

"English Fever" in China Has Reached a Watershed

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Recently, several provinces in China have proposed an initiative for reforming the national college entrance examination (*gaokao*)—reducing the importance of the English-language part of the examination as one of the targets. This move has subsequently aroused extensive debate in public, with both support and oppose views. Some supporters argue that English teaching and learning in primary and secondary schools cost too much of students' time, thus decreasing the time spent on Chinese language, and therefore agree with lowering the English emphasis in the *gaokao*. Others argue that English is still important for students to read Western scientific books and journals, participate in international economic activities and exchanges, and thus oppose lowering the score of that language in *gaokao*. The Jiangsu province was the first to declare withdrawing the English test from the *gaokao*. The English test will be given twice a year and its score will be in the form of letter grades. Beijing has also now invited public comments on its

reform plan, which proposes that the full mark of the English test will be reduced from 150 to 100 points and that of Chinese test will be increased from 150 to 180 points. Why does the English score fall while the Chinese score rises? Has "English fever" in China reached a watershed?

WHY DOES THE GAOKAO REFORM START WITH ENGLISH?

Concerning the fact that English-language education in China is time consuming and low efficiency, reforming the English exam can easily be understood and supported by both the public individuals and educators. English education in China is now becoming more test oriented, which urgently requires reform. Chinese students have invested the most time and efforts in learning English; however, it has not yielded positive results. Many students have been learning English for years, constantly memorizing words and doing exercises, but so far have only managed to learn so-called "broken English."

Now, far too few students can handle cross-cultural communication in a fluent and concise manner. One of the aims of the *gaokao* reform in Beijing is to dilute the selection function of the English test and restore the function of English as a tool of communication. Therefore, as revealed in the reform plan, Beijing decided to increase the proportion of the listening comprehension in the English text in *gaokao*; and the content of the test will be limited to basic knowledge and ability. Another important issue that deserves our attention is the

government's attitude to deliver the power of organizing examination to third-party social institutions. If the reform plan is implemented nationally, the English part of *gaokao* will be sponsored by social institutions like the Educational Testing Service in the United States, twice a year in 2016. Students will then be able to participate in up to six times the exam in a high school three-year period, which greatly reduces the pressure of taking the exam and hopefully leads students to learn English for the communicative use rather than just purely for getting a higher score on an examination.

WILL THE IMPORTANCE OF ENGLISH FALL WHILE THAT OF CHINESE RISES?

Over the years, Chinese educators have been concerned that English has too much importance attached to education and that people are sometimes overlooking the importance of studying Chinese. Given this worry, along with decreasing the score of the English exam, the Beijing *gaokao* reform is designed to increase the score of Chinese by 30 points, to emphasize the fundamental role of Chinese as a mother tongue and basic core subject. The great attention paid to Chinese language and culture by the policymaker is evidently expressed in the reform. Compared with English, it is more demanding for teachers to guide students to appreciate the charm of Chinese culture, as students and parents have been more devoted about learning English than Chinese. As *gaokao* is the baton of primary and secondary education, policymakers wisely use it to guide

teaching and learning. We believe by adjusting the weights of English and Chinese, students and teachers can be guided to focus more on the learning of Chinese to a large extent.

"ENGLISH FEVER" AT A WATERSHED IN CHINA

The reform concerning English in *gaokao* to some extent also implies that "English fever" has reached a watershed in China. Since the *gaokao* was restored in the late 1970s, the importance of English scores in *gaokao* has been gradually raised from 30, 100 to 150 points, becoming one of the three-core subjects together with mathematics and Chinese. Correspondingly, a wave of "English fever" swept the nation, and English training has become a huge industry. Now, China has the world's largest English-speaking population.

In recent years, with the further build-up of China's comprehensive national strength, China has been increasing trade activities with nations around the world. Following the development of the nation, there are more students around the world who choose to learn Chinese, including President Obama's daughters and Vice President Biden's granddaughter. After a recent visit to China, British Prime Minister David Cameron indicated that schools in the United Kingdom should not teach kids so much French and German, but should rather focus on Chinese. To accommodate this need, strengthening cultural exchanges with foreign countries and trying to propagate Chinese language have

become an increasingly pressing issue. “Chinese fever” abroad also urges education authorities to reflect and adjust language and culture education policies, so as to enhance the education of Chinese language and culture, and to a certain extent cool the excessive “English fever” at home.