel proud if I can learn the English language well. (S1_S2 further explained that ‘pride’ related to gaining an ‘advantage’ over peers.)

S1_S3: I think English is a world/international language. If [I] could learn it well, [I] would not have a problem to travel around most countries in the world.

S1_S4: [It is] because English will be very helpful if [I] study abroad in the future.

S1_S5: English is a useful language, if [I] am going to study overseas.

S1_S6: With regard to English, if some foreigners come to China and [I] want to make friends with them, it is important to have ability in speaking English.

Otherwise, [I] cannot communicate with them.

Table 6 Early exposure to English for School Three students: time, age and settings (*N* = 10)

Student	Current year of primary	Current age	Time of first exposure to English	Setting
S3_S1	3	8	Kindergarten (3-5/6 years old) or Primary One (6-7 years old)	Kindergarten or/and Private tutoring
S3_S2	3	9		
S3_S3	3	8		
S3_S4	4	9		
S3_S5	4	10		
S3_S6	3	9	1 st year of Kindergarten	Kindergarten and Private tutoring
S3_S7	3	9	Primary Three (8-9 years old)	School Three
S3_S8	6	12	Primary One (6-7 years old)	Private tutoring
S3_S9	5	11	3 rd year of Kindergarten	Private tutoring
S3_S10	6	12	Primary Three (8-9 years old)	School Three

S1_S7: It's rare that foreigners can speak Chinese (when you communicate with them). Since there's a cost to hire an interpreter, having an ability to speak English is important...to be able to teach foreigners Chinese, learning English is necessary.

S1_S8: This is because we can approach foreigners and communicate with them if we learn English well.

S1_S9: I also think English is considerably important. This is because, for example in the recent Youth Olympic Games (which took place in August 2014 in Nanjing), as some foreigners [will] come to Nanjing, we can [take this opportunity to] communicate with them.

S1_S10: [It is] very important. English is very useful when [I am] overseas in the future.

School Two

The same discussion was held in the focus groups of School Two; however, the group two students compared English with the other subjects. They ranked English among all the subjects in the school but none of them put English first. As shown in Table 7, English was considered less important than Chinese. However, from the perspectives of all the students in School Two, it remains a major subject in primary school education.

The students provided their reasons why they believed English was important.

S2_S1: My parents and I believe that English is very important for my future. If travelling overseas later on, [I] could communicate with foreigners in English. International communication is crucial, thus my parents encourage me to learn English well.

S2_S2: My parents believe that English is very important. [For me], [I think] Chinese, Mathematics and English are equally important.

S2_S3: I feel that English is quite important. However, English teachers sometimes are very strict and harsh. I understand that English teachers are trying to push us a bit more to study harder. But, I have to say that our homework is way too much – especially we have to repeatedly copy the same words at least ten times to prepare for upcoming exams (written exams).

S2_S4: I think English is important. If [I] don't know English, I will neither be able to graduate from the primary school nor be able to enter a better secondary school.

S2_S5: It is, [it should be] just interesting.

S2_S6: I think that I should say after I grow up, English is useful if travelling overseas.

S2_S7: Many people have started learning English nowadays. It is beneficial for finding a job, admission to better schools and qualifications.

Table 7 The importance of English in school education (N = 5; group two only)

Student	Current Year of primary	Most Important Subject	The Rank of English
S2_S5	5	Chinese	3
S2_S6	5	Science	2
S2_S7	5	Chinese and Mathematics	2
S2_S8	6	Chinese	2
S2_S9	6	Chinese	2

S2_S8: I want to just include all of what the other people have just mentioned.

S2_S9: I think it is fun and interesting.

School Three

The students of School Three did not mention individually how important English was for them. However, they reported that their learning of English was not based on their personal interests, but because their parents wanted them to learn it. The main purpose for them to learn English well was primarily because of examinations, parental expectations and admission to good secondary schools. Examples were provided by two students S3_S6 and S3_S7.

S3_S6: I am in Primary Three, but my English is still at the level of beginner. As my parents focus on my English (study) very much, I have much pressure in English. I did not know English until my mom taught me every day. At the school, although my English score is very good in exams, I still need to continue to work hard in learning English.

S3_S7: ...I like English. My parents also pay much attention to my English learning. I, at least, dictate one unit of words (from textbooks) every day.

Theme 3: Parental demand and expectations

School One

Several students of School One reported that they had attended private English tutoring since kindergarten. They repeatedly mentioned that their parents had enrolled them in those programs and that they expected them to achieve better results in school English exams and rank top in their class. Four of them said they were stressed from studying English after school.

S1_S1: I have to complete homework before relaxing.

S1_S2: I also have to finish all my homework, including those from school and extra classes, prior to relaxing.

S1_S3: I feel irritated [when I see] many books piled up on the desk. I hope to have a 20-minute break for every one hour of homework.

S1_S4: I have not been allowed to watch TV since Primary One. I have to complete all my homework prior to relaxing.

These comments highlighted the intensity of parental demand for English education for these primary school children, and also how much pressure these students experienced.

School Two

It was evident that the parents of nine students in School Two had been heavily involved in their English education. All the students interviewed came from rural migrant families, which represented 90 % of students in School Two. According to the students, the parental expectations in their English academic performance were very high. Table 8 summarises what their parents expected them to achieve in English tests. The majority were required to obtain at least 90 % in each English test. For the students in senior years, in addition to expected scores, they also had to ensure that they ranked in the

Table 8 Academic performance and parental expectations for School Two students ($N = 9$)

Student	Current Year of Primary	Expectation: Scores (max. 100)	Expectation: Rank
S2_S1	4	≥ 95 (easy) ≥ 90 (hard)	N/A
S2_S2	4	≥ 90	N/A
S2_S3	4	≥ 90	N/A
S2_S4	4	≥ 90	N/A
S2_S5	5	≥ 95	First
S2_S6	5	≥ 95	Top three
S2_S7	5	N/A	Top three
S2_S8	6	≥ 95	First
S2_S9	6	≥ 95	Top two

top three of their class in every test. Their parents thus expected continued high academic performance from them.

A comment agreed to by all nine students was, “if I cannot meet the target, I would have to face punishment” (S2_S6).

School Three

The students indicated that their parents expected them to reach a specific standard at school, such as being in the top three in each exam in the class (S3_S2) and above average in the class (S3_S4 and S3_S5). Some students were afraid of exams. For instance,

S3_S2: I [often] feel nervous in exams.

In order to meet their parental expectations, the students were enrolled in extra curricula English classes mainly once a week. Only student (S3_S7) dropped out of the class, because her parents were finally aware of the pressure she was under.

S3_S7: ... too many students in one class...and also too often a change of teachers... it was less fun compared to the school. My parents agreed with my wishes of not continuing to study there.

S3_S8: at the beginning, I felt it (English) was fun, which was because [we can] play games – very interesting. I have always been enrolled in [the extra curricula class]. [I] have been studying in several [English] classes.

S3_S9: I started to learn English outside the school from the second semester of Primary Three...I wanted to study because I already get along with classmates and teachers over there; however, I am also OK if I was not enrolled.

S3_S10: My parents believe the level of English taught in the school is too easy, hence they want to push my proficiency of English to a higher standard.

Theme 4: Examination and admission

For many families, studying in quality secondary schools means more opportunities for entry to better universities. Thus, the pressure of English learning is also directly related to the *Gaokao* (the Tertiary Entrance Examinations). In the *Gaokao*, English is one of the three core subjects to be tested and it is worth the same weight as Chinese and mathematics. However, a debate regarding decreasing the worth of marks in the English test has been ongoing. This debate has attracted much attention in the community, although the

potential reforms have yet to be publicly announced. The students interviewed mentioned the importance of English in relation to the examination system including the *Gaokao*.

School One

The students from School One discussed examinations and admission to good secondary schools and re-emphasised the parental demand in this process. They reported that their parents expected them to enter one of the top secondary schools in Nanjing, Nanjing Foreign Languages School (NFLS). They commented as follows:

S1_S1: My parents like comparing me with other children...however, I sourced this school (NFLS) online when I was in Primary One...as this school requires a high level of English proficiency, it is likely to have more opportunities for overseas study.

S1_S2: My mom asks me to go to [NFLS]...my mom told me that there was less homework in that school but there were more activities. My mom holds 98 % hope for me to get into NFLS.

S1_S6 and S1_S8: Simply [NFLS] a good school where high quality of English education is provided that can help find a good job.

S1_S7: The annual rate of junior high graduates from NFLS to high quality senior high is high; being able to get into a quality senior high means an opportunity for a high ranked university that also relates to jobs and my future life.

S1_S9: My mom told me studying in NFLS would offer more possibility to continue studies overseas.

S1_S10: My mom said the entrance tests for NFLS were in English, so getting to this school can improve my English academic performance.

Not surprisingly, eight students had heard about the possible reforms regarding English in the *Gaokao*. Their comments varied as follows:

S1_S1: I feel depressed. I feel I have learnt [English] in vain (if English in the *Gaokao* reformed).

S1_S2: I think the English reform relates more to students who are going to study overseas. However, if staying in China, English is not supposed to be tested.

S1_S3: I've heard about this news. I think it is most likely that English becomes a minor and does not require a high level of proficiency, which means that examinations should not be too difficult in the future.

S1_S4: I feel surprised.

S1_S5: I feel a bit happy. However, in my opinion learning English is not for exams, but to benefit ourselves.

S1_S6: If it (English) is not assessed [in the *Gaokao*], it cannot, eh, we cannot know how we have learnt.

S1_S7: If *Gaokao* does not test English, our level of English proficiency cannot be measured and that increases uncertainty [of our English communication skills] when travelling overseas. In addition, there's no doubt that English test is essential and part of the requirement of admissions to secondary schools and universities overseas, as it (English) is their native language.

S1_S10: I think English test is necessary, because English is a native language of overseas countries. However, if it is not tested, the equal status of Chinese, mathematics and English will no longer exist. [In other words], English will not be such an important subject any more.

Based on the comments from the students, it was evident that they recognised the importance of examination and of admission to quality secondary schools and universities, and that English was essential for them to achieve these goals and meet their parents' expectations.

School Two

The School Two students reported that English was essential for 'key' secondary school entrance examinations. They did mention NFLS; however, only one or two of them were willing to sit the entry test. There were two main reasons. First, the students were afraid of the admission standard required for NFLS (S2_S8 and S2_S9): as well as having a separate test for English, other subjects are also tested in English. Second, they wondered if their parents could provide financial support for them to study abroad (S2_S7) (as many NFLS graduates would go overseas) or whether they have considered this as an option (S2_S5). Three students had also started to think about the *Gaokao*.

S2_S1: I will reduce my focus on learning English in school if English is not included in the *Gaokao*.

S2_S8 and S2_S9: Removing a subject means less pressure from overall schooling, so it is good news if English will be removed from the *Gaokao*.

This reflects the dilemma surrounding the attitudes of students towards English education. On the one hand, they understand the usefulness of English and are in favour of English. On the other hand, this results in great pressure for the students, as English is a core subject and tested in each exam throughout 12 years of schooling.

School Three

The students of School Three expressed their ambition to be admitted to NFLS. They indicated that their extra curricula English classes were helping them prepare for the entrance exams of NFLS. All of them knew this school provided a high quality of English education as well as a conducive learning environment. Two of them noted that their parents wanted them to enter NFLS and the parents of one student considered overseas study but not necessarily through NFLS. However, one student, S3_S6 was an exception as his parents wanted him to follow the track of 'performing arts' not 'academic' study. This is because his parents wanted to keep options open by focusing equally on both routes.

S3_S6: My parents and grandfather prepare me for the national college of arts in stage performance or dancing major...they have never mentioned NFLS.

For the two students who planned to enter NFLS, their attitudes varied.

S3_S7: My parents want me to get into NFLS is to study overseas later.

S3_S9: I hope to study abroad but they (parents) just want me to study at NFLS without considering the option of overseas study afterwards.

One student reported that her parents suggested overseas study without emphasising NFLS.

S3_S8: I am not keen to study abroad (but her parents do suggest this)...I think the consequences of overseas study are extreme, to be either very successful, or failed completely...I don't really care which school is chosen for me – I will just follow whatever they decide.

More importantly, these students had some ideas about the *Gaokao*; they said their parents had already started to prepare them for it. They even followed the recent reform news with regard to English in the *Gaokao*.

S3_S1: I think English is still very important, as Chinese is not useful if [I am] going abroad in the future...to communicate with foreigners, the use of English is a must-have.

S3_S6: Regardless of its reforms, I want to, and also must learn it (English).

S3_S7: I will use my own money (gift money received from family and relatives in Chinese New Year) to enrol myself in English classes, if my parents do not approve this decision.

The students considered English as important for examinations, but to a greater extent, for their future development.

Discussion

The myth of 'the earlier the better' in English education

The National Curriculum (MOE 2003, 2011) requires the introduction of English at Primary Three. There is flexibility for school principals and local education departments for the 'earlier' introduction of English. In fact, many developed and wealthy regions and cities commonly introduce English from Primary One and Two. For instance, the sampling site, Nanjing, has many primary schools doing this. Two of the three participating schools, School One and School Two, also introduced English from Primary One; only School Three followed the Curriculum by not introducing English until Primary Three. Based on the results of the study, it was evident that the majority of students (19 out of 29, 65.5 %) encountered English earlier than the official introduction time. Among them, six were from School One and they had started from age three to four in kindergartens. Five students from School Two encountered English from when they were three years old in kindergarten, and all of the students from School Three started either from kindergarten or Primary One, much earlier than the official introduction in Primary Three. This result was not surprising as there has been a trend to introduce English earlier and earlier into the school curriculum across Asia (Kirkpatrick 2011). Although this belief is popular, it is still controversial as to whether and how the age factor affects second language acquisition (SLA) (Cenoz 2009). According to Cenoz and Lecumberri (1999), the early introduction of a second language may have advantages on ultimate achievement but not on the rate of acquisition. This means that the young learners may achieve certain linguistic benefits, such as pronunciation, but whether the early introduction maintains its advantages for the learners over a longer learning period is debatable. Also, school environments are not considered as natural learning settings (Cenoz 2009). Furthermore, in terms of

the results analysed, the SES difference is less likely to affect the common belief in 'the earlier the better' among the students and their families.

English is not 100 % important to every child

From the 'open door' policy to the successful bid for the 2008 Olympic Games and membership of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001 (Zhang and Adamson 2007), China has been ready to "introduce the world to China and to introduce China to the world" (Wen 2012), 84). English is clearly important for Chinese society. As discussed earlier, due to the power of English in developing the economy, in science and technology, the primary aim of English education for the Chinese Government was for nation building. However, questions have yet to be answered: whether English is a necessity for all children and whether children think that English is important for them. The students' attitudes toward English were various, but were largely positive and possibly influenced by their parents and the Socio-Economic Status (SES) of their families. As the two well-resourced primary schools, the students of School One and School Three highlighted the importance of English, though they also related this to the examination system. Interestingly, the School Two students whose parents were mainly rural migrant workers in Nanjing, ranked the useful subjects in schooling with the vast majority of them prioritising Chinese. English, on the other hand, was not even ranked in the top three. It is evident that the SES difference impacts on the attitudes of students and their parents. This is because of the disparities between urban and rural families. In comparison with School One and Three, most parents in School Two had been working hard to maintain education investment in their children; however, English may become somehow extras from the main purpose of education. It is certainly important, but, with conditions along with learning the language. As some students of School Two reported, they believed English was important overall "if travelling overseas" (S2_S6 and S2_S1). However, in reality, due to limited finance and resources, it is potentially impossible for these students to travel overseas. Additionally, some students could easily stop their learning of English if it is no longer included in the *Gaokao* (S2_S1, S2_S8 and S2_S9). This is very different from those in School One and Three where they believed English was necessary to learn despite policy changes in the curriculum and *Gaokao*. It implies that the actual needs of students and contextual situations have not been properly assessed by policy makers before introducing the English language policy in primary schools. This results in the difficult or impossible policy implementation in schools across the whole nation. The young learners are told to have to learn English, which unfortunately no need of using this language becomes common, particularly appearing in the low SES schools and families.

Parental demand for English is extremely high

In the tradition of Chinese education, parents play a dominant role in the process of their children's schooling (Hu 2008). Although this present study did not include parent participants, the perceptions of the parents can be indirectly identified from the responses of their children. Chinese parents generally want to invest in their children's education, not surprisingly as Confucian philosophy prioritises education in society (Wei 2011). Since the introduction of the 'one-child' policy in the 1980s, the structure

of the Chinese family has been changed to a '4-2-1' model (Shwalb et al. 2003). Under this model, the single child has become dominant and more important in a family unit, a trend particularly pronounced in urban areas (Fong 2007). In terms of English education, though parents may not have enough knowledge to help their children, there is no doubt that they find alternative ways to assist their children in learning. One approach is private tutoring, which is very popular across the nation. The results demonstrated that an aim of enrolling in private tutoring was to achieve better academic performance in exams. The students reported their fear and pressure associated with exams, as their parents expected very high performance from them, not only scores but also expected them to be among the top of the class. Regardless of the SES of parents, their high expectations and demand for English education for their children were the same.

Examination-driven English education relates to the admission to school and tertiary levels

In spite of the task-based teaching approach and the focus of communication in the latest National Curriculum (MOE 2011), the reality of classroom teaching still follows the traditional mode: teacher-centred and examination-driven. Fundamentally, it is because the examination system has never been updated and focuses only on written performance across the 12 years of school education. This has resulted in different problems: first, the students have suffered great pressure from learning English; second, this pressure has been due to the fierce competition to be admitted to quality secondary schools and universities. Overall, the students in this study were acutely aware of the importance of examinations. English education in China is still examination-driven. At the same time, students generally reported that they believed English was important for them, not just for examinations, but to a greater extent, for their personal development. The view was shared generally by students from School One and School Three, while the students in School Two did not express the same. This can refer to the SES difference as the students and their parents from School Two have to overcome more difficulties and challenges; as for majority of them, education has been the way to success and examination is the fairest solution to these students from low SES migrant rural families.

Conclusion

This study has elicited and discussed the attitudes and perceptions of primary school students on the importance of English in primary school education in Nanjing, China. Regardless of the socio-economic differences among the three participating schools, four key issues emerged with regard to the importance of English. To begin with, 'the earlier the better' approach is generally supported by students across the three schools. Second, the status of English is lower than the other two core subjects, Chinese and mathematics, mainly due to there being fewer teaching hours. However, the students still recognised that English was important for examinations. Parental demand and expectations for English education are high. According to all of the students, their parents expect them to achieve the best possible scores and rankings among peers in their English learning in primary schools. The students and their parents have, from the very

early years of primary school, also started to consider their admission to ‘key’ secondary schools, such as NFLS, in order to enter better universities based on performance in the *Gaokao*. Many students are enrolled in private English tutoring after school, which adds on even more pressure to them. With respect to the varying socio-economic backgrounds, students’ attitudes and perceptions differ mainly in the reasons of learning English. It is very important to understand that students from low SES backgrounds have to face much more challenges on the education pathways. Their strong belief in ‘learning English primarily for examinations and admissions’ implies the “significant differences” ((Cortazzi and Jin 1996), 61) among urban and rural in China’s language teaching developments. In short, the students’ opinions are worthy of note and should be acknowledged by the policy makers and the Ministry of Education (MOE).

The present study has answered the three initial questions: whether students believe that English is important in primary school education; why do they think the way they do; and what are the potential implications. It is clear that the implications for English education in primary schools in China are significant, ‘the earlier the better’ in English education has continued, which primarily is due to fierce competition in exams and admission to secondary schools. The same situation can also be examined in other Asian countries, but whether English is important to all is still in question. Therefore, the actual needs of students have to be explored and considered prior to the introduction of new policies. Their voices are important and indicate the different needs due to different family backgrounds, education resources and school environments. It is unfair to make a ‘top-down’ decision without understanding the individuals of the community and society and different contextual situations in big nations, for instance, China. Further studies are required to consider perceptions of other key stakeholders in order to provide an insightful understanding of societal needs and other concerns about English education in primary schools.

Competing interests

The author declares that she has no competing interests.

Authors’ contributions

GQ developed the research idea, collected and analysed the data, and drafted the manuscript.

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