

Why 175 Million Chinese Are Studying English

By Jonathan Adams and Max Hirsch, Newsweek International

Aug. 20-27, 2007 issue - China's recent rise has brought with it a new conventional wisdom: that everyone must learn Mandarin. But no one's told South Korea yet. Though Chinese is increasingly popular here, the nation seems to be suffering a profound case of English fever. South Korea now boasts at least 10 "English villages"—mock Western communities complete with post offices, pharmacies and the like where kids can practice their language skills. An entire English-only town is due to open on Cheju Island in 2010. And one Internet-based company here even offers English courses for fetuses in the womb.

Next door, mighty China itself seems to have caught the English bug. Beijing guesses that more than 40 million non-native speakers now study Mandarin worldwide. But that pales next to the number of those learning English. In China alone, some 175 million people are now studying English in the formal education system. And an estimated 2 billion people will be studying it by 2010, according to a British Council report last year. "The impression is that 'Mandarin fever' is rampant and spreading, but a close look shows this is an exaggeration," says Stephen Krashen, a second-language-acquisition expert at the University of Southern California. "The dominance of English as an international language is growing."

To be sure, Mandarin has become increasingly useful, particularly in Asian business circles. And its utility will rise as China's clout grows. But English is—and, for the foreseeable future, seems set to remain—essential for those hoping to compete in the globalized world. From Brussels to Beijing, English is now the common language spoken in multinational firms, top universities and the scientific community. A recent survey by the San Francisco-based firm GlobalEnglish found that 91 percent of employees at multinationals in Latin America, Europe and Asia believed English was "critical" or "important" to their current positions. And the consulting group McKinsey warned China in 2005 that fewer than 10 percent of its college graduates were suitable for employment at multinationals—primarily because they couldn't speak English. "Any nation that ignores English learning does so at its peril," says James Oladejo, an expert in language acquisition at Taiwan's National Kaohsiung Normal University.

In recognition of this fact, numerous countries are starting to teach their kids English at ever younger ages. According to the British Council, the prevailing model is to ensure that students gain basic English proficiency in primary school and then use it

as a language of study in secondary school. This model is much evident in Europe; Eurydice (an EU education unit) reports that more than 90 percent of primary-school students in Austria and Norway study English, as do more than 80 percent in Spain. In South America, Colombia and Chile have implemented ambitious programs to boost English skills. And the Philippines mandated in 2003 that English be the medium of instruction for math and science beginning in the third grade, and for all subjects in secondary school.

But no country compares with China, which has the world's largest number of English students. In 2001, Beijing ordered that English classes start in the third grade, rather than in high school as before. In big cities like Beijing and Shanghai, such instruction now begins in grade one. And many Chinese parents try to accelerate the process by sticking their kids into English *buxiban*—cram schools—as early as possible. New Oriental, one company that runs such programs, says it alone has enrolled 4 million students, including 1 million last year. In total, China's English-language training market is now estimated to be worth \$2.6 billion annually and to be growing at some 12 percent a year.

Driving that growth is China's rising standard of living. Middle-class parents feel intense social pressure to enroll their offspring in *buxiban* so they can keep pace with their peers. And the long-term benefits of English acquisition are widely touted. According to New Oriental, medium proficiency in English now gives a Chinese child an almost 25 percent salary boost when he or she enters the working world; advanced English provides a more than 70 percent boost. Of course, companies like New Oriental have a vested interest in making such arguments, but many outside experts echo them. Asians who work at multinationals but speak broken English are likely to bump up against a linguistic "glass ceiling" and be passed over for promotions. Wei Yun, a professor of English as a second language at China's Suzhou University, points to two former students who are now software engineers. The one who passed a key English exam is making double the salary of the one who failed.

The Educational Testing Service (ETS)—the U.S.-based organization that administers the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and similar exams—says that Eastern European countries and Persian Gulf states like Qatar have also become big growth markets. But they are dwarfed by the hot economies of Asia. In Vietnam, the region's newest

“tiger,” an estimated 90 percent of all foreign-language learners now study English.

In South Korea, “the hunger for Western—and specifically U.S.—education seems to have no limits,” says Bhaskar Pant, head of the ETS’s Asia-Pacific operations. Many Korean universities now require all students to pass the TOEFL in order to graduate, and many employers won’t hire applicants unless they’re similarly qualified—even for jobs where English is not routinely used. More and more South Korean families now pack their young ones off to the United States for expensive English-only summer camps. According to Marilyn Plumlee, the president of Korea TESOL (an organization for English-language teachers), interest in Chinese at Hankuk University where she teaches has spiked, but English majors still outnumber Chinese majors by more than 2 to 1. In fact, China’s rise has actually increased the desire to learn English among the country’s neighbors, as they seek to maintain a competitive edge. Take Taiwan; 3 million students now study English in its schools, compared with roughly 1 million in 2001. Taiwan is also following South Korea’s lead by opening an “English village.”

In Japan, Mandarin has surged past French and German to become the second most popular foreign language taught in the country. But Chinese still ranks a distant second to English, which is increasing its lead. According to government statistics, in 2005 there were some 3.6 million high-school students studying English, and just 22,000 studying Chinese. And last year Tokyo created 100 “super

English high schools,” where core classes are taught exclusively in English.

Farther afield, Mandarin also trails far behind English in influence. David Graddol, the author of last year’s British Council report, notes that Chinese is growing more popular in Europe. But he’s skeptical it will ever weaken English’s hold over the EU. “English has become the lingua franca of Europe ... it’s the language of integration.” The statistics are telling: from 2002 to 2005, the numbers of German primary-school students studying English soared from 16 percent to 47 percent, and in Greece they’ve doubled, from 44 percent to nearly 90 percent.

Of course, none of this guarantees that English’s current importance will last forever. Graddol, for one, predicts that after peaking at 2 billion in 2010, the number of English students worldwide will begin to drop sharply. Eventually, Mandarin could replace it. But the operative word is “eventually.” “Chinese will not challenge English any time soon,” says David Nunan, a Hong Kong-based expert on teaching English as a second language. “English will remain the dominant global language for at least the next 50 years because of its pre-eminent position as the language of science, technology, tourism, entertainment and the media.”

If study patterns are any guide, even many Chinese agree. More and more of them are heading to English classes wherever they can find them: voting with their feet in the great language election.

With Nick Hayes in London
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