

The use of English in the professional world in China

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ABSTRACT: The status and use of English in mainland China are topics of intense interest for researchers, although most previous research has been conducted within the field of education, with few data from the professional world. The current study attempts to focus on the professionals in China and their use of English. The study has drawn data with a questionnaire from 2,247 participants in workplaces across China and 44 of them have been interviewed. The participants are from three types of organization: government, public service unit, and company. Although overall the use of English is not frequent in China's professional world, the results indicate that English plays an important role in about a quarter of the participants' working lives and that the majority of the participants recognize the high importance of English.

INTRODUCTION

It is nothing new to say that today's world has become a global village. When it comes to the common language of this village, it can be seen that English has grown from being a national language into the global lingua franca out of more than 6,000 languages in the world due to the influence of the UK and the US in turn (Graddol 2006; McArthur 2006; Jenkins 2015) and now English has become world Englishes (Kachru 1985; Jenkins 2015). One result of the spread of English is that its non-native speakers now outnumber its native speakers by an increasingly large margin (Li 2007; He 2015). Hence, it is believed that the center of the language has shifted from the Inner Circle countries to the Outer and Expanding Circle countries (Ostler 2005; Deterding 2006). One important consequence of this shift is that many of the Outer and Expanding Circle countries have developed their own localized varieties of English and become norm-developing as well instead of completely norm-dependent as they used to be (Kachru & Smith 2009; Evans 2011). Therefore, these new varieties of English, especially in Asia and Africa, have become the focus of research and debate in the field of world Englishes for the past three decades (Kachru 1985; Bolton 2003; Deterding 2007; Kirkpatrick 2007; Xu 2010; Deterding & Salbrina 2013; Noor Azam Haji-Othman & McLellan 2014).

Ever since the Open Door Policy in early 1980s, English has been promoted in China for more than three decades at different levels. At governmental level, it has been promoted for the nation's development, modernization, and internationalization. At a personal level, it has been promoted for increasing individuals' upward and outward mobility. At educational level, English (or another foreign language occasionally) is a required subject from primary three till Doctoral degree, and there are even Chinese-English bilingual kindergartens; and some content modules are taught using both Chinese and English as media of instruction at

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a number of mainstream schools and universities (He 2015; Gao & Wang 2016). As such, an increasingly large population in China are using English in their daily lives, with localized linguistic features, hence a new variety of English is on its way. As a developing variety of English, China English (or Chinese English) has attracted great attention from researchers since China is believed to have the largest English-learning and using population in the world (Crystal 2008; Bolton et al. 2011; He 2013). In terms of language policy, China English is argued to be a variety that can satisfy learners' strong desire for English not at the expense of local indigenous languages and cultures (Li 1993; Fang 2011). For the past 35 years, the teaching, use, and development of English in China have always been hot issues that attract public concerns (Ge 1980; Jiang 2002; He & Li 2009; Wen 2012; Schneider et al. 2014), and the keen interest in such issues seems unlikely to diminish (Graddol & Mesthrie 2012) due to the common recognition that 'English serves as a tool and symbol of modernization, globalization, and economic prosperity' (Schneider 2014: 28).

However, nearly all the empirical studies concerning China English were conducted in the field of education (Kirkpatrick & Xu 2002; Hu 2004, 2005; He & Miller 2011; Bolton & Botha 2015a; Wang 2015). As a result, one of the criticisms (or doubts) associated with China English is that voices from the actual users of English in everyday occasions (as in the professional world) have seldom been reported (Bolton & Graddol 2012; Yang & Zhang 2015). For the further development of China English, there is 'an evident need for more empirical field-based research on the current impact of English' (Bolton & Botha 2015b: 208) and 'a more detailed, finer-grained body of sociolinguistic research in this area' (Bolton & Graddol 2012: 7). The current study attempts to narrow, if not bridge, this gap. In other words, this study endeavors to investigate the practical use of English in China's professional world covering as many industries as possible except for farming, forestry, animal husbandry, and fishing where English is barely used.

CHINA ENGLISH AND THE PROFESSIONAL WORLD

As a nation with the largest population in the world, significant issues related to China cannot be ignored by other parts of the globe, especially in the background of China's fast economic growth and ever-increasing global influence in recent decades, and the development of English in China is no exception. With so many people learning and using English with inevitable cross-linguistic influence from their mother tongue, Chinese, it is reasonable to believe that a localized variety of English in China is coming into being and will eventually gain recognition (He & Zhang 2010; Eaves 2011). The last two decades have witnessed a steadily growing research interest in China English from various perspectives, to name a few: the existence and definition of China English (Wang 1991; Jiang & Du 2003; Yan & Yin 2009); awareness of and attitudes towards China English (Li 1993; Liu 2009); features of China English (Du 1998; He & Li 2009; Xu 2010); functions of China English (Jia & Xiang 1997; Hu 2011); applications of China English (Zhang 2003; Feng 2013); and implications of China English for ELT in China (Jia & Xiang 1997; He & Zhang 2010).

China is expected to soon own more English speakers than the UK and the USA combined. This indicates that China English is likely to become 'a major Expanding Circle English in the years to come' (Xu 2010: 205) and exert considerable influence on the further development of the English language. 'At that time, native speakers may even

become irrelevant [...] and Chinese English will truly be in the forefront of the development of the language' (Deterding 2006: 195). The scenarios depicted here are from two of the editors of a book on China English (Xu, He & Deterding 2017), which is consistent with Graddol's (2006: 15) observation that 'Asia, especially India and China, probably now holds the key to the long-term future of English as a global language'. Given the astonishingly large number of English learners in China, 'a key issue is the relationship between the learning of English and the actual use of the language' (Bolton & Botha 2015b: 169). Although the exact number of English users in China, especially in the professional world, is lacking, according to a national survey conducted between 1999 and 2001 to a sample of 165,000 households in China (Wei & Su 2012), about 390 million people had learnt some English around the year of 2000, and 7.3 per cent of them 'often' used English in their daily lives, 23.3 per cent 'sometimes' and 69.4 per cent 'seldom' used. That is, 30.6 per cent (7.3% + 23.3%) of the Chinese who had learnt English used it in their daily lives. The use of English in China can be found in various domains including education as the main one and some other minor-scale use in international trade and business, hotels, tourism, and media and communications and so on. However, our knowledge about 'other uses of the language within China is limited' except for the education domain (Bolton & Graddol 2012: 7).

On the basis of a survey involving 260 parents of pupils and middle school students in Shanghai, Wei (2010) reported that 52 per cent of the participants did not know English, 24 to 33 per cent knew some English but seldom used it despite the convenient access to English and 15 to 24 per cent used English in their everyday lives. It is believed that the comparatively low English proficiency level is one of the main reasons leading to Chinese people's low frequency of English use since only 21.9 per cent of the respondents self-reported that they could conduct everyday conversations in English and 28.8 per cent could read passages in English (Wei & Su 2011, 2012). The limited literature on the practical use of English in China indicates that the language is not used frequently, then what is it like when it comes to Chinese people's practical need for English in their work? According to another survey carried out between 2009 and 2010 to 5,636 urban residents in China, respectively 22.3 per cent and 35.7 per cent of the participants needed foreign language(s) and needed to re-learn foreign language(s) in their work (Lu & Zhang 2012). Although Lu and Zhang's study is about foreign language(s) learning in China, it should be noted that 93.8 per cent of these learners are learning (or have learnt) English (Wei & Su 2012).

In view of the above statistics from previous research, it seems that people who use English in their everyday lives and work do not account for a significant proportion of the whole English learning population in China. However, this proportion still indicates an enormous number of people when considering the magnitude of the country's population, and these people do have practical need for English in their work. The influence brought (or to be brought) by these people through their use of English to the language itself cannot be underestimated, not to mention that the number of such people is still growing (Fan et al. 2017; He 2017). On the other hand, from what has been reviewed so far, it can be observed that relevant literature on the practical use of English in Chinese people's professional work is still lacking. The present study makes an effort to contribute some baseline data and literature to this field. Specifically, this study aims to explore into the following issues in China's professional workplace: (i) language choice, (ii) the frequency of the use of English, (iii) the importance of languages, and (iv) the use of English by types of organization, ownership of company and industries.

METHODS

Data collection

This study used a questionnaire (see Appendix) to collect data, which was adapted from *Language use in the professional world* developed by Evans (2011) to suit the context of China. Evans' original questionnaire includes 73 items, the one used in this study has 79 by removing his last ten items and another one concerning 'Cantonese' and adding 17 others (see Items 3, 9, 24, 26, 27, 37, 38, 39, 47, 48, 49, 50, 59, 64, 65, 73, and 74 in Appendix). It elicits data on four aspects: participants' demographic information, general pattern of language choice and use (English vs. Chinese), frequency of the use of English, and importance of languages in both written and spoken communications in workplaces in China. Pilot tests of the adapted questionnaire with 30 professionals yielded Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.808 to 0.892 for the different sections, which are slightly lower than Evans' results but still indicate that the internal reliability of the present questionnaire is robust (George & Mallery 2003). For the purpose of data-source cross-validation, 44 (22 males and 22 females) of these participants (that is, about 2%) were also interviewed. They were asked three questions on the importance of English and the acceptability of China English. Most of the interviews were done via WeChat (a Chinese mobile communication software similar to WhatsApp) or QQ (also known as Tencent QQ, a Chinese instant messaging software service similar to Skype) except for the two interviewees from Shanghai. Permission was obtained from the interviewees to record their interviews. For better communication, all of them were interviewed in Putonghua, so there was no direct assessment of English proficiency, which helped the interviewees feel at ease. The transcriptions of the interviews were later translated into English.

Participants

The questionnaire were firstly administered to 2,505 participants working at different levels in various industries in China with the help of 389 students at a university in Shanghai, China. This is a key university that takes students from all over the country. These students were asked to help distribute the questionnaire or forward the link of the online version to their parents and relatives who again approached their colleagues and friends for help with the survey. In so doing, this study secured data from different parts of China and various industries, but meanwhile such a snowball sampling method diminished the participants' representativeness of the whole population in professional world in China. There were few (0.3%) participants aged 55 or above and the participants' educational level was comparatively high (78.1% with a bachelor's degree or above). A probability sample is hard to obtain due to the present study being a non-government initiated investigation. The questionnaire was distributed in three ways: hard copies (242), electronic copies (189), and online version (2,074) through an online survey system. Among these responses, 2,247 (89.7%) were valid.

Of the 2,247 participants, 1,259 (56.0%) were females and 988 (44.0%) males; 427 (19.0%) had five years or less of English learning experience, 938 (41.7%) six to ten years, 532 (23.7%) 11 to 14 years, and 350 (15.6%) 15 years or more; 140 (6.2%) achieved a highest educational level of senior high school or equivalent, 350 (15.6%) higher diploma, 1,239 (55.1%) Bachelor's degree, 434 (19.3%) Master's degree, and 84 (3.7%) Doctoral degree. It can be seen that the majority of the participants were well-educated with more

Table 1. Age distribution of the participants (N = 2,247)

	24 or below	25–29	30–34	35–39	40–44	45–49	50–54	55 or above
Number	281	442	295	175	377	587	83	7
Percentage	12.5%	19.7%	13.1%	7.8%	16.8%	26.1%	3.7%	.3%

Table 2. Years of working experience of the participants (N = 2,247)

	≤5	6–10	11–15	16–20	21–25	26–30	31–35	36–40	≥41
Number	657	328	153	363	484	211	43	8	0
Percentage	29.2%	14.6%	6.8%	16.2%	21.5%	9.4%	1.9%	0.4%	0.0%

Table 3. Geographical spread of the participants (N = 2,247)

	NE	NC	EC	SC	YeR	YaR	SW	NW
Participant number	205	287	503	232	212	259	371	178
Participant percentage	9.1%	12.8%	22.4%	10.3%	9.4%	11.5%	16.5%	7.9%
Population distribution percentage	8.0%	14.7%	11.7%	11.2%	14.2%	17.6%	18.0%	4.6%

Note: NE (northeast): Heilongjiang, Jilin, Liaoning; NC (north coast): Beijing, Tianjin, Shandong, Hebei; EC (east coast): Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang; SC (south coast): Fujian, Guangdong, Hainan; YeR (the middle reaches of the Yellow River): Henan, Shaanxi, Shanxi, Inner Mongolia; YaR (the middle reaches of the Yangtze River): Hubei, Hunan, Anhui, Jiangxi; SW (southwest): Guangxi, Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan, Chongqing; NW (northwest): Tibet, Xinjiang, Qinghai, Gansu, Ningxia. The percentage for each region's population against that of mainland China is from National Bureau of Statistics of China (2014).

than six years of English learning experience. As for the age distribution, most of the participants were in their forties, late twenties or early thirties (see Table 1). Up to 43.8 per cent of the participants had worked for 10 years or less, but the survey included a lot of experienced professionals as well (see Table 2). With regard to the rank in job, 538 (23.9%) of the participants were senior staff, 814 (36.2%) junior staff, and the remaining 895 (39.8%) were in middle rank. The participants were from three types of organization: government (that is, the civil service, 230 people, 10.2%), public service unit (schools and hospitals, 713, 31.7%), and company (1,304, 58.0%). Among those working in company, 832 (63.8%) were in China-owned companies, 336 (25.8%) in foreign-owned, and 134 (10.3%) in China-foreign joint ventures. They were working in 35 industries¹ in all eight China's economic regions. Table 3 illustrates the geographical spread of the participants, including each region's population percentage against mainland China's whole population. Four of the eight participant percentages basically match the corresponding regions' (that is, NE, NC, SC, and SW) population distribution percentages. A noticeable mismatch goes to the EC region, since the university whose students helped administer the questionnaires is based in this region hence a comparatively large proportion of participants in the region. This diminishes the representativeness of the current sample to a certain degree.

The interviewees were selected from 30 out of the 35 industries with at least four from each of the eight economic regions so as to make the interviewees as representative of the questionnaire participants as possible. The five industries from which no interviewee was selected were textile, agricultural technology, electronics, military, and entertainment. The participants from each of these five industries accounted for only 0.8 per cent or less of the

Table 4. Frequency of English use in the professional workplace (N = 2,247)

Mode of communication	Never	Seldom	Not very often	Sometimes	Often	Always
Writing	37.4%	27.4%	13.8%	12.4%	7.5%	1.5%
Reading	34.1%	21.8%	20.1%	14.5%	7.8%	1.7%
Speaking or listening	40.0%	25.3%	15.7%	9.5%	7.9%	1.6%

total questionnaire population; and the five industries belonged to the least six in terms of participant percentages as shown in Note 1. More details of the interviewees can be found in their codes as explained in Note 2.²

RESULTS

The questionnaire data underwent descriptive analyses in terms of overall frequencies (percentages and means) with SPSS. The results show that there is certain use of English in China's professional world, but the pattern of use is skewed heavily towards types of organization and industries. This section presents the overall trends of language choice and use of English of the full sample, then reports the more informative trends related to organization types and industries, which is followed by the findings of interviews.

Language choice in the professional workplace

Section 2.1 of the questionnaire (see Appendix) is centered on language choice (English vs. Chinese) in written communication (reading or writing), which includes 15 items on a five-point Likert scale. A preliminary frequency analysis found that 25.5 per cent of the participants used English and Chinese equally at work or used more English than Chinese. Given the fact that they were using English in a Chinese-dominant society, their use of English was considered fairly frequent if they used English and Chinese equally. About 39 per cent of them still used English sometimes (usually Chinese) while the rest (35.4%) never used English (always Chinese) at work. The top five types of text the participants chose to write or read in English are: professional journals/magazines, websites, external email messages, promotional materials, and letters. Regarding spoken communication (speaking or listening, see Section 2.2 of the questionnaire), 20.9 per cent of the participants most likely spoke or listened to English at work, 78.7 per cent of them most likely communicated in Chinese, while the other 0.4 per cent most likely used other Chinese dialects or foreign languages. The top five situations in which the participants chose to speak or listen to English are: job interviews, formal meetings/negotiations, conferences, seminars, and presentations.

Frequency of the use of English in the professional workplace

Sections 3.1 to 3.3 of the questionnaire examine the frequency of using English for various professional purposes on a six-point Likert scale ranging from '1' – 'never' to '6' – 'always' (almost every day). Table 4 displays such frequencies of writing, reading, speaking and listening in English respectively. It is found that 21.4 per cent (12.4% + 7.5% + 1.5%) of the participants wrote in English sometimes or more frequently, while 13.8 per cent of them used some English though not very often in written communication. The rest of them

Table 5. Importance of languages in the professional workplace (N = 2,247)

	Completely unimportant	Unimportant	Of some importance	Important	Very important	Extremely important
Putonghua	2.2%	1.6%	7.2%	15.6%	20.9%	52.6%
Written Chinese	1.6%	2.8%	4.4%	15.0%	22.7%	53.6%
Spoken English	18.1%	17.8%	12.1%	11.5%	12.5%	28.0%
Written English	16.8%	19.6%	11.8%	10.6%	12.1%	29.0%

seldom or never wrote in English at work. The top five types of text written in English in terms of frequency are: external emails, letters, Skype/QQ, promotional materials, and reports. When it comes to reading in English, 24.0 per cent (14.5% + 7.8% + 1.7%) of the participants sometimes or more frequently read in English at work, and 20.1 per cent of them did not often read in English, while the others seldom or never read in English at work. The top five types of text the participants read in English in terms of frequency are: websites, external emails, professional journals/magazines, letters, and promotional materials. Three types of text (such as external emails, letters, and promotional materials) are found to appear in both writing and reading top-five lists. With regard to the frequency of speaking or listening to English in the workplace, 19.0 per cent (9.5% + 7.9% + 1.6%) of the participants sometimes or more frequently spoke or listened to English at work, and 15.7 per cent of them did not very often speak or listen to English, while the rest seldom or never did so. The top five speaking or listening situations are: telephoning, formal meetings/negotiations, seminars, Skype/QQ, and informal meetings/discussions.

Importance of languages in the professional workplace

Participants were asked to rate the importance of Putonghua, written Chinese, spoken English and written English in their job on a six-point Likert scale, with '1' indicating 'completely unimportant' and '6' 'extremely important' (see Section 4 of the questionnaire in Appendix for details). The results (see Table 5) show that 89.1 per cent (15.6% + 20.9% + 52.6%) of the participants believed that Putonghua was important or very important or extremely important, while the rest of them attached some or no importance to Putonghua. As for written Chinese, 91.3 per cent (15.0% + 22.7% + 53.6%) of them considered it important or very important or extremely important. With regard to spoken and written English, the two cumulative percentages of importance are: 52.0 (11.5% + 12.5% + 28.0%) and 51.7 (10.6% + 12.1% + 29.0%). These percentages mean that more than half of the participants attached considerable importance to the English language, which indicates that English as a foreign language in China is playing a significant role in the professional world.

Use of English by types of organization

In terms of types of organization, 82.3 per cent of the participants who read and wrote English frequently were from companies and the rest (17.7%) from public service units, with none of them from government. For those from companies, 57.1 per cent were from foreign-owned companies, 23.2 per cent from China-foreign joint ventures, 18.1 per cent from China-owned companies, and the remaining 1.6 per cent did not report their ownership

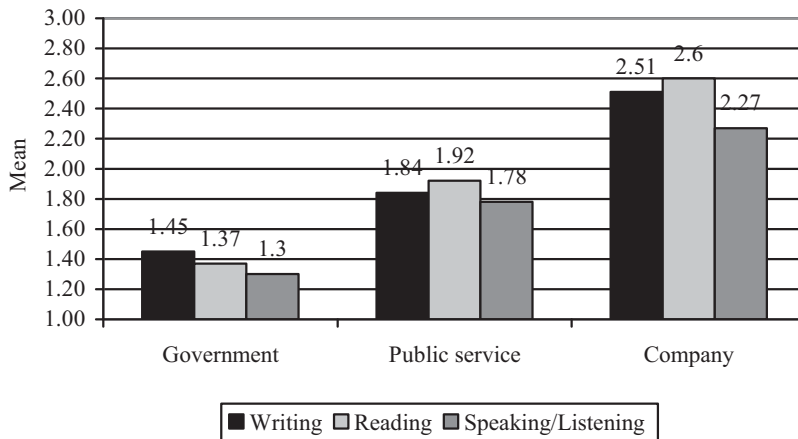


Figure 1. Use of English by types of organization (N = 2,247)

Scale: 1 = Never, 2 = Seldom (once/twice a year), 3 = Not very often (once/twice every 4 months), 4 = Sometimes (once/twice a month), 5 = Often (once/twice a week), 6 = Always (almost every day).

of company. When it comes to spoken communication, 66.6 per cent of the participants who opted for English frequently were from companies and 33.4 per cent from public service units. For those from companies, 59.6 per cent were from foreign-owned companies, 21.6 per cent from China-foreign joint ventures, 18.2 per cent from China-owned companies, and the rest (6.1%) did not report their ownership of company. Figure 1 shows the overall means each type of organization scored in three aspects of using English. First of all, the 'company' participants demonstrated the highest frequency of using English in all the three aspects at work among the three types of participants whereas the 'government' ones the least. Second, all the three types of participants displayed a lowest frequency of speaking/listening in English, whereas for the use of written English the 'company' and 'public-service-unit' participants tended to read in English more frequently and the 'government' participants write in English more frequently.

Importance of languages by types of organization

As shown in Figure 2, a significant tendency is that all the three types of participants considered Chinese (both spoken and written forms) as much more important than English (spoken and written). Another tendency reveals that the 'company' participants attached the highest importance to both spoken and written English whereas the 'government' ones the lowest. This finding is in accordance with the frequency pattern of English use as demonstrated in Figure 1. Furthermore, the 'public-service-unit' participants scored the highest means on Putonghua while the 'government' scored the lowest. One possible reason is that professionals in public service units (for example, doctors and teachers) need to ensure efficient communication with people from all walks of life or people with varying ethnic/linguistic backgrounds via Putonghua, whereas government officers do not feel such an urgent need to speak Putonghua and are much likely to stick to their local dialect due to the influence of the deep-rooted 'privilege mentality' and bureaucracy in Chinese culture.

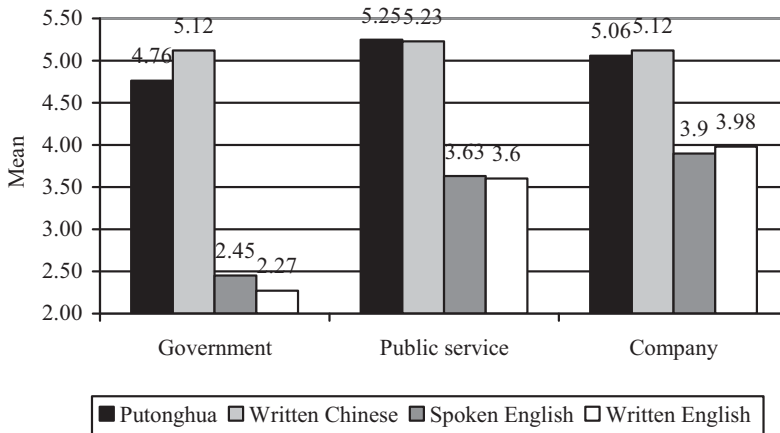


Figure 2. Importance of languages by types of organization (N = 2,247)

Scale: 1 = Completely unimportant, 2 = Unimportant, 3 = Of some importance, 4 = Important, 5 = Very important, 6 = Extremely important.

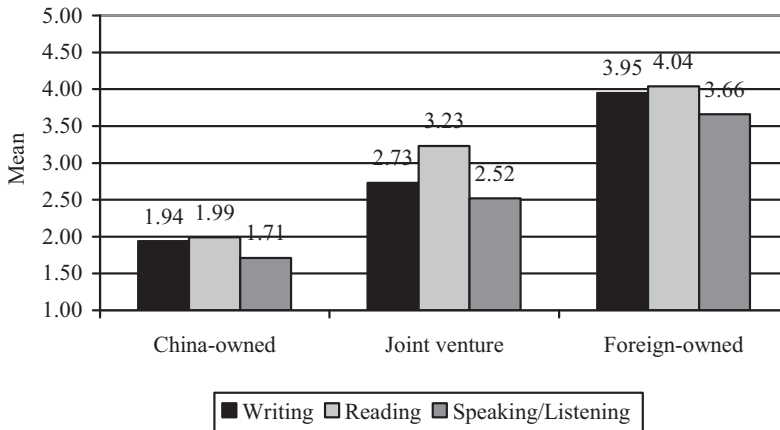


Figure 3. Use of English by ownership of company (N = 1,304)

Scale: 1 = Never, 2 = Seldom (once/twice a year), 3 = Not very often (once/twice every 4 months), 4 = Sometimes (once/twice a month), 5 = Often (once/twice a week), 6 = Always (almost every day).

Use of English by ownership of company

There were three sub-groups within the ‘company’ group according to ownership, namely, China-owned, foreign-owned, and China-foreign joint venture. Although it is not surprising to find that people working in foreign-owned companies used English most frequently and those in China-owned companies least frequently, the mean scores of the three groups are in striking contrast, as shown in Figure 3. Such contrast denotes that the linguistic environment in workplace, such as having foreign colleagues and supervisors around, the amount of exposure to English, the need to communicate in English, is one of the decisive elements for the use of English by ‘company’ people. Moreover, all the three sub-groups read in English the most at work and spoke/listened in English the least.

Use of English by industries

A further analysis of those who chose to use written English frequently (25.5% of the full sample) revealed that they were from 21 out of the 35 industries in the following order of frequency of English use: trade, finance, education, manufacturing, media and communication, service, information technology, internet, medical industry, public relations, engineering, transportation, clothing, tourism, retail, advertising, real estate, chemical industry, energy, catering, and optics. With regard to spoken communication at work, participants who most likely spoke or listened to English (20.9% of the full sample) were from 19 industries, and 18 of them were the same as those mentioned above in written communication: trade, finance, education, manufacturing, tourism, medical industry, service, information technology, media and communication, retail, internet, advertising, real estate, public relations, transportation, engineering, chemical industry, and energy. The last one was construction. It can be seen that trade, finance, education, and manufacturing were the four industries where English was used most frequently in terms of both written and spoken communication.

Interview findings

As summarized and exemplified below, the findings of the three interview questions were basically consistent with the questionnaire results. To Question 1: *Has English become more important in your work? Why or why not?* 29 (65.9%) of the 44 interviewees reported that English had become more important in their work. The reasons include: the need to communicate more with foreigners and English is the only lingua franca; English as a required medium for work (for instance, medium of instruction); English as a tool to access foreign knowledge and information; among others. Below are two examples.

- (1) F-4-NE-F: I think English has become more important in my work, since I am working in a foreign-owned company, and I have both supervisors and colleagues who speak English and other foreign languages, and our work language is English. Besides, we have more business in foreign countries in recent years.
- (2) M-2-YeR-P: Yes, English has become definitely more important for my work, since the university has been asking us to offer some of our modules in English in recent years, and we also need to publish in international academic journals, which means in English.

Five (11.4%) of them answered ‘not sure’ since they thought the importance of English remained more or less the same in their work. The other ten (22.7%) claimed that English had become less important in their work because they usually did not use English, as shown in Example 3.

- (3) M-5-NW-G: I think it is becoming less important since my colleagues and I seldom, if not ‘not at all’, use English in our work. I have almost forgot all about English.

To Question 2: *Will English become more or less important in China? Why?* 42 (95.5%) of respondents believed that English would become more important (see Examples 4–6 for details) whereas two of them said they did not know or it was hard to say. The reasons given by these 42 interviewees were listed here (in decreasing order of mentions):

- English is the global lingua franca.

- At personal level, English is a must to improve the outward and upward mobility.
 - China is widening her Open Door Policy, so more foreigners will come to China.
 - China is playing a more important role in the world than ever before.
 - English is useful for the purpose of entertainment and leisure.
 - More Chinese enterprises are establishing business in foreign countries.
 - There is an increasing need for mutual communication between Chinese people and foreigners, but Mandarin is much more difficult than English, so Chinese people feel obliged to learn English.
- (4) F-22-SW-C: More important. Since China is becoming more open to the outside world and we can see more and more foreigners coming to China for sight-seeing and also experiencing Chinese culture. Besides, China is doing business with foreign countries all over the world. I even heard that my company is thinking about setting up a branch in the US. Some of my colleagues are re-learning English now, hoping to work in the US branch.
- (5) M-7-YaR-J: It will be definitely ‘more important’ to me. Take my company as an example, I am in a pharmaceutical company co-invested by companies from both China and New Zealand. Our company is growing well and we have opened 2 branches in Australia and our next target market is Europe, so our company is in need for more talents proficient in English.
- (6) M-9-NC-G: English will be more and more important because China is playing a more and more important role in the world and we need to let the world realize this. But how? By publicity in English as it is the most widely used global language. We also need to introduce a more prosperous and beautiful China to the outside world. How? Of course, through English publicity too. Chinese people are also watching more and more movies, TV series and variety shows in English. So I can see no way that English won’t become more important in China.

To Question 3: *Do you know about China English? If yes, do you think it is acceptable or unacceptable? Why or why not?* 24 (54.5%) interviewees had heard of or read about China English. Among them, 18 regarded it as acceptable because it is inevitable that China English will bear some Chinese characteristics due to the linguistic and cultural influences from their mother tongue and culture (see Example 7). One interviewee even discussed China English in spoken form and written form, arguing that the former is acceptable but not the latter (see Example 8). All the other six considered China English unacceptable because they mistook it as Chinglish (Chinglish is ‘*Zhongshi Yingyu*’ in Mandarin whereas China English is ‘*Zhongguo Yingyu*’). After being explained about the difference between the two terms, five of them changed their opinion and thought of China English as acceptable (see Example 9), but one interviewee still held negative attitude towards it.

- (7) M-20-SC-P: Yes, I have heard of it. I think it is inevitable for us to speak English in the Chinese way, since we are using it in China, our own language will influence on the way we use it. Sometimes you can only express some ideas in China English, for example, when you wanna introduce a Chinese food to a foreigner, how can you do it without China English?
- (8) F-1-EC-F: Yes, I know. I think it is acceptable in oral English but not in written English. In oral English, it doesn’t matter what kind of English you are speaking as long as you

can get yourself understood by others. In written English, we have time to think about and read and even re-read our words, so we still need to follow standardized English if we are able to.

- (9) M-18-EC-C: Yes, but I think Chinglish is poor English, and it may not be understood by foreigners.

Interviewer: Sorry for my interruption, but I need to clarify something. I am asking you about China English, not Chinglish. China English is a variety of English which has the standardized Englishes as its core but is colored with characteristic features of Chinese phonology, lexis, syntax and discourse pragmatics, and which is particularly suited for expressing content ideas specific to Chinese culture. For example, 'long time no see' is considered China English while 'good good study' ['hao hao xuexi' in Mandarin, literally means 'study hard'] is Chinglish.

M-18-EC-C: Oh, in that case, I think it is acceptable.

Among those 20 interviewees who did not know about China English, 11 of them thought that they could accept it after being explained what is China English as shown in Example 9, four of them did not take a side while the remaining five regarded it as non-standard hence unacceptable. To sum up, 34 (77.3%) of all the interviewees agreed that China English is acceptable.

DISCUSSION

Bolton and Botha (2015a: 207) have pointed out that 'the effects of globalization are particularly felt in Asian societies' (see also Bolton 2013), therefore English as the most widely used global language is playing an increasingly important role nowadays in this part of the world, and China is no exception. What has been presented in this paper resonates with this trend in some way. Although the overall percentages of people using English in their workplace do not seem to be high (with 25.5 per cent and 20.9 per cent for written and spoken communication respectively), the prospect of the use of English in China and hence of China English as a developing variety is worthy of looking forward to, especially when considering the following facts.

First of all, there is an astonishingly large number of people learning English in China and this number is still increasing. For example, statistics show that there were more than 190.57 million students receiving formal classroom English instruction in the country in 2014 (Ministry of Education 2015). Graddol (2010: 14) also argues that 'China may already have more people who speak English than India'. Take the professional world for example, the use of English has become more common over the past two decades. As shown by the results of the present study, the participants used English frequently in professional communications like external email messages, promotional materials, letters, formal meetings/negotiations, seminars, professional journals/magazines, and websites. The 'company' group in this study exhibited a clear tendency to use English quite frequently in their work and attached significant importance to English in their professional communications. Professionals working in companies, especially in foreign-capital enterprises and joint ventures, tend to be the major users of English in China's professional world and to play a leading role in shaping the future of English in China.

Second, as reported earlier, more than half of the participants held the opinion that English is important. This will naturally lead to the continuing booming and promotion

of learning and using English in China. Specifically, about 52 per cent of the participants in this study believed that English is important while only about 36 per cent of them considered it unimportant. The interview findings confirmed the importance of English in that most (65.9%) of the interviewees considered that English had become more important in their work, and nearly all (95.5%) of them believed it will become more important in China. In addition, the majority (77.3%) of the interviewees perceived China English as acceptable. The interview data also provided evidence about the sociolinguistic need and basis for the use and development of China English.

Third, English is not only being learnt but also used in many domains in China, to name a few, business and trade, hotel and tourism, research and development, and media and communication. Many participants in this study who reported using English frequently in their workplace were also from diversified industries, as mentioned earlier in the previous section. Take academic research as an example, China is now the third-largest producer of international research articles, after the EU bloc and the US. 'The number of papers authored by Chinese scientists grew an average of more than 15 per cent annually between 2001 and 2011, rising from three per cent of global research article output to 11 per cent over the decade' (Morrison 2014). Bolton and Botha (2015b: 173) also stated that 'China's increasing spending on research, and the growing proportion of research articles in leading journals . . . entails a proficiency in English as the international academic lingua franca'.

Last but not least, China has a great shortage of professionals who are proficient in English, especially in the fields like finance, trade, engineering, chemical industry, information technology, international laws, media and communication, and tourism (Zhang 2007). The results of the present study also showed that these industries (except for international laws) were those where English was frequently used. Ever since 2004, China's economy has developed very fast and become increasingly influential in global economy. China's nominal gross domestic product was US\$1.93 trillion and positioned number six globally in 2004 (Chen 2005) and was US\$10.36 trillion and number two in 2014 (Wikipedia 2014). With the economic development, more Chinese enterprises have invested in other parts of the world. China's overseas direct investment was more than her foreign direct investment for the first time in 2014 (Lu 2015). China is practicing her influence not only in economic field but also in many other fields such as culture and education. China has now become the third largest cultural product exporting country after the UK and the US (Wan 2011) and the third most favored nation of international students after the US and the UK (Chhapia 2014). However, if the nation intends to keep on her development and internationalization, the practical need for English promotion in China cannot be ignored, especially among people working for government and public service units as suggested by the results of this study. The enhancement of English proficiency of these two groups of people will undoubtedly help to improve their overall service and support for the development of the country. What has been discussed here helps to explain why most of the interviewees in the current study believe that English has and will become more important in their workplace in China.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of a large-scale questionnaire investigation, this article has reported the language choice and use pattern in China's professional world. Although the use of English

by the participants from various domains in China is not so prevalent, the importance they lay on the language cannot be ignored. What is more, the percentages, though not high, of people using English in workplace do indicate a very large English-using population considering the tremendous number of English learners in China. The findings highlight China's great need for professionals with sound English proficiency and also suggest that China English is still at its developing stage. There surely will be a long way to go before it develops into a well-codified, well-promoted, and well-accepted variety.

As one motive behind this investigation, the findings from this study provide some empirical support for the necessity and practicality of the development of China English as a new variety from the perspective of its use in the professional world. If English promotion is a must in China as discussed previously, in the long run it will be necessary and practical to recognize the legitimacy of China English on a par with standardized Englishes since it is believed that English learners and users in China will develop a stronger sense of ownership of English and feel more confident while using it (Kirkpatrick 2007; He 2015). The legitimacy and recognition may become a reality since English is already 'being shaped, in its international uses, at least as much by its non-native speakers as its native speakers' (Seidlhofer 2011: 7) and 'variation in English is inevitable in any society where it is widely used' (Deterding & Salbrina 2013: 7). In reality, 'various cultures throughout the world have adopted and re-invented English' (Davis 2010: 26). While China English contains irreplaceable local characteristics, it is the more suitable choice rather than other English varieties in the context of China (Yun 2013).

With 2,247 participants from 35 industries, the results and findings yielded in the present study have provided a window for understanding and contextualizing the use of English in the professional workplace in China. However, this study still has its limitations. Although the participants came from a variety of industries and all regions in China, the sample was not so representative of the whole English-using population in the professional world of the country due to the method of participant selection. Therefore, the results and findings might be relatively tentative. Considering the vast number of English learners and users and complex linguistic landscapes in China, an authentic picture of the use of China English would be available from a more representative sample of participants in a national-scale investigation on broader issues concerning China English. These issues may include linguistic features, cultural conceptualizations, and identity construction, among many others.

NOTES

1. The 35 industries and the related percentages are: finance (10.9%), education (including research, 10.7%), manufacturing (9.7%), trade (7.8%), government (7.2%), service industry in broad sense (excluding those specified in this list, 5.6%), medical industry (5.6%), construction (3.4%), media and communication (3.1%), information technology (2.5%), energy (2.5%), internet (2.4%), logistics (2.3%), clothing (2.1%), retail (2.0%), transportation (1.9%), engineering (1.9%), advertising (1.8%), insurance (1.6%), publishing (1.6%), telecommunication (1.4%), tourism (1.4%), public relations (1.3%), real estate (1.2%), marketing (1.2%), environmental protection (1.0%), optics (1.0%), catering (0.9%), law (0.9%), textile (0.8%), agricultural technology (0.8%), electronics (0.6%), military (0.6%), chemical industry (0.5%), and entertainment (0.3%).
2. The codes of each interviewee include the information below in turn: gender (F – female, M – male); industries ('1' – '29' stand for 'finance' to 'law' respectively as listed in Note 1 above, '30' – 'chemical industry'); economic regions ('NE' – 'NW' for 'northeast' to 'northwest' respectively as shown in Table 3 and the related note); type of organization and ownership of company ('G' – 'government', 'P' – 'public service unit', 'C' – 'China-owned company', 'F' – 'Foreign-owned company', 'J' – 'China-foreign joint venture'). For example, F-4-NE-F refers to a female interviewee from a foreign-owned trading company in northeast China.

APPENDIX

Language use in the professional world

This questionnaire is designed to provide information about language use in the professional workplace in China. The information you provide will enable us to better understand the communication needs of professionals in China and thereby enhancing teaching and learning. All data collected will be treated in the strictest confidence and be used only for research purposes without mentioning your name while reporting.

1. Personal information

Please answer each item by ticking (\checkmark) the appropriate number or filling in the blank.

1. Gender: (1) Female (2) Male
2. Age: (1) 24 or below (2) 25–29 (3) 30–34 (4) 35–39
(5) 40–44 (6) 45–49 (7) 50–54 (8) 55 or over
3. Years of English learning:
(1) ≤ 5 (2) 6–10 (3) 11–14 (4) ≥ 15
4. Highest academic level achieved:
(1) Senior high school or equivalent (2) Higher Diploma
(3) Bachelor's Degree (4) Master's Degree
(5) Doctoral Degree
5. Years of working experience:
(1) ≤ 5 (2) 6–10 (3) 11–15 (4) 16–20 (5) 21–25
(6) 26–30 (7) 31–35 (8) 36–40 (9) ≥ 41
6. Rank in current job: (1) Senior (2) Middle (3) Junior
7. Industry/Profession: _____
8. Job title: _____
9. City where you work: _____
10. Type of organization:
(1) Government (i.e. Civil Service) (go to **Q.13**)
(2) Public service unit (e.g. school) (go to **Q.13**)
(3) Company
11. Ownership of company:
(1) China-owned
(2) Foreign-owned (e.g. Japanese), please specify: _____
(3) China-foreign joint venture, please specify: _____
12. Size of company:
(1) Small (≤ 50 employees) (2) Medium (51–100) (3) Large (≥ 101)

2. Language use in the professional workplace

Please provide information about the roles of the English and Chinese languages in your professional life.

2.1 Written communication

Please indicate which language(s) you use when **reading** or **writing** each text type at work by ticking (✓) the appropriate number on the scale.

Text type	Always English	Usually English	English & Chinese equally	Usually Chinese	Always Chinese
13. Letters	1	2	3	4	5
14. Memos (hard copy)	1	2	3	4	5
15. Faxes	1	2	3	4	5
16. Internal email messages	1	2	3	4	5
17. External email messages	1	2	3	4	5
18. Reports	1	2	3	4	5
19. Minutes	1	2	3	4	5
20. Legal documents	1	2	3	4	5
21. Notices	1	2	3	4	5
22. Promotional materials	1	2	3	4	5
23. Circulars/Newsletters	1	2	3	4	5
24. Professional journals/magazines	1	2	3	4	5
25. Websites	1	2	3	4	5
26. Text message	1	2	3	4	5
27. Skype/QQ	1	2	3	4	5

2.2 Spoken communication

Please indicate which language you are **most likely to speak** or **listen** in the following speaking/listening situations at work by ticking (✓) the appropriate number on the scale.

Speaking/listening situations	Putonghua	English	Other (please specify)
28. Formal meetings/negotiations (i.e. with agenda, minutes)	1	2	
29. Informal meetings/discussions	1	2	
30. Staff training/development	1	2	
31. Presentations	1	2	
32. Conferences	1	2	
33. Seminars	1	2	
34. Job interviews (as interviewee/-er)	1	2	
35. Appraisal interviews (as appraisee/-er)	1	2	
36. Telephoning	1	2	
37. WeChat	1	2	
38. Skype/QQ	1	2	
39. Socializing with colleagues	1	2	

3. Use of English in the professional workplace

Please indicate **how often you use English** for various professional purposes by ticking (✓) the appropriate number on the scale.

1	2	3	4	5	6
Never	Seldom	Not very often	Sometimes	Often	Always
	(once/twice a year)	(once/twice every 4 months)	(once/twice a month)	(once/twice a week)	(almost every day)

3.1 Writing in English

Please indicate **how often** you write each text type in English.

Text type	Never	Seldom	Not very often	Sometimes	Often	Always
40. Letters	1	2	3	4	5	6
41. Memos (hard copy)	1	2	3	4	5	6
42. Faxes	1	2	3	4	5	6
43. Internal email messages	1	2	3	4	5	6
44. External email messages	1	2	3	4	5	6
45. Reports	1	2	3	4	5	6
46. Minutes	1	2	3	4	5	6
47. Notices	1	2	3	4	5	6
48. Promotional materials	1	2	3	4	5	6
49. Text message	1	2	3	4	5	6
50. Skype/QQ	1	2	3	4	5	6

3.2 Reading in English

Please indicate **how often** you read each text type in English.

Text type	Never	Seldom	Not very often	Sometimes	Often	Always
51. Letters	1	2	3	4	5	6
52. Memos (hard copy)	1	2	3	4	5	6
53. Faxes	1	2	3	4	5	6
54. Internal email messages	1	2	3	4	5	6
55. External email messages	1	2	3	4	5	6
56. Reports	1	2	3	4	5	6
57. Minutes	1	2	3	4	5	6
58. Legal documents	1	2	3	4	5	6
59. Notices	1	2	3	4	5	6
60. Promotional materials	1	2	3	4	5	6
61. Circulars/Newsletters	1	2	3	4	5	6
62. Professional journals/magazines	1	2	3	4	5	6
63. Websites	1	2	3	4	5	6
64. Text message	1	2	3	4	5	6
65. Skype/QQ	1	2	3	4	5	6

3.3 Speaking and listening in English

Please indicate **how often** you speak or listen to English in each situation.

Speaking/listening situations	Never	Seldom	Not very			
			often	Sometimes	Often	Always
66. Formal meetings or negotiations (i.e. with agenda, minutes)	1	2	3	4	5	6
67. Informal meetings/discussions	1	2	3	4	5	6
68. Staff training/development	1	2	3	4	5	6
69. Presentations	1	2	3	4	5	6
70. Conferences	1	2	3	4	5	6
71. Seminars	1	2	3	4	5	6
72. Telephoning	1	2	3	4	5	6
73. WeChat	1	2	3	4	5	6
74. Skype/QQ	1	2	3	4	5	6
75. Socializing with colleagues	1	2	3	4	5	6

4. Importance of languages

Please indicate **how important** the following languages are in your current job.

	Completely unimportant					Extremely important
		<	<	>	>	
76. Putonghua	1	2	3	4	5	6
77. Written Chinese	1	2	3	4	5	6
78. Spoken English	1	2	3	4	5	6
79. Written English	1	2	3	4	5	6

Thank you very much for your participation!

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