



Marginalizing English in high-stakes tests: an attitudinal study in China

Qing Shao

The University of Hong Kong

Paul Stapleton

The Education University of Hong Kong

Bioprofiles:

Qing Shao is a research student at the Faculty of Education, the University of Hong Kong. Address: Room 668, 6/F, Meng Wah Complex, The University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam, Hong Kong.

Paul Stapleton is an associate professor at the Department of English Language Education, The Education University of Hong Kong.

Address: Room 36, 1/F, Block 4, The Education University of Hong Kong, Taipo, Hong Kong.

Abstract

This paper highlights a series of measures deemphasizing English in high-stakes tests that recently have been, or shortly will be implemented in various parts of mainland China. It is contended here that these measures may be leading towards the marginalization of English via negative washback into secondary-school classrooms and students' self-learning behavior. This paper thus investigates the attitudes of secondary-school students from three locales: Beijing, Shenzhen and Zaozhuang. Findings revealed that negative washback arising from an increasing de-emphasis of English in high-stakes tests could lead to a reduction of students' short-term instrumental motivation. Additionally, although students from Beijing collectively gave priority to long-term instrumental motivation, the first concern of their counterparts in other regions tended to be their performance on approaching high-stakes tests, and their attitudes towards learning English was notably weaker than Beijing students.

Keywords: China; foreign language education policies; marginalization of English; L2 motivation; washback

Introduction

Since the modernization of China in the late 1970s, English teaching and learning has been increasingly prioritized at all levels of education there (Cheng & Curtis, 2010). To ensure the quality of English language education and to promote pedagogical reform, proficiency aspects of the language have been incorporated into a series of high-stakes examinations by the Ministry of Education (MOE), including the senior-secondary school enrollment test (*Zhongkao*), the university matriculation test (*Gaokao*¹), the postgraduate entrance examination, and the College English Test (CET).

Holding the role of a default gatekeeper for individual development, English is believed to be critical for one's upward and outward mobility. After the establishment of the state policy of reform and opening up, the significance of nationwide proficiency in English has never been questioned (Hu, 2007). However, a trend to de-emphasize it in formal education has been growing since 2005 -- efforts to play down the role of English have been implemented by at least six provinces, namely Zhejiang, Hebei, Gansu, Shaanxi, Guizhou and Jilin, when they announced pilot plans to abandon the English listening section in *Gaokao*. Although listening was restored in most of the pilot provinces due to strong opposition from parents and teachers (Tao, 2007), other assessment adjustments marginalizing English have been, or soon will be implemented in China. Table 1 shows in chronological order some of the efforts to minimize English. In the meantime, no significant instances of English being augmented in secondary-level education during the same period (2008-2014) were found.

Table 1*Efforts to minimize English*

From	Region	Test	Adjustment
2008	Jiangsu	<i>Gaokao</i>	Reduction of marks from 150 to 120
2008	Sichuan	<i>Gaokao</i>	Cancellation of listening section
2014	Harbin	<i>Zhongkao</i>	Reduction of marks from 120 to 100; Cancellation of listening section
2014	Shandong	<i>Gaokao</i>	Cancellation of listening section
2014	Linyi	<i>Zhongkao</i>	Reduction of marks from 120 to 100
2014	Suqian	<i>Zhongkao</i>	Reduction of marks from 150 to 100
2014	Zhangye	<i>Zhongkao</i>	Increasing marks of all other subjects except English
2014	Shanxi	<i>Gaokao</i>	De-emphasis of listening section (accounting for no marks, for universities' non-compulsory reference only)
2014	Beijing	<i>Gaokao</i>	Reduction of vocabulary demand (from 3480 to approximately 3080)
2014	Beijing	<i>Zhongkao</i>	Reduction of the lower limit of words in the composition task (from at least 60 words to at least 50 words)
2015	Heilongjiang	<i>Gaokao</i>	De-emphasis of listening section (accounting for no marks, for universities' non-compulsory reference only)
2015	Beijing	<i>Gaokao</i>	Further reduction of vocabulary demand (from 3080 to approximately more than 2000)
2016	Beijing	<i>Zhongkao</i>	Reduction of marks from 120 to 100
2016	Beijing	<i>Gaokao</i>	Reduction of marks from 150 to 100

Note. While the university matriculation test (*Gaokao*) is undertaken on a provincial basis, the senior-secondary enrollment test (*Zhongkao*) adopts city-based administration. Harbin, Linyi, Suqian and Zhangye are cities of Heilongjiang, Shandong, Jiangsu and Gansu Provinces, respectively.

The move to reduce the role of English in tests also has the support of high profile individuals. In September 2013, Wang Xuming, the former spokesperson of the MOE, appealed to the public and the government on his microblog to eliminate English teaching in all primary schools and add Chinese Culture Studies as a new subject. In his words, children should be “emancipated” from English, and Chinese [the language] should be “saved” (Modern Express, 2013, p. F12). One month later, the Municipal Education Commission of Beijing announced that the share of English in *Gaokao* would be reduced from 150 marks to 100 (out of a total of 750) from 2016 onwards, while the proportion allotted to Chinese would increase from 150 to 180 marks, almost double that of English (CNN, 2014).

Furthermore, in a document titled “Several major decisions to comprehensively deepen the reform made by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China” (CCCPC, 2013), the supreme authorities announced that China would explore ways to implement “society-level” tests to replace the English section in *Gaokao*.

According to Cheng and Curtis (2010, p. 10), language tests in China can be categorized into three types: 1) society-level tests (e.g. TOEFL and IELTS); 2) university-level tests (e.g. CET); and 3) school-level tests (e.g., the English section in *Gaokao*). Society-level tests are open to public test-takers and are not compulsory. The aforementioned document, released in November 2013 after the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CCCPC, revealed a plan from the highest power to further diminish the English section in *Gaokao*. With this change as a backdrop, the present study investigates the attitudes of students in three locales soon to be affected.

Literature review

Washback effects and impacts of high-stakes tests

Having a natural influence on teaching and learning within the classroom, the education system and the wider society (Xiao, Sharpling, & Liu, 2011), high-stakes tests are often manipulated to achieve the desired washback effects in teaching and learning (Gu, 2014). In a study examining the washback effects of the English section in *Gaokao*, Qi (2005; 2007) concluded that the intended washback, which was meant to serve as a lever of pedagogical reform “to produce a shift from formal linguistic knowledge to practice and use of the language in secondary schools” (2007, p.145), was dwarfed by an unintended washback coming in the

form of the test-orientedness in classroom teaching due to the selective nature of *Gaokao*. A similar observation was made by Matoush and Fu (2012, p. 114) who noted that Chinese families are fully aware of the fact that they live “in a country with a large population and comparatively few opportunities”, in which tests are used to filter out the majority. Accordingly, both teaching and learning practices specifically aimed at the attainment of top scores in high-stakes tests has become a common practice. As a major subject in formal education, English has become a subject for which the strongest motivation to learn is simply to score high on various tests. Thus, the apparent recent moves to de-emphasize English in high-stakes tests could be perceived as an effort to marginalize English in formal education at the secondary level in China.

Testing researchers have made a distinction between test impact and washback (Hamp-Lyons, 1997; McNamara, 2000). Impact refers to the influence of language tests on the overall educational arrangement and society, while washback refers more to the influence on classroom practice of teachers and students (Cheng & Curtis, 2012). Thus, the “impact” may have an interdisciplinary effect, while the washback tends to occur within one subject. This distinction itself suggests that tests have both macro and micro influences, and both could apply to the present perceived efforts to marginalize English in high-stakes tests in China. Since other subjects also occupy sections in *Zhongkao* and *Gaokao*, there may be strategic decisions about how much effort students should allot to each subject to ensure they get a high overall grade. Now that the significance of the English section has decreased in some regions, or will soon do so, the negative washback could lead schools to reduce the classroom teaching time of English or fine-tune instruction, in order to leave more time for other subjects, such as Chinese, that have had their importance in high-stakes tests increase. It is also possible that students will invest their time in subjects whose grade allotments are higher, and concurrently their motivation for English learning may decrease.

The motivation to learn English in China

The most cited theoretical concept on second language learning motivation is Gardner’s (1985; 2004; 2010) distinction between integrative and instrumental orientation. Integrative orientation refers to “a positive affective disposition towards the L2 community and a desire to achieve language proficiency in order to be a member of, and to develop a sense of belonging to,

the L2 community” (Yu, 2013, p. 730), while instrumental orientation “reflects the belief that language learning will bring concrete benefits” (Mitchell, Myles, & Marsden, 2013, p. 23).

This conventional distinction has been questioned. Ushioda and Dörnyei (2009) claim that due to the global spread of English, the motivation to learn English may not necessarily be linked to a specific language community that is usually perceived as the owners of English. Since English is now the *de facto* world lingua franca, it has come to be considered a generic skill. Today, the motivation for learning English in China, thus, may have little to do with the attitude towards a particular group of speakers, but rather may be connected to the life-long development of individuals, that is, a long-term instrumental orientation, or may be driven by the high-stakes tests, i.e., a short-term instrumental orientation.

Research on Chinese students’ L2 motivation has featured prominently in the literature. For example, Pan and Block (2011) noted that instrumental motivation for English was common among students and teachers when they investigated Chinese people’s attitudes towards English during the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008 at a time when China’s integration into the world reached a new peak. While most of their respondents agreed that national proficiency of English would benefit China, many believed that the focus of teaching and learning English was still test-oriented. Thus, there appear to be countervailing forces at work: the strong role of test washback on English learning in China (Qi, 2005; Cheng & Qi, 2006), which is now being influenced by a possible marginalization of English, and the instrumental L2 motivation propelled by the established prestige of English.

While concerns about test policy and washback from assessment appear in high-level exchanges between government officials and educationalists, it is the students who are impacted most by such forces. Few studies, however, have investigated the attitudes of students who are positioned in the middle between their L2 motivation based on sociolinguistic realities and the potential negative washback caused by the newly implemented assessment policies. Hence, our research question emerged from the present situation:

How do secondary-school students under different assessment policies in three disparate locales view English, English learning and testing? Will their motivation to learn English be affected by potential negative washback and why?

Method

Schools and Informants

Three typical (i.e., neither elite nor low-performing) junior-secondary schools in Beijing, Shenzhen and Zaozhuang were selected as research sites. The first two are major cities, while Zaozhuang is a less developed city in Shandong Province. The participants, who were in the second year of secondary schools from three distinct cities, would face different assessment policies in their most crucial high-stakes examination, *Gaokao*, four years later. Beijing, Shandong and Guangdong have been given the autonomy to design their own exam papers for *Gaokao* and they are adopting different policies with regard to the English section. As Table 1 shows, the test policies announced when this study was conducted were different among the three regions. For students in Beijing, they thought the section on English would be significantly reduced by the time they sit the test in 2018, while for students in Zaozhuang, listening will be cancelled from the English section. As for the students in Shenzhen, the English section may not change.

The participants from the three schools, randomly invited by their teachers to participate, were all about 14 years old. We assume that all participants were at a similar level of mental maturity.

Instrument 1: the questionnaire

Following the completion of standard ethical procedures, a questionnaire was used as the principal instrument. Adopting a five-point Likert-scale, the first part of the questionnaire was designed to collect respondents' reactions towards 20 evaluative statements.

Similar to previous attitudinal studies (e.g., Lai, 2005), a distinction between integrative and instrumental motivation was built into the questionnaire items. However, emphasis was placed on instrumental motivation in that items related to instrumental motivation were further divided into short-term (high-stakes test-related) and life-long (individual development-related) orientations. Gardner's (2004) attitude/motivation test battery (AMTB) was referred to when developing questionnaire items, but major adaptations were made to address the research

questions. As a result, items 1, 6, 7, 8, 16, 17 and 19 focused on integrative motivation; items 4, 5, 9, 12, 14, 18 and 20 elicited long-term instrumental motivation; and items 2, 3, 10, 11, 13, 15 concerned short-term instrumental motivation.

Nine of the 20 items were worded negatively and presented together with the eleven positive statements in random order to “avoid a response set in which the respondents mark only one side of a rating scale” (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010, p. 43) and to reduce the acquiescence bias, i.e., “the tendency for people to agree with sentences when they are unsure or ambivalent” (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010, p. 9). When calculating the reliability and reporting the findings of the questionnaire survey, responses to all negatively worded items were reversed.

The second part of the questionnaire consisted of multiple-choice items concerning personal particulars, together with an open-ended question inquiring about the assessment policy of the English section in high-stakes tests, and why the respondents held such opinions.

Questionnaires, originally written in simplified Chinese, were administered by collaborative teachers to the classes they were teaching. Participants were asked to read the relevant news about the testing policy, take home the questionnaires and hand them in the following day. Confidentiality and anonymity were emphasized and promised. Consent was obtained from all participants and their parents. Additionally, the students had the option to leave their names and contact information on the questionnaires.

Four hundred and twenty-two questionnaires were collected from the three schools including 200 from Shenzhen, 110 from Beijing and 112 from Zaozhuang.

Instrument 2: the interview

Thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author in Mandarin (*Putonghua*) via online video chat as a follow-up to provide deeper views of students and to triangulate the findings obtained from the questionnaire data. From each school, ten interviewees who left contact information on the questionnaire were randomly selected. All interviews (ranging from 30 to 55 minutes) were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants and their parents, and later transcribed. They were told that pseudonyms would be used if the interview data were to be used.

Before the interview, the returned questionnaires of each individual respondent were analyzed. Apart from the general questions, the interview was highly individualized based on

each participant's previous response in the questionnaire survey. Some interviews began by asking why the student responded to specific items in a particular way, especially when strong emotions were expressed, or when seemingly contradictory responses were given. Other questions addressing personal attitudes towards English learning and the present or upcoming assessment policies were also asked.

Data analysis

The first author cleaned the initial questionnaire data. Returned questionnaires with obviously dubious responses (e.g., strongly agreeing with all items) were excluded, leaving 179 valid questionnaires from Shenzhen, 100 from Beijing and 95 from Zaozhuang. Cronbach's alphas for the sub-scales of the three region-specific questionnaires (see Table 2) showed sufficient reliability (>0.70).

Table 2

Cronbach's alphas for sub-scales

Cities	Integrative	Long-term instrumental	Short-term instrumental
Beijing (<i>n</i> =100)	0.765	0.760	0.850
Shenzhen (<i>n</i> =179)	0.711	0.801	0.835
Zaozhuang (<i>n</i> =95)	0.824	0.844	0.872

The five-point scale was symmetrically digitalized as shown in Table 3. The nine negatively worded statements were reversely coded when processing. For each item, students were thought to be in favor of English if the mean was a positive number and vice versa. Based on this coding method, means and standard deviations were calculated on each item.

Table 3*Coding spectrum for the Likert-scale items*

Strongly Agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
2	1	0	-1	-2
Strongly in favor of English	In favor of English	Neutral	Against English	Strongly against English

To code the data of the open-ended question, the first author was joined by a graduate student. Three detailed practice sessions were held as pre-coding training. Questionnaires were divided into three groups according to the different regions. The principles and processes of inductive analysis were followed including initial coding and second-level coding (Dörnyei, 2007). First, the first author and grad student independently read all responses line by line to create several initial categories, i.e., preliminary codes or themes, the names of which were key words selected from authentic data. When differences emerged between the coders, they created broader categories over three rounds of discussions. Finally, they read all the responses again and classified them into mutually agreed categories. The inter-rater correlation coefficients of the three regional groups coded independently were calculated and each was greater than 0.8. For the few responses where disagreements remained, the first author's codes were used.

Since the interviewees were minors and some of them could not articulate the answers to the interview questions in a logical, organized manner, the first author went through the interview transcripts three times and identified themes by key words in order to capture ideas that were “important about the data in relation to the research question” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83). According to the taxonomy of findings in the questionnaire, the key words used by participants themselves in the interview were selected, examined and categorized.

Useful excerpts were then translated into English by the first author. The original transcripts plus the translations were sent to a professional translator to proofread. Excerpts of interviews

according to the emergent themes are selectively presented to provide additional depth to the underlying attitudes behind the questionnaire responses.

Findings

Findings that address how participants view English, English learning and testing and their attitudinal reactions to the potential negative washback are reported in this section. To understand the respondents better, an overview of the profiles of students from the three schools is introduced first. Table 4 shows the respondents' demographic details.

Table 4*Profiles and learning behavior of the respondents*

Particulars	Beijing (n=100)	Shenzhen (n=179)	Zaozhuang (n=95)
Sex	M:47 F:53	M:85 F:94	M:48 F:47
Future plans to study or live abroad	Yes: 22 No: 9 Not sure: 69	Yes: 39 No: 18 Not sure: 122	Yes: 19 No: 5 Not sure: 71
Attending fee-paying English language classes outside of school	Yes: 66 No: 34	Yes: 64 No: 115	Yes: 46 No: 49
Type of fee-paying classes	Advanced: 47 Remedial: 19	Advanced: 23 Remedial: 41	Advanced: 7 Remedial: 39
Future plans to sit international English tests, such as IELTS or TOEFL	Yes: 38 No: 62	Yes: 70 No: 109	Yes: 24 No: 71
Self-evaluation of English level in class	Below: 11 Average: 36 Above: 53	Below: 72 Average: 50 Above: 57	Below:30 Average: 30 Above:35

Generally positive attitudes towards English and English learning

According to the coding spectrum (Table 3), students' attitudes were calculated in terms of the mean on every item. Table 5 shows the generally supportive attitudes of the students (overall mean values >0).

Table 5

Responses to the twenty evaluative statements

Item	Beijing (n=100)		Shenzhen (n=179)		Zaozhuang (n=95)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1	1.07	1.027	0.7	1.016	0.67	1.076
2R	0.83	1.190	0.21	1.188	0.38	1.322
3R	1.15	1.095	0.69	0.913	0.79	1.287
4R	1.04	1.127	0.7	0.934	0.66	1.182
5	1.11	1.014	0.8	0.912	0.94	1.090
6	0.79	1.166	0.96	1.027	0.71	1.184
7R	1.08	1.143	0.69	1.071	0.29	1.352
8	0.76	1.065	0.77	0.995	0.78	0.947
9	1.05	1.009	1.12	0.856	1.20	0.894
10R	0.91	1.102	0.54	1.098	0.26	1.475
11R	0.89	1.188	0.36	1.13	0.45	1.335
12	1.09	0.975	1.01	0.89	0.95	1.025
13R	0.8	1.064	-0.2	1.083	-0.15	1.101

14	0.78	1.001	0.53	0.895	0.6	1.215
15R	1.06	0.941	0.51	1.062	0.27	1.364
16	1.06	0.973	1.07	0.884	0.74	1.132
17	0.48	1.259	0.48	1.191	-0.11	1.387
18	1.57	0.820	1.58	0.626	1.67	0.691
19R	0.73	1.190	0.34	1.131	0.35	1.507
20	0.55	1.048	0.79	0.946	0.47	1.351
Overall	0.96	n/a	0.71	n/a	0.63	n/a
Integrative	0.85		0.72		0.49	
Long-term Instr.	1.03		0.93		0.92	
Short-term Instr.	0.94		0.35		0.33	

Note. Item numbers with an ‘R’ stand for negatively worded items that were reversely coded before calculating.

Each individual item generated a positive mean in Beijing. Only one slightly negative mean (Item 13) was found in Shenzhen (-0.2). Similarly, in Zaozhuang only two items (Item 13 and 17) were slightly negative (-0.15 and -0.11).

The responses to half of the statements were calculated as more than 1 in Beijing, suggesting that the motivation for English learning was strong.

Long-term instrumental motivation

Long-term instrumental motivation proved to be the strongest kind. Almost all mean values generated on the following long-term instrumental items were more than 1.

Item 18 in Table 6 recorded the highest means and the lowest standard deviations in all the three cities, clearly indicating that most students hoped their English could reach an advanced level in the future. Most students from all three cities gave positive responses to this statement. Since it begins with “I hope someday,” implying long-term instrumental goals after schooling, students were able to express their attitudes free from the consideration of high-stakes tests. This suggested that without policy interference, advanced English tended to be collectively desired among respondents.

Table 6

I hope someday my English could be so proficient as to be capable of reading books, viewing websites and watching TV shows in English with ease.

Item 18	Mean	SD	2	1	0	-1	-2
Beijing (<i>n</i> =100)	1.57	0.820	72.0%	19.0%	3.0%	6.0%	0%
Shenzhen (<i>n</i> =179)	1.58	0.626	63.1%	32.4%	3.9%	0%	0.6%
Zaozhuang (<i>n</i> =95)	1.67	0.691	74.7%	22.1%	0%	2.1%	1.1%

Note. 2: strongly agree; -2: strongly disagree. Response distributions were presented as percentages. Similarly hereinafter.

Table 7*Good English would make me more competitive if I worked in an international company.*

Item 9	Mean	SD	2	1	0	-1	-2
Beijing (n=100)	1.05	1.065	38.0%	41.0%	12.0%	6.0%	3.0%
Shenzhen (n=179)	1.12	0.856	35.2%	48.0%	11.2%	4.5%	1.1%
Zaozhuang (n=95)	1.20	0.894	41.0%	45.3%	9.5%	1.1%	3.1%

Table 8*I think a bilingual résumé looks more attractive than a résumé in Chinese only.*

Item 12	Mean	SD	2	1	0	-1	-2
Beijing (n=100)	1.09	0.975	38.0%	43.0%	13.0%	2.0%	4.0%
Shenzhen (n=179)	1.01	0.890	28.5%	51.9%	14.0%	2.8%	2.8%
Zaozhuang (n=95)	0.95	1.025	31.9%	44.1%	16.7%	2.1%	5.2%

Respondents also collectively realized the importance of English. Tables 7 and 8 show that about 80% of the students believed English is important to one's career. In the interviews, some students held similar beliefs; Jane was typical among Beijing respondents in expressing her strong long-term instrumental motivation:

“My Mom's company uses English to interview potential employees. She [her mother] said that fluent English is a prerequisite to get a decent job in big companies... I practice my oral English with Mom at home all the time.”

Comparatively, integrative orientation (towards the English-speaking community) was also generally positive, but weaker in terms of mean values. For example, on Item 1, 6, 8 and 16 (see Table 5 and Appendix 1), students associated fluent spoken English with a well-educated background. They admired those whose English is good; they wanted English-speaking friends; and thought bilingual signs would make their cities more modernized and internationalized.

Short-term instrumental motivation

Item 13 in Table 9, which elicited participants' future actions as a response to the assessment policies, was worded differently for each of the three schools because of the different approaching policies facing students in the three cities. Revealing students' anticipated reactions to the changing assessment policies, it produced negative means in both Shenzhen and

Zaozhuang, where a very similar distribution of responses in terms of percentages was found. In both Shenzhen and Zaozhuang, almost half of the students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Conversely, only 16% of the Beijing students would reduce their time for learning English and a 70% would still spend their time as usual.

Table 9

Beijing: I will reduce my time devoted to English accordingly since its significance in Gaokao and Zhongkao will be heavily marginalized in and after 2016.

Shenzhen: I would reduce my time devoted to English accordingly if its significance in Gaokao and Zhongkao were de-emphasized.

Zaozhuang: I will reduce my time devoted to English accordingly since it has been de-emphasized in Gaokao from 2014 onwards.

Item 13R	Mean	SD	2	1	0	-1	-2
Beijing (<i>n</i> =100)	0.80	1.064	2.0%	14.0%	14.0%	42%	28.0%
Shenzhen (<i>n</i> =179)	-0.20	1.083	8.9%	39.7%	17.9%	29.6%	3.9%
Zaozhuang (<i>n</i> =95)	-0.15	1.101	8.4%	39.0%	15.8%	32.6%	4.2%

Note. 2: strongly agree; -2: strongly disagree. Response distributions were presented as percentages. This is a negatively worded item (with an 'R' attached to the item number), but for a better presentation the raw data here are NOT reversely coded. Thus, -2 simply means the respondents strongly disagreed with the statement. Similarly hereinafter.

In the hypothetical situation raised in Item 11 (Table 10), Zaozhuang and Shenzhen respondents produced low means as well, indicating that they could be affected more by washback and test impact. A notable phenomenon is that 41% of the Beijing respondents strongly disagreed with the statement, indicating a firm commitment to English beyond the tests. This same commitment could not be found among Shenzhen and Zaozhuang students. Additionally, for Item 10 in Table 11, most Beijing students (72%) believed they were learning English for their own good, while students in Shenzhen and Zaozhuang seemed relatively unconvinced. The mean value generated in Beijing (0.91) was almost double that of Shenzhen (0.54) and tripled that of Zaozhuang (0.26).

Table 10

I would not study English if it were removed from all high-stakes tests including Zhongkao, Gaokao, CET and so forth.

Item 11R	Mean	SD	2	1	0	-1	-2
Beijing (n=100)	0.89	1.188	5.0%	9.0%	19%	26%	41%
Shenzhen (n=179)	0.36	1.130	8.4%	12.3%	28.5%	36.3%	14.5%
Zaozhuang (n=95)	0.45	1.335	13.7%	11.4%	13.7%	37.9%	23.3%

Table 11

I am not studying English for myself. I am learning it to satisfy the requirements from teachers, parents and the high-stakes tests.

Item 10R	Mean	SD	2	1	0	-1	-2
Beijing (n=100)	0.91	1.102	3.0%	11.0%	14.0%	36.0%	36.0%
Shenzhen (n=179)	0.54	1.098	3.4%	18.4%	18.4%	40.8%	19.0%
Zaozhuang (n=95)	0.26	1.475	19.0%	14.7%	13.7%	26.3%	26.3%

Regional differences in terms of short-term instrumental motivation were also identified in the interviews. Although most Shenzhen and Zaozhuang students claimed to prioritize subjects according to their significance in high-stakes tests, some Beijing students stated that tests should not be the only concern. Some also mentioned their parents' disagreement regarding the reduction of 50 marks from the English section in *Gaokao* – in some Beijing parents' eyes, English was still a key to success in the future.

Sociolinguistic issues

With regard to the former MOE spokesperson's appeal presented above, three items meant to invoke a sense of nationalist sentiment and construed to be supporting arguments for further marginalizing English in formal education were included. Item 7 in Table 12 was meant to inquire how nationalist sentiment would affect integrative motivation. More than 30% of respondents in Zaozhuang supported the argument, while almost half of those in Beijing strongly disagreed revealing a significant regional disparity.

Table 12

Foreigners should learn Chinese to communicate with Chinese people rather than requiring us to learn English.

Item 7R	Mean	SD	2	1	0	-1	-2
Beijing (<i>n</i> =100)	1.08	1.143	6.0%	5.0%	10.0%	33.0%	46.0%
Shenzhen (<i>n</i> =179)	0.69	1.071	6.7%	6.7%	16.8%	50.2%	19.6%
Zaozhuang (<i>n</i> =95)	0.29	1.352	15.9%	14.7%	11.5%	40.0%	17.9%

Item 19 in Table 13 implied the possibility that the fast rising status of the Chinese language could jeopardize the prestige of English. Here, Zaozhuang and Shenzhen generated low means compared to Beijing. More than 30% of the respondents in Zaozhuang identified with the sentiments stated in the item, indicating their confidence in the escalating prestige of Chinese.

Table 13

China will be increasingly strong and prosperous and Mandarin may become the new global language. Hence, we do not need to learn English so hard like before.

Item 19R	Mean	SD	2	1	0	-1	-2
Beijing (<i>n</i> =100)	0.73	1.190	7.0%	10.0%	14.0%	41.0%	28.0%
Shenzhen (<i>n</i> =179)	0.34	1.131	10.1%	10.1%	28.5%	39.0%	12.3%
Zaozhuang (<i>n</i> =95)	0.35	1.507	20.0%	12.6%	8.40%	30.5%	28.4%

Lastly, Item 2 (Table 14) raised the issue of fairness of the compulsory national curriculum of English. Seventy-four per cent of Beijing students either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement, while close to one-third of Shenzhen and Zaozhuang students deemed the compulsory English course as unfair. The findings of these three items clearly show the regional disparity among the three locales, suggesting that Beijing students rejected statements with nationalist sentiments more strongly than their counterparts.

Table 14

It is unfair to set English as a compulsory course in formal education since most of the Chinese students will stay in China and seldom use English.

Item 2R	Mean	SD	2	1	0	-1	-2
Beijing (<i>n</i> =100)	0.83	1.190	6.0%	12.0%	8.0%	41.0%	33.0%
Shenzhen (<i>n</i> =179)	0.21	1.188	9.5%	21.2%	20.6%	36.5%	12.2%
Zaozhuang (<i>n</i> =95)	0.38	1.322	14.7%	12.6%	10.6%	44.2%	17.9%

The interview data further support this disparity. Clement from Zaozhuang expressed his dissatisfaction with the compulsory English learning, voicing a typical view from this city's respondents:

“English is a foreigners’ language. We are Chinese here in our own country. I don’t understand why I have to learn English to go to high school and university.”

Similar opinions were also expressed among Shenzhen students. However, most Beijing students held the opposite viewpoint. Ellen, for example, stressed the importance of English as a global language:

“It sounds ridiculous to abandon English simply because we are Chinese. As a global language, English is used everywhere including China... I don’t believe learning English will harm my mother tongue...”

Sebastian from Beijing defended the teaching of English in China:

“Some people say it’s unfair to test English in *Gaokao* since most Chinese people won’t use English in the future. That’s just nonsense. I think most Chinese people won’t engage in politics in their lives. Then why test politics? ...”

Ideal assessment policies

Table 15 shows a multiple-choice item together with an open-ended item eliciting opinions about the proportion of English in *Zhongkao* and *Gaokao* with regard to the latest policies.

Table 15*Opinions about the proportion of English in Zhongkao and Gaokao.*

Ideal proportion of English in <i>Zhongkao</i> and <i>Gaokao</i> compared with current policies:	Beijing (<i>n</i> =100)	Shenzhen (<i>n</i> =179)	Zaozhuang (<i>n</i> =95)
Cancel English completely	7	27	11
Decrease	20	88	79
Increase	73	58	4
Maintain status quo	0	6	1

English now accounts for 150 marks in *Gaokao* both in Zaozhuang and Shenzhen, but will account for only 100 marks from 2016 onwards in Beijing. The listening section has been cancelled in the English section of *Gaokao* in Shandong Province from 2014 onwards which affects Zaozhuang. Table 15 shows that a substantial number of students in Beijing (73%) wanted the proportion of English to return to 150 marks. Conversely, 90 students (95%) in Zaozhuang and 115 students (64%) in Shenzhen wanted a decrease or total cancellation of English.

Ninety-six students in Beijing, 166 in Shenzhen and 86 in Zaozhuang completed the open-ended question to further explain their opinions. Table 16 summarizes the reasons collected.

Table 16*Explanations with frequencies of opinions about the ideal assessment policy.*

Opinions	Reasons	Beijing (<i>n</i> =96) (<i>r</i> =0.85)	Shenzhen (<i>n</i> =166) (<i>r</i> =0.83)	Zaozhuang (<i>n</i> =86) (<i>r</i> =0.88)
Cancellation or decrease	1. Useless for daily life in China	4	24	5
	2. To lessen the burden of students	2	4	4
	3. Should not be compulsory	6	45	4
	4. Personal dislike of English	/	/	1
	5. Not our mother tongue	13	34	49
	6. Chinese will be the new global language	/	/	18
Increase	1. Personal interests in high-stakes tests (very good at English)	4	7	/
	2. New policy has gone too far	3	/	/
	3. English as a Global language	38	19	4
	4. Cross-cultural communication and appreciation	3	/	/
	5. To guarantee English learning in China	8	/	/
	6. Practical use and concrete benefits	15	28	/
Remaining	1. Changes cause inconvenience	/	1	1
	2. Satisfied with the status quo	/	4	/

Note. *r* = inter-rater reliability

Discussion

The research questions driving our study inquired about the views of secondary school students towards the English and the associated learning and testing of the language in three locales. Key to this inquiry was whether a recent de-emphasis of the English section in high-stakes tests would impact the students' motivation to learn English and whether there were regional differences in this regard.

Three types of L2 motivation of the respondents

The overall positive attitude towards English reveals the language is still generally valued among young students, which may be connected to the respondents' long-term instrumental motivation. The responses from many students in the three cities revealed that they had a willingness to learn English, and most of them hoped they could advance their English skills in the future, indicating that the established high prestige of English remains intact. Similar to Pan and Block (2011), the belief that English is critical to an individual's life-long development was also found in the present study with a majority of participants still perceiving English as necessary for pursuing further study or getting a good job.

According to the data from the MOE, the number of Chinese students who went abroad to pursue their further study in 2013 reached 413.9 thousand, which is 3.5 times of the figure of 2003. Most of these students went to English-speaking countries and a younger age trend was detected (China Education Online², 2014). Responses in the present study tended to support this trend with 39%, 38% and 25% of students from Shenzhen, Beijing and Zaozhuang respectively reporting their intentions to sit for IELTS or TOEFL. Meanwhile, only a very limited number of students rejected the future possibility of studying abroad. Thus, English tended to have important linguistic capital for the long-term individual aspirations of the respondents.

Secondly, integrative orientation, that is, towards specific speaking groups, was generally positive, but weaker. This concurs with Ushioda and Dörnyei's (2009) claim that English has come to be considered a basic skill in today's globalized world. Rather than the motivation for learning English coming from attitudes towards a particular group of speakers, e.g., native

speakers of English, the underlying L2 motivation of learners may be related to concrete benefits, such as possibilities to work abroad.

Nevertheless, short-term instrumental motivation (test-related) could become negative in Shenzhen and Zaozhuang under the impact of the assessment policies that have already been, or could soon be implemented. This further aligns with the results of the previous washback studies and suggests that test-orientedness is still a significant phenomenon in teaching and learning English in China. The positive attitude towards learning English in the above two cities appeared to be swayed by test impact in spite of the established prestige of English in China. Thus, it is possible that short-term instrumental motivation is still prevailing in primary and secondary education where the basics of English are acquired, especially when English is still a compulsory subject, and this is further reinforced by high-stakes tests. Under this scenario, if assessment policies do not safeguard English teaching and learning by way of high-stakes test content, students may lose their short-term instrumental motivation, resulting in a loss of interest in learning English. Those who value long-term instrumental motivation most, however, may look for alternative ways to learn English such as resorting to training centers, as many Beijing students appeared to do.

Beijing may resist negative washback most

According to the profiles of respondents (See Table 3), 66% of the students from Beijing went to training centers, and among those, 71% attended advanced English classes beyond the level of the national curriculum prescribed by the MOE and the requirements of high-stakes tests. This may indicate that the main purpose for attending fee-paying courses for most of the respondents in Beijing was to reach a higher level of English proficiency, rather than to correctly answer discrete items in high-stakes tests.

The present study shows that despite the move to de-emphasize English, Beijing students valued English much more than their counterparts from the other two cities. Facing the pressure of imminent high-stakes tests, their responses indicate they still focused on the benefits English can bring them in terms of long-term individual development. Most of them did not plan to reduce their time studying English, and it appeared they would seek compensatory education of English from training organizations if regular school English instruction were further reduced.

Important regional differences were found in the present study, possibly shedding light on how globally engaged a city is. In light of the latest Global Cities Index presented by A.T. Kearney (2014), Beijing ranks the 8th out of 84 cities in terms of business activity, human capital, information exchange, cultural experience and political engagement, while Shenzhen ranks 73rd. Zaozhuang is less developed and is not on the list. A survey such as this one may be an indicator that people in Beijing simply need and use English more.

Region-specific curriculum and assessment?

Regarding the second part of the research question, which inquired into students' opinions towards the assessment policies of the English sections in high-stakes tests, significant regional differences appeared. For example, in Beijing, where 73% of the students supported returning the English section of *Gaokao* to 150 marks, their reasons focused on their beliefs in the importance of English as a global language. On the other hand, more than half of the students from Zaozhuang wanted to see a decrease of English in terms of marks in high-stakes tests because it is not their mother tongue. One possible reason for this large difference is the relatively heavy emphasis on Chinese Studies in Shandong Province, which was the birthplace of Confucius. Although Beijing and Shenzhen students also bear the same characteristics of typical Confucian cultural background, Shandong students may hold a stronger awareness of Chinese culture that affects their L2 motivation. This coincides with Gan's (2009) observation that learners with the same Confucian cultural background but different social contexts may behave differently in their learning activities.

A noteworthy phenomenon in Zaozhuang is the large number of commercial training centers there teaching subjects such as classic Chinese, Chinese traditional medicine and tea ceremony to young students. Some parents are willing to pay up to 20,000 *yuan* per year for their children to attend these classes (Qilu Evening, 2014). This is a striking contrast with Beijing parents who are most eager to pay for their children's English classes.

The different emphases on education depending on the region raises the issue of fairness in education, i.e., specifically whether China should promote a region-specific curriculum and assessment of English, rather than the present nationwide requirement of English because people

in regions, such as Zaozhuang, may need English far less than those in Beijing. However, as Pan (2011) argued, region-specific curriculum and assessment policies create unequal access to English provision, which can lead to further inequality in education and economic development.

This, again, triggers the debate on inequity.

Given the disparity of views among regions, as illustrated by this study, education authorities can better reflect the needs of the populous by conducting attitudinal surveys on a large scale covering as many parents and students as possible before the implementation of new assessment policies. Traditionally, however, policies in China tend to be put into place without performing such surveys. If, in fact, surveys have been performed, their results have remained confidential, leaving grassroots opinions unheard while a top-down approach dominates the formulation of foreign language education policies (Hu, 2007).

Conclusions and limitations

The present study employed a questionnaire and interviews to investigate the attitudes of secondary-school students from three cities in mainland China towards English and English learning, as well as their opinions about the present or forthcoming assessment policies concerning the proportion of the English section in high-stakes tests, especially *Gaokao*. Similar to the conclusion about the spread of English as a global language made by Crystal (1997), the established value of English is still widely held among participants in terms of their long-term instrumental motivation and to a lesser extent, their integrative L2 motivation. However, high-stakes assessment policies were seen to potentially jeopardize the short-term instrumental L2 motivation of students, especially of those from Shenzhen and Zaozhuang whose learning behavior and plans tightly centered on their academic achievement.

Regional differences were clearly evident. Students in Beijing weighed long-term instrumental benefits much more. They appeared to be unaffected by negative washback and seemed to ignore nationalist sentiments. Most of them wanted pro-English assessment policies in the matriculation test, and alternative avenues for acquiring English would be adopted if English were further marginalized. In Shenzhen and Zaozhuang, however, despite the common

acknowledgement of the prestige of English, students weighed short-term goals much more and expressed negative attitudes towards L2 learning.

It should be noted that the conclusions reached in the present study have been based on small samples from only one school in each of only three cities. Thus, although all three schools may be typical, the findings can be taken as indicative only. Secondly, since the present study is attitudinal in nature, the factors behind the high-stakes test policies to marginalize English have not been discussed. By presenting these policy moves and bottom-up attitudinal reactions in China, however, the authors hope to trigger more inquiries about the rationale for the latest language policy and language planning in different settings to reveal the fast-changing sociolinguistic realities in the context of a globalizing Asia.

Note:

1. The university matriculation test (*Gaokao*) is a comprehensive test consisting of several subjects of which English serves as a key component rather than an independent exam. Considering regional disparities, nowadays most provinces and municipalities are given autonomy to design their own exam papers for local use. Based on this, the conventional term “National Matriculation English Test (NMET)” is not adopted to refer to the English section in *Gaokao* in the present study.
2. China Education Online is a website under the administration of the MOE.
3. In March 2016, the Beijing Education Examination Authority finally decided that for the year 2016, the weighting of Chinese and English in *Gaokao* would remain 150 respectively (Shao & Gao, 2016). However, this study is still valid because when it was conducted, participants in Beijing thought the weighting of English would be reduced in 2016.

References:

- A.T. Kearney. (2014). *2014 Global cities index and emerging cities outlook*. Retrieved from <https://www.atkearney.com/documents/10192/4461492/Global+Cities+Present+and+Future-GCI+2014.pdf/3628fd7d-70be-41bf-99d6-4c8eaf984cd5>
- Braun, V., & V. Clarke. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- CCCCPC. (2013). *Several major decisions to comprehensively deepen the reform made by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China*. Beijing: People's Press.
- Cheng, L., & Curtis, A. (2010). English language assessment and the Chinese learner in China and beyond. In L. Cheng & A. Curtis (Eds.), *English language assessment and the Chinese learner* (pp. 3-12). New York: Routledge.
- Cheng, L., & Curtis, A. (2012). The impact and washback: implications for teaching and learning. In C. Coombe, P. Davidson, B. O'Sullivan & S. Stoyhoff (Eds.), *The Cambridge guide to second language assessment* (pp. 89-95). New York: Cambridge.
- Cheng, L., & Qi, L. (2006). Description and examination of the national matriculation English test. *Language Assessment Quarterly: An International Journal*, 3(1), 53-70.
- China Education Online. (2014). *The 2014 report on the trend of studying abroad*. Retrieved from <http://www.eol.cn/html/lx/2014baogao/content.html>
- CNN. (2014, November 21). How China has fallen in love with private education. Retrieved from <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/11/21/world/asia/china-private-education/index.html>
- Crystal, D. (1997). *English as a global language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dörnyei, Z., & Taguchi, T. (2010). *Questionnaires in second language research: Construction, administration, and processing*. (2nd ed.). Oxon: Routledge.

- Gan, Z. (2009). 'Asian learners' re-examined: an empirical study of language learning attitudes, strategies and motivation among mainland Chinese and Hong Kong students. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 30(1), 41-58.
- Gardner, R. C. (1985). *Social psychology and second language learning: The role of attitudes and motivation*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Gardner, R. C. (2004). *Attitude/motivation test battery: International AMTB research project*. Canada: The University of Western Ontario.
- Gardner, R. C. (2010). *Motivation and second language acquisition: the socio-educational model*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Gu, P. Y. (2014). The unbearable lightness of the curriculum: what drives the assessment practices of a teacher of English as a Foreign Language in a Chinese secondary school?. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 21(3), 285-305.
- Hamp-Lyons, L. (1997). Washback, impact and validity: Ethical concerns. *Language Testing*, 14(3), 295-303.
- Hu, Y. (2007). China's foreign language policy on primary English education: What's behind it? *Language Policy*, 6(3-4), 359-376.
- Lai, M. L. (2005). Language attitudes of the first postcolonial generation in Hong Kong secondary schools. *Language in Society*, 34(3), 363-388.
- Matoush, M. M., & Fu, D. (2012). Tests of English language as significant thresholds for college-bound Chinese and the washback of test-preparation. *Changing English*, 19(1), 111-121.
- McNamara, T. (2000). *Language testing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mitchell, R., Myles, F., & Marsden, E. (2013). *Second language learning theories*. (3rd ed.). Oxon: Routledge.
- Modern Express. (2013, September 10). Former MOE spokesman: English classes should be cancelled in primary schools.
- Pan, L. (2011). English language ideologies in the Chinese foreign language education policies: a world-system perspective. *Language Policy*, 10(3), 245-263.
- Pan, L., & Block, D. (2011). English as a 'global language' in China: An investigation into learners' and teachers' language beliefs. *System*, 39(3), 391-402.

- Qi, L. (2005). Stakeholders' conflicting aims undermine the washback function of a high-stakes test. *Language Testing*, 22(2), 142-173.
- Qi, L. (2007). Is testing an efficient agent for pedagogical change? Examining the intended washback of the writing task in a high-stakes English test in China. *Assessment in Education*, 14(1), 51-74.
- Qilu Evening. (2014, February 24). Chinese studies classes popular in Shandong. Retrieved from <http://news.qq.com/a/20140225/008924.htm>
- Shao, Q., & Gao, X. (2016). 'Noisy guests shall not unseat the host': Framing high-stakes English examinations in mainland China's state-controlled print media. *English Today*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1017/S0266078416000419
- Tao, B. (2007). Some thoughts on the resumption of listening in the English section of Gaokao. *Assessment Studies*, 4, 23-30. (The source is originally in Chinese: 陶百强. (2007). 对恢复高考英语听力测试的思考. *考试研究*, 4, 23-30)
- Ushioda, E., & Dörnyei, Z. (2009). Motivation, language identities and the L2 self: A theoretical overview. In Z. Dörnyei & E. Ushioda (Eds.), *Motivation, Language Identity and the L2 Self* (pp. 1-8). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Xiao, Y., Sharpling, G., & Liu, H. (2011). Washback of national matriculation English test on students' learning in the Chinese secondary school context. *Asian EFL Journal*, 13(3), 103-129.
- Yu, B. (2013). Asian international students at an Australian university: mapping the paths between integrative motivation, competence in L2 communication, cross-cultural adaptation and persistence with structural equation modelling. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 34(7), 727-742.

Appendix 1

Likert-scale items not included in tables

1. Fluent spoken English suggests a well-educated background.

Beijing - Mean:1.07; SD:1.027; Shenzhen – Mean:0.70; SD:1.016; Zaozhuang – Mean:0.67; SD:1.076

3R. My English would matter little if I could score very high in all other subjects in *Zhongkao* and *Gaokao*.

Beijing - Mean:1.15; SD:1.095; Shenzhen – Mean:0.69; SD:0.913; Zaozhuang – Mean:0.79; SD:1.287

4R. With the state-of-the-art technology, many good online translation tools are widely used nowadays. Therefore we do not need to learn English as hard as before.

Beijing - Mean:1.04; SD:1.127; Shenzhen – Mean:0.70; SD:0.934; Zaozhuang – Mean:0.66; SD:1.182

5. English serves as a gatekeeper everywhere in China. It is necessary for us to learn English well.

Beijing - Mean:1.11; SD:1.014; Shenzhen – Mean:0.80; SD:0.912; Zaozhuang – Mean:0.94; SD:1.090

6. I admire those whose English is good.

Beijing - Mean:0.79; SD:1.166; Shenzhen – Mean:0.96; SD:1.027; Zaozhuang – Mean:0.71; SD:1.184

8. I hope I have some online friends whose mother tongue is English.

Beijing - Mean:0.76; SD:1.065; Shenzhen – Mean:0.77; SD:0.995; Zaozhuang – Mean:0.78; SD:0.947

14. English should be a prerequisite for tertiary education since many great academic works are written in English.

Beijing - Mean:0.78; SD:1.001; Shenzhen - Mean:0.53; SD:0.895; Zaozhuang - Mean:0.60; SD:1.215

15R. I do not want to learn more English than required by passing the high-stakes tests.

Beijing - Mean:1.06; SD:0.941; Shenzhen - Mean:0.51; SD:1.062; Zaozhuang - Mean:0.27; SD:1.364

16. Bilingual signs make the city more modernized and internationalized.

Beijing - Mean:1.06; SD:0.973; Shenzhen – Mean:1.07; SD:0.884; Zaozhuang – Mean:0.74; SD:1.132

17. A bilingual brochure looks more formal and trustworthy than a Chinese one.

Beijing - Mean:0.48; SD:1.259; Shenzhen – Mean:0.48; SD:1.191; Zaozhuang – Mean:-0.11; SD:1.387

20. Other conditions being equal, those whose English is better may get better jobs.

Beijing - Mean:0.55; SD:1.048; Shenzhen – Mean:0.79; SD:0.946; Zaozhuang – Mean:0.47; SD:1.351

Appendix 2

General interview questions

What would you do if English were further de-emphasized?

What motivates you most to learn English?