

Local Bilingual Teachers and International Teachers in China: Disparities in Employability and Work Experience

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Abstract. “Despite the division of work in subjects, wages vary dramatically for local and foreign teachers. Foreign teachers are generally paid more than double the amount of the local bilingual teacher’s wage” (School Headmaster, personal communication, August 10, 2020). With practical evidence of disparities and unequal treatment between international and local bilingual teachers, there is urgent need to address this issue because discrimination against local bilingual teachers and other unfair treatment violates teachers’ rights, since any inequalities based on race, ethnicity, or opportunities tend to challenge people’s sense of fulfillment and self-worth (The United Nations, 2017). Additionally, Kohli’s (2014) study provides evidence that learners existing in an environment where disparities are in place might observe them and become negatively impacted in the future. If these students go on to become teachers, internalized inequalities could influence their teaching, and thus inequalities are reproduced and inherited in educational settings, jeopardizing social progress and justice. With the prevalence of international schools and Chinese-English bilingual programs over the last two decades, a huge body of bilingual teachers across China are victimized, demanding for a scrutiny of the status quo (Gao & Wang, 2017). Unfortunately, current academic discourse is paying insufficient attention to the issue, focusing mainly on bilingual education typologies, the development of Chinese-English bilingual education, and teacher collaboration between Chinese and international faculty, albeit the issue’s importance and urgency. The purposes of this study lie greatly in the absence of relevant discussion of the problem. I aim to strengthen the knowledge base in the academic literature about Chinese-English bilingual education and to arise people’s awareness of racial and linguistic equities by revealing possible disparities between teachers and promoting justice for employees in Chinese-English high school level bilingual programs. To serve the above purposes, this study investigates the differences in recruitment processes and daily work experience between international and local bilingual teachers based on Phillipson’s (1992) concept of linguistic imperialism.

Keywords: bilingual education, bilingual teachers, international education, teacher employability.

1. Literature Review

While this study aims to investigate disparities in recruitment processes, requirements, and work experience between international and local staff, the current academic discourse addressing teacher employability and work experience mainly focuses on those of the international teachers. This section presents studies about international teachers’ teaching, recruitment requirements for international teachers, and international teachers’ work experience in similar contexts.

Tatar (2019) studies the employment criteria used by school administrators and how administrators perceive the strengths and weaknesses of international versus local teachers in Istanbul, Turkey. Tatar’s results indicate eight prevalent hiring criteria, namely 1) educational background/training, 2) a “standard” pronunciation of English (referring to the native way of speaking English in English-speaking Western countries such as the U.S., the U.K, Australia, and Canada), 3) teaching certificate/master’s degree, 4) teaching experience, 5) references from individuals/institutions, 6) experience staying/living abroad, 7) being a native speaker of English, and 8) citizenship, with the two most important qualities being the presence of ITs in a school and fact they are native speakers. However, administrators do recognize that local teachers are often more knowledgeable in teaching methods (Tatar, 2019). Similar results are present in Kiczkowiak’s (2020) study investigating recruiters’ attitudes toward native and non-native English-speaking teachers in multiple national contexts. While teaching experience, qualifications, and recruitment performance are essential criteria

for over 90% of recruiters, more than half of the recruiters still consider “native-speakerness” important. Concerns for hiring non-native speaker teachers include lower English proficiency and negative feedback from clients, although recruiters show a higher satisfaction rate with non-native English speakers (Kiczkowiak, 2020). This study also sheds light on advice about how recruiters can create equal opportunity hiring systems in the future. Critical advice includes educating clients (students and parents) about the benefits and strengths of non-native speaker teachers to change their biases against them and stop using native-speakerness as a selling point. In another study conducted in the context of South Korea, North American, young, white, and women instructors are manifested to be preferred by ESL business owners while Korean language ability is considered one of the least important characteristics of teachers in this study. (Hart, 2006). In contrast, Budrow & Tarc (2018) find in their qualitative interviews with recruiters from 8 countries that cultural awareness, adaptability to both the school and the cultural context, and pedagogical flexibility were top-ranked themes, with no salience of English, English language learning, or race and ethnicity.

Regarding international teachers’ work experience and collaboration with the local teachers, Kostogriz & Bonar (2019) study the relational tensions between international and local teachers in their process of building professional collaborations. They reveal that tensions and differences between international and local teachers in the international school context are present in 1) international teachers tend to have less sense of belonging to the school than local teachers, largely due to their language barriers and duties, such as not having to be students’ homeroom teachers and thus not being able to bond with students as easily, 2) international teachers and local teachers display different understandings for professionalism that hinder their collaboration and lead to (unfair) mutual judgment, and 3) international teachers are commonly observed to develop arrogance in their pedagogies and language use, feeling that it is a waste of time to collaborate with local teachers or as observe in classes. Finally, Poole (2019) indicates in his study with international teachers from 2 international schools in Shanghai that they face problems of financial insecurity, lack of agency, and marginalization of professional identities, aligning with Kostogriz & Bonar (2019)’s findings.

To fill in the existing research gap, this study approaches the issue adopting Phillipson’s (1992) concept of linguistic imperialism. Williams (1976) as cited in Phillipson (1992) defines imperialism as an imperial power controlling and exploiting its physical and cultural colonies mostly politically and militarily. Another definition of imperialism includes and even emphasizes economic and cultural interference, which is connected with the development of soft power in the post-colonial era. The idea of linguistic imperialism falls under this latter frame of imperialism (Phillipson, 1992, p. 45). Phillipson points out six types of interlocking imperialism: economic, political, military, communicative, cultural, and social. He argues that linguistic imperialism is embedded in each of them, for language is the primary and necessary medium through which people communicate ideologies (Phillipson, 1992). He gives a definition of English linguistic imperialism as when “the dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages” (Phillipson, 1992, p. 47). These structural and cultural inequalities then lead to constant unequal resource allocation, both material and immaterial, to favor English over other languages and English speakers over speakers of other languages. This study adopts this overarching definition of English linguistic imperialism as a conceptual framework in examining disparities between international and local bilingual teachers.

In his own works, Phillipson has applied this concept of linguistic imperialism to address how underqualified Native English Speaker Teachers who lack essential multicultural and multilingual qualities have acted as inter-state actors in facilitating English linguistic imperialism in Asia, with support from a state-level agency, such as the British Council (Phillipson, 2016). He also discusses how English is marketized and commercialized by Anglo American-centric individuals and organizations, endowed with the image of a universal language, a language offering greater opportunities, a language necessary to become a global citizen, and bound with the elite class of countries that are “in need of aid” from Western countries (Phillipson, 1997, 2008, 2016). This process of marketizing English has contributed to retaining structural and cultural inequalities

between English-speaking countries and non-English-speaking countries. This study's use of the concept shares similarities with Phillipson's own study, as it also strives to decipher disparities between teachers for sociolinguistic reasons and uncovers English superiority in a local context. The concept is primarily consulted in the process of developing survey instruments and interpretation of the data.

2. Research Design

Although this potential issue of inequality between international and local teachers exists at more than one school level, this study specifically looks at the high school level (grades 10-12 in the Mainland China context) for two reasons. First, grades 1-9 are compulsory education in China, where the content of education is determined and overseen by different levels of governmental agencies, from the Chinese Ministry of Education to local provincial-level governments (Ministry of Education of People's Republic of China [henceforth MOE PRC], 2009). Situated in this system, students graduating from the 9th grade need to pass a state-mandated exam to receive their degree, which adds to the difficulty of implementing a bilingual program that deviates from what the Ministry of Education requires for grades 1-9 (MOE PRC, 2009). Second, the 2019 Measures for the Administration of Overseas Teaching Materials for Schools announced by the Ministry of Education clearly stipulate that no overseas teaching materials shall be used at compulsory education levels (MOE PRC, 2019). Because textbooks in English are mostly imported from English-speaking countries, this document from the Ministry of Education further puts the construction of Chinese-English bilingual education at the compulsory education level into stagnation, and debates about whether bilingual programs at the compulsory levels are still legitimate have attracted educators' attention with the release of this document. As a result, bilingual programs at the compulsory education level are ruled out for this research; it focuses only on grades 10-12, which are high school levels in Mainland China. All participants involved in this study are engaged in high school level of bilingual education and only speak for this school level in their information provided.

This study is conducted with participants who are all from or work in Chengdu, Sichuan, China. This location is chosen because it is the provincial capital of Sichuan and is experiencing rapid economic growth in recent years (Bloomberg News, 2019). While families are becoming more economically powerful, international teachers are still scarce compared to megacities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. In my preliminary conversation with an anonymous school headmaster, they confirmed that the scarcity of international teachers plays an important role in existing disparities among international teachers and local bilingual teachers. Therefore, the high scarcity of international teachers in Chengdu means that Chengdu is likely to be an information-intensive location to conduct this research.

The selecting criteria for participants are: if they are 1) a Chinese teacher who has taught or is teaching in the upper division of a bilingual school or bilingual program (e.g., a public or private school international division) in Chengdu, Sichuan, and has taught a non-English subject bilingually during your career, OR 2) an international teacher who has taught or is teaching in the upper division of a bilingual school or bilingual program in Chengdu, Sichuan, OR 3) a school administrator (director level or above, with some recruitment decision rights) who has worked or is working in a bilingual school or program in Chengdu, Sichuan. Snowball sampling was used for recruiting participants. A participant recruiting document was circulated to people who might have connections to the targeted participants and initial participants was asked to circulate the document in their circles. Ten participants belonging to this group participated in my study. Their demographic information is summarized in Table 1 below:

Table 1 Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonyms	Gender	Nationality	Role	Subject	Years of teaching	Years of teaching in China
Ashley	F	Chinese	Director of Teaching	Mathematics	13 yrs	13 yrs
Elise	F	Chinese	Local Bilingual Teacher	Chemistry	0.5yrs	0.5yrs
Joseph	M	Irish and English	International Teacher	Mathematics	23 yrs	4yrs
Sharon	F	Chinese	Local Bilingual Teacher	Economics	5 yrs	5 yrs
Laura	F	Chinese	Chinese Principal, Head of Primary and Middle Schools	ESL	30 yrs	30 yrs
Nicole	F	Indian	International Teacher	Economics and Business	16 yrs	7 yrs
Linda	F	Chinese	Center Liason Officer	N/A	N/A	N/A
Cindy	F	Chinese	Center Liason Officer	N/A	N/A	N/A
Patrick	M	Chinese	Local Bilingual Teacher	Mathematics	4 yrs	4 yrs
Julia	F	Chinese	Vice Principal of Middle School	Chemistry	10 yrs	10 yrs

In-depth one-on-one and semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 10 participants. The interview protocols were designed for a 30- to 45-minute interview with each participant, but all participants were so actively engaged that all interviews exceeded one hour of length. Designed around my research questions “How do the recruitment processes differ for international teachers and local bilingual teachers?” and “How does the daily experience of working differ for international teachers and local bilingual teachers?”, the interview protocol aimed to investigate the following constructs: 1) participants’ demographic information 2) recruitment processes, requirements, and preferences for international and local teachers, respectively, and 3) teachers’ work experience, including division of duties between international and local teachers, their collaboration, as well as how they generally feel during the experience of working as teachers in their current position.

3. Summary of the Findings

In general, participants did not feel that students treat them differently because of their nationalities. In contrast, all participants observed different treatment of international teachers and local bilingual teachers from parents. From LauraC’s experience, parents are very passionate about international teachers, and she offered her interpretation:

For so many years, China has been colonized, mentally and physically by the Western powers, so the Chinese people have always said that we have to learn from the Westerners. We have a weak mentality. If there are no foreign faces here, they will not buy in. This is marketing, but there are also parents, especially those who have suffered in the international school that want a Chinese teacher to raise the score. Also, Chinese parents are not at all polite to Chinese teachers but respect the foreign teachers.

LauraC’s observation is typical among all Chinese interviewees. JuliaC added to this point by saying, “I think this is also a consumer mentality, like spending more than \$100,000 on tuition, you always have to be different from the institutional schools. The most obvious manifestation of this is that I have a few more white people in this school”. Additionally, Joseph expressed his opinion from an IT’s perspective:

They paid so much to go to an international school, they want to see foreign teachers and foreign faces, and with the local teachers, they would be like why am I paying for you? As foreigners, parents do treat them differently. They are sending their children to an international school to study in English, learning English, that's what they are paying for, but there must be a visible purpose to go to the international school, and that is the foreigners, I suppose. That's just what the market is.

PatrickC shared identical observations about why he thinks parents have a much higher tolerance level for ITs:

Parents feel that a Chinese teacher’s teaching just isn't international enough, and that a foreigner must teach to satisfy them.

Evidence also suggests international teachers enjoy shorter recruitment processes and less rigorous requirements than local bilingual teachers due to their scarcity. Resumé screening is a must for all yet local bilingual teachers usually have to submit a demo lesson in addition. However, according to Joseph, an Irish and English mathematics teacher who has taught in three different schools in Chengdu, he was only asked to do a simple demo lesson for one school. He describes his employment process at the current school as:

It was very simple. I arrived, interviewed with the head of secondary, and they offered the job. I didn't even apply. I sent them a CV, and within a couple of days I signed a contract. I didn't do a demo class.

LauraC said that administrators do not require demo lessons from international teachers because “they are not used to it, and we instead use scenario-based inquiry to examine their classroom management and teaching skills”. JuliaC approached this question from a different angle. She explained that the recruitment process differs also because ITs apply through different channels:

The process for foreign teachers is pretty much the same, but many foreign teachers go from headhunting. When the headhunter is involved, he may have already recorded a video for the teacher, or he already has some detailed information for the school. Then the school may have an online interview next because the foreign teacher is all over the country and all over the world. Then after the communication is done most of the time his demo is either already recorded in the headhunting agency, or he will record a video later and send it to us. But there is no or very rarely subject knowledge test. Most of the time we look at the background of the foreign teacher, his teaching, and his major. So, I think relatively speaking foreign teachers, because of their scarcity, the process will be faster with less screening.

AshleyC shares similar opinion by saying:

Because good foreign teachers are so hard to find, especially in the Chengdu area, we have to speed up the screening process. Candidates are applying to multiple schools at the same time, and if you don't hurry up, they'll sign the contract with other schools. It's a competition.

Recruiters also have different preferred qualities for international and local teachers. Preferred qualities for local bilingual teachers mainly look at their past teaching experiences and results indicated by past college admissions results and standardized testing scores. In contrast, preferred qualities for international teachers are mainly their past experiences, particularly in major English-speaking Western countries and Western curricula, stability, favorable background checks, and willingness to learn about China.

Strengths and weaknesses of each type of teacher were discussed with interview participants. International teachers are generally the more privileged in all schools, which is reflected through their daily work experiences. Though all teachers except one are generally satisfied with their current job, international teachers are treated with fewer expectations and more respect. In comparison, local bilingual teachers face higher expectations from school administrators and must take on more duties. A clear division of subjects is observed. Humanities, ESL, and arts are subjects where international teachers are strongly preferred, and these would be very difficult for local bilingual teachers to take on, presumably because they are English-intensive, and school administrators assume local bilingual teachers are less qualified due to their non-English-native-speakerness. Sciences, mathematics, and standardized tests tend to fall on local bilingual teachers in their departments, but international teachers are still welcomed. Local bilingual teachers are paid much less than international teacher, although it is inconclusive to quantify the gap with an insufficient amount of data. All 10 participants admitted that a Chinese bilingual humanities teacher is very rare and is exceptionally uncommon at the high school level. English subjects, including English as a second language and English literature, are both taught by native English-speaking staff. SharonC, AshleyC, and PatrickC indicated although local bilingual teachers are more common in teaching maths and sciences, all subjects prefer international teachers. When recruiters cannot find matching international teachers, they will substitute international teachers with local bilingual teachers. As PatrickC explained, schools want to give students an immersive environment where they learn from the native speakers that speak English only. CindyC was proud when introducing her school that the use of Chinese is forbidden in and out of class because students need to accommodate the English-speaking environment as soon as possible to prepare for future college-level studies. PatrickC provided another reason that he thinks using English is suitable for students because it also trains students in the western way of thinking, which is embedded in the language.

Racism and linguisticism are observed within international teachers. The only non-White and non-English native speaker teacher in her school was discriminated and humiliated because of her nationality, race, and mother tongue. Being an English native speaker international teacher is also highly valued by recruiters and by parents. Moreover, while all interviewees acknowledge there are certain disparities among international teachers and local bilingual teachers, both international teachers and local bilingual teachers have accepted the status quo; they attribute it to parents' demands and claim that their schools can do nothing in this market because they must survive.

In conclusion, native-speakerism and English supremacy in Mandarin-English bilingual programs in China are manifested in this study. All evidence aligns with Phillipson's (1992, p.47) definition of English linguistic imperialism as when "the dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages". In the context of this study, the dominance of English is both the reason and the result of international and local bilingual teachers' unequal treatment in professional settings. The linguisticism toward local bilingual teachers and the emphasis on English native-speakerism establish and enhance English's dominant role in Mandarin-English bilingual programs, which in turn further exacerbates existing disparities between international and local bilingual teachers.

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