

# Impacts of the Corona Virus Pandemic on English Learning in China

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**Abstract** According to the available statistics of 2016, more than 400 million people were learning English as a second language. The numbers had drastically risen since this data was published. This was evidenced by the continuous opening of private institutions offering English lessons all over China. Private English training centers had become the backbone of English learning in China before the sudden outbreak of the corona virus in China first and to the rest of the world. The pandemic brought many changes to the education sector as well as the nature of English learning in China. This article is a general overview of how English learning was affected by the outbreak of the corona virus. It also looks at how the government policies are affecting English learning especially for young learners. In the article there are suggestions on how to possibly improve English language learning.

**Keywords** English learning, Corona virus, Students, Teachers, Private institutions

## 1. Introduction

Before the corona virus pandemic, the nature of English learning in China was quite encouraging and motivating for students to study English. According to the available data for English learning in China as of 2016, around 400 million people were learning English and the number was increasing very fast. Many English private centers were opening for it was becoming a very good business. Although these training centers were open for everyone to learn English, the main targeted age groups were students from 3 years to 16 years old. China's education system is very competitive and parents give all they have for their children to get quality education especially in foreign language learning. The problem of competitiveness in the education of China was mainly caused by the previous one-and two-child policies, which made parents put a lot of pressure on their children to always be better than their peers. According to the Chinese Society of Education, which is the most recent data available, over 75 percent of students aged 5-17 years attended after-school tutoring in 2016, especially for language learning and other core subjects.

In public schools, students were having English classes with foreign teachers at least two times a week and having three classes a week with local teachers. This was quite a motivating atmosphere for students to learn and speak

English. Having English classes everyday gave students the desire and motive to speak a foreign language. Their English homework was being checked on a daily basis. Having classes every day and having foreign teachers made the classroom environment so good for students to practice speaking English. English learning language learning in China requires a lot of motivation because English as a foreign language, students do not have enough time and opportunity to practice their English speaking. The majority of homes in China do not provide an English-speaking environment and the only place of practice they have is in the classroom.

Public schools were also organizing activities which promoted English speaking and exposed students to foreign culture as well. Public activities also encouraged students to learn in a fun way. These activities were so interesting for kids and removed the mentality that English should be spoken in the classroom only. The English outdoor activities also increased the confidence of students to speak English to everyone not their teacher alone. Other activities which were being done in many primary schools included facilitating interaction between students of different levels and grades. This was a very creative way to let students learn from each other and inspire each other to speak English. This also helped in boosting the confidence of students in speaking English. Some students knew a lot of English vocabulary but were afraid to speak out. The activities helped them to gather more confidence to be able to speak.

There were also many private training centers which were offering after school English classes before the outbreak of the corona virus in early 2020. China was hit first and hit hard with the pandemic. No one saw it coming

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and no one had prepared for it. In these private learning centers provided very good learning environment for students who wished to learn foreign languages. These schools offered English language classes for all age groups. The students were not only learning the language, that is, grammar, writing, reading and oral lessons, the students also had the opportunity to learn about different world cultures. To ensure that this was achieved, the private learning centers would engage foreign teachers to plan the events because they know more about cultures outside China more than the Chinese people. This allowed students to learn other things in the English culture and other cultures around the world. This was beneficial for students because when learning a language, it is also important to learn about the culture of the people who speak that language. Learning other cultures also help to know more about how people outside your country live.

Many kindergartens around China had introduced the learning of children. Before the outbreak of the pandemic, it had become a norm that kindergarten students have English classes. In some kindergartens they would hire foreign teachers for part time jobs and the students will have English classes at least once a week. In some kindergartens the classes were put into categories. They were classes which did not have English classes at all, the other classes will have English lessons three times a week and the other type of class was the international class. The international classes were having Chinese teachers and a foreign teacher through out the whole day, five days a week. This was a very good approach to the students' English learning ability. The environment was conducive for the young learners to speak English for the whole day. The cooperation between the Chinese teacher and the foreign teacher encouraged the kids to acquire a second language at an age when they are still acquiring their first language. Learning a foreign language at an early age is good because young children grasp things quickly and their pronunciation will not be greatly affected by their mother tongue. It also generates a great zeal and interest in kids to want to learn more and develop their speaking ability.

## **2. Effects of the Corona Virus Pandemic on Education as a Whole**

When there was a serious outbreak of covid-19 pandemic in Wuhan, schools in China were already on winter-break. It seemed safe for students and no-one expected it to take longer. In every ordinary person's mind, by the time schools would open, the virus would have been dealt with. That was not case. February 2020, when it was time to open schools, the pandemic was on its peak with new cases of the virus sky-rocketing every day. Everyone was afraid because there seemed to be no way out of this pandemic. It was very clear that schools were not going to open. Notices were issued by the ministry of education to suspend all in person classes in order to curb the virus. Although the classes in all

levels were suspended the government said that it was not stopping students from learning. They dubbed "suspension of classes and non-stop learning". Online education became a trend during the peak of the corona virus pandemic.

Online teaching and learning brought its own advantages and disadvantages to education. It was an advantage because education became accessible to all the children around China. Students only required the internet to get connected to the best teachers in around China which they were not able to do with offline classes. In China, there is usually a gap on the quality of education received by students depending on the parents' socio-economic status. There is also a theory which supports this notion. The theory is called Family investment theory. Family investment theory explains how social economic status of a family can affect the education of children. This theory focuses on the economic principles of investment and points out that parents of higher social economic status have access to more resource like money and quality education compared to those of lower social economic status. This access to resources is directly connected to the successful development of their children's education (Conger and Donnellan 2007). However, with the introduction of online classes many children were able to access quality education which was inaccessible before. From offline to online lessons, education costs reduced, whether it is the cost of labor or the cost of access to educational resources. Before the introduction of online classes, a quality open class may only have thirty to forty students who would have the opportunity to hear because it was offline, but through the network dissemination, hundreds of thousands of students were able to have lessons from open classes, even children in the mountains of Yunnan could also hear the explanations of famous teachers in Beijing, which helped to promote educational fairness.

On the other hand, there were also disadvantages brought by online education. Many teachers were not trained to do online education but they had to do it because there was no option. They had to adapt with time on how to manage a class during online lessons. Traditional teaching methods no longer adapted to the new online teaching needs. The ability of educators to use online tools was an important factor affecting the effectiveness of teaching and learning. Online education is self-learning for the educated and more mature population. Strength and self-control are more demanding, and many lazy and procrastinating students were falling behind. Many children had poor self-control without the supervision of teachers which was what they were used to. Therefore, online education was not a good platform for both teachers and students especially the primary school kids.

## **3. Effects of Corona Virus Pandemic on English Education**

Almost every parent had enrolled their children in

learning English, either in kindergartens or other institutions offering English lessons before the corona virus crisis. In the face of the sudden outbreak of the corona virus, there was a great exodus of expats in China going back to their home countries. They were escaping the virus not aware that in no time it would be a world virus. Among the expats who left China, many of them were English tutors in kindergartens, government schools and private training centers. By the time China was able to contain the virus and open schools, there was a great shortage of English teachers all over China. The problem was not only the shortage of teachers but also China had closed its borders in a bid to prevent another outbreak. The teachers were therefore not able to travel back to China when the pandemic was still on its peak world-wide. When borders partially opened, the requirements to travel were so demanding for both the teachers and the employers, therefore, it was still difficult for many teachers to travel.

The government of China took a series of effective measures to ensure the safety of the people to the greatest extent, but at the same time, the suspension of work and production caused by the epidemic also had a great impact on China's economic development. During the epidemic prevention and control period, the training and education professional committee of the China Private Education Association conducted a survey on the impact of the novel coronavirus epidemic on private educational institutions organized by the Training and Education Professional Committee of 31 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities directly under the Central Government across the country, showing that more than 90% of the institutions said that the epidemic had a great impact on educational institutions, resulting in some difficulties or serious difficulties in the operation of institutions.

The impact of the epidemic on China's private educational institutions mainly came from five aspects:

#### 1. The pressure on rent expenditure was too much

After the outbreak of the epidemic began, private educational institutions completely stopped offline education activities in accordance with the requirements of government documents. Without the consumption of school hours, the institutions had no other financial incomes, and rent is an important aspect of economic expenditure. The increase in rent pressure forced some institutions to reduce the rental areas, and even the rent was withdrawn, and all teaching was converted to online. Some English teaching institutions permanently closed because they could not afford to pay for a rental space when no new students were enrolling.

#### 2. Labor costs increased, and the cost of online teaching teachers rose

During the epidemic prevention and control period, private English institutions which specialized in offline teaching could not open classes normally, but the salaries of teachers and workers employed by institutions still needed to be paid, which undoubtedly brought great

financial pressure to these institutions. At the same time, after many institutions had changed to online teaching, although teachers could simply take classes, many teachers, especially those with many years of teaching experience, had insufficient proficiency in online education informatization and they could barely meet the requirements of online teaching. The teachers in the new online era who are familiar with online education informatization became a scarce resource, resulting in an increase in the cost of class hours for a small number of teachers.

#### 3. The transformation of online teaching forms brought challenges to institutions

As mentioned above, during the epidemic prevention and control period, institutions were not allowed to carry out offline activities for a long time, and many educational institutions began to carry out online education activities through online education platforms in order to survive. Originally, institutions engaged in online teaching, such as Ape Tutoring, VIPKID, etc., as well as large institutions that implement dual-teacher teaching, such as Xueersi, New Oriental, etc., the online teaching model was relatively mature and relatively less affected. However, for most educational institutions, they have been engaged in offline teaching, which was relatively unfamiliar to the online teaching model, what kind of third-party platform is better to find, what needs to be paid attention to when taking online teaching, and how to ensure the teaching effect of online teaching, etc., are all issues that needed to be considered by educational institutions which were venturing into something they had not done before. Many institutions opened online teaching in order to ensure the consumption of class hours and retain the source of income through students who will renew their classes after the old class finished. So, the effect of online teaching was very important for English educational institutions, and many educational institutions were able to move forward after fully adopting online lessons.

#### 4. It was difficult for new students to enroll, and the renewal rate of old students was also not high

Not only institutions were being affected by the effects of the corona virus pandemic, parents also were facing the same fate. No one had prepared for this disaster. Parents with small business were greatly affected because their businesses were not operating. Some people were retrenched from their jobs and there was no income for them too. Others had their salaries slashed which means they had to adjust to lower budgets. The income of many families greatly decreased, coupled with the persistence of the epidemic, the parents had to cancel after school classes for their children. Some parents even withdrew their children from private schools to public schools where they had to pay nothing for tuition fees. This was also a big blow for English educational institutions. They had to finish the classes which were remaining for the students and had to pay the teachers doing the job without any other income

coming into their accounts. After the students completed their lessons, many of them did not renew their classes and not so many new students were coming to enroll. With this mounting pressure, they were reports where school owners could dismiss the school without paying employees or finishing lessons for students. In addition, some students and parents did not recognize the teaching effect of online courses, which also led to the difficulties in the online teaching enrollment of institutions.

### 5. Refund disputes increased dramatically

There was a great panic brought by the pandemic. Some parents were opposed to online teaching. Many parents could not see the hope of offline resumption and they were worried that educational institutions could close at any time, they started asking for refund. Before the outbreak of the pandemic, many parents could pay tuition fee for a year and it was a lot of money since the private institutions are expensive. So, the issue of refund crippled many institutions and they ended up refusing to refund some parents. Even after the classes were allowed to resume offline, some parents were still worried about the outbreak of the epidemic at any time, and they were reluctant to go to the institution for safety reasons, but they could not accept the online courses of the institution (such as fear of affecting the child's vision, the online effect is not good, etc.), and they asked for a refund. The sharp increase in parents' demand for refunds was undoubtedly worse for educational institutions with huge financial pressure, and some institutions ended up refusing to refund or delay refunds. This made the refund disputes and complaints between parents and institutions increase sharply, which further affected the enrollment and development of institutions.

### 3.1. Other Factors Currently Affecting English Learning in China

Policy suggestions and changes in foreign language learning

While English is compulsory in Chinese primary schools and has been so widely embraced, not everyone is pleased. On March 15, 2021 a wechat Official Account called One-tube daily news published an article which mentioned that there had been suggestions to abolish English classes in primary and secondary schools and not list English and other foreign languages as compulsory subjects in the national college entrance examination. Readers also posted their comments, expressing their dislike of teaching English as a compulsory subject in schools. They argued that the use of English in the curriculum means that every Chinese student is wasting time learning languages they may not use in life. They also argued that parents waste a lot of money paying for private language schools in exchange for skills that students will never use. However, others disagree, pointing out that the world is becoming a global community, and it is necessary to learn foreign languages to bridge the communication barrier. Some Chinese believe that learning English and foreign cultures will distort their own culture.

In September 2021, there was a major crackdown on private training centers, including those offering English lessons. 38% of private English training centers were shut down. Although many writers have said China is in a bid to increasingly reject English, on paper, this was the government's attempt to ease academic pressure on Chinese students. The performance gap among students learning English in primary schools is continuously getting wider, with those who attend after-school training centers performing better than those who do not. It also puts pressure on parents to work many hours outside normal working hours to raise money for after-school courses. Incomplete statistics show that Chinese urban families spend on average a quarter of their income on education, which should be free. Many parents are struggling to get their children into better primary schools. So, the Chinese government clamped down on the lucrative after-school tutoring business and piloted reforms that encouraged skilled teachers to rotate from school to school so that parents would not make tentative choices about schools for their children. Online courses have also been banned, and it has seen large online businesses such as VIP Kids that teach English online cease operations in China.

While the policies benefited Chinese students, the crackdown was so intense that a large number of students stopped taking extracurricular classes. The way English is taught in many primary schools is not enough for them to acquire a foreign language, and private training centers were helping them to improve their language learning. In the private training center, many students had the opportunity to communicate with foreign teachers, which enhanced their confidence. The policy greatly affected students who attended after school classes. On the other hand, the gap in language proficiency of students will not continue to grow drastically.

The world is becoming a community. Therefore, learning a foreign language does not prove that a person is weak. Learning a language also does not automatically indicate that you will use the skill, and stop learning the language if you do not have the opportunity to use it. The point of education is not just to make students skilled or specialized in everything they learn, but to expose them to great ideas and ideas from all over the world. There is no doubt that learning a foreign language can help students gain a global way of thinking and draw inspiration from the world, which is of great help for the future.

### 3.2. Possible Solutions that Can Promote English Learning

Although there have been closure of many private institutions offering English in China, there is still a huge number of privately run English institutions involving many relevant interest groups, including teachers, staff, students and their parents, organizers and investors, financial institutions such as banks, lessors of school venues, etc. Once various situations occur in the operation of educational institutions, there will inevitably be many

problems that cannot be ignored. In addition to the self-help of various educational institutions, the government should relax some of the rules to allow English to be taught without fear of being told to close abruptly. Many people are now afraid to invest in this field because it is uncertain whether they can operate for a long time or they will be told to close again.

#### Teacher Training.

The pandemic hit hard when no one was prepared. Almost everyone took education to online but not so many teachers were trained to teach online. The quality of English lessons was greatly compromised. It was a lesson for everyone to learn that we must always stay equipped incase the inevitable happens.

After the decision to move online, on the third day of the Chinese New Year, the teaching teachers began to teach and research online, test courses, familiarize themselves with the online course model, and the operating teachers began to notify parents online, and remotely guided parents and students to install and test equipment. This was all done in a hurry within a short period of time in order not to stop children from learning but the reality is students suffered the most from not getting the quality education they were used to. It should become mandatory that all teachers should be properly trained on how to properly conduct online lessons the way they are also trained to conduct offline. The transition to online education was so rough and bumpy for teachers, students and parents as well. The adjustment of teaching forms, including the adjustment of teaching methods and adjustment of courseware PPT, content, teaching methods needed the teachers to be fully trained. It is the teachers' approach that not only greatly improves the educational effect, but also touches the hearts of parents.

#### Parents' involvement

It has been proven by what happened during the corona virus pandemic that education can be compromised due to some unavoidable situations. Most homes in China speak Chinese at home and some parents can not speak English and their children's level of English might be higher than them. It shows that many homes do not provide the environment for their children to practice speaking English. The reason why most parents enroll their children into private institutions to learn English is because they want them to speak English fluently. With the closure of many training centers, many children were no longer learning English outside school. It is a well-known fact that English language learning in public schools is not enough to make the children acquire English as a foreign language. The only other option students will have is to learn at home. Parents will therefore need to be actively involved in making their children improve. Parents and other children's guardians should be able to teach their own children at home. The English-speaking environment should be made available at home. English will stop being a subject only learned in school but also spoken at home.

### 3.3. Conclusions

It is the young children that have been mostly affected by the effects of corona virus pandemic and the policies on English education in China. The teachers in the institutions did not have any online education experience and on the other hand, the children of 4 to 6 years old were difficult to control during online lessons. They could not stay concentrated while not in a classroom set-up. Their learning was greatly affected. The shortage of foreign teachers made some English education to close because they heavily relied on foreign teachers for their businesses to flow. The government's harsh policies also made it difficult for many people to access quality English education. As of now, it is difficult to determine the future of English learning in China. Yes, it is the most popular learnt foreign language in China and it mandatory from primary schools up to tertiary schools but its future is very unpredictable.

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