

The language business in China

English beginning to be spoken here

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The market for English-language education in China is huge. The profits are not "MY MOTHER used to be an engineer, but now she's a housewife. I don't like her job. I want to be a designer. I like to think up new ideas." Not the words of a young British or American child, but a nine-year-old Chinese girl in Shenzhen city, southern China. And Shun Yushun is no prodigy. She is typical of her English First school, one of 68 on the mainland started by a Swedish-owned language-teaching chain.

Yushun belongs to a new generation in a country where older folks, deprived of education during the Cultural Revolution, speak almost no English at

all. Even young adults struggle, having passed through an archaic school system that still insists on the brute memorisation of words and grammar. Zhang Jin, a 24-year-old from remote Guizhou province, studied English from the age of 12 and then for four years at Huanan University. But she has trouble putting a sentence together.

Today the Chinese are obsessed with English. Anything up to a fifth of the population is learning the language. As Gordon Brown, the British finance minister, observed on a trip to China last year, in two decades China's English speakers will already outnumber native English speakers in the rest of the world. This is fuelling a market that comprises everything from books, teaching materials and tests to teacher training and language schools themselves. At \$60 billion a year, China is already the world's largest market for English-language services, estimates Mari Pearlman at ETS, an American group that developed TOEFL, a well-known test of English-language proficiency.

The bulk of this, she says, is spent on teaching materials: dictionaries, language textbooks and classroom aids. Most of these are supplied by the education arms of foreign companies in partnership with local firms. Macmillan has sold more than 100m school textbooks in China with

its partner FLTRP, which has a fifth of the market and is the leading Chinese publisher of English-language books. Longman (which belongs to Pearson, part-owner of *The Economist*), Oxford University Press and HarperCollins have popular bilingual dictionaries, while Thomson Learning has licensed its teaching materials to People's Education Press.

Never too young to learn *photo: OnAsia*



Demand for textbooks has been boosted by the government's recent lowering (from 12 to nine) of the age at which primary-school pupils start to learn English, and many eastern cities have begun teaching it at six. On some

estimates, English texts now account for up to one-fifth of the country's entire book sales. Though foreign publishers must license books to Chinese publishers, almost half the English-teaching market involves the purchase of foreign copyright.

There is also an increasing call for high-tech teaching. At its kindergartens, Beijing's municipal government has just started testing interactive whiteboards made by a British firm, Promethean. At 33,000 yuan (\$4,125) a go, they enable teachers to integrate traditional materials with movie clips, radio broadcasts and other internet content. Nicole de Lalouvière, the director of learning at the British Council in Beijing, claims its [website](#), managed with a Chinese partner and offering free tests, vocabulary and business English, has become "the biggest online university in the world", with 2m students.

Testing is also growing fast, as students with overseas ambitions practise for international college-entrance exams, and Chinese employers seek proof of English ability. Once again, foreigners are in pole position, though the two main suppliers, ETS and a venture between the British Council and Cambridge Assessment, are run as not-for-profit organisations. Teacher training promises to become another big market,

given the shortage of half a million English teachers in state schools and Beijing's push to improve English ahead of the 2008 Olympics.

Finally, there are the private language schools themselves—some 50,000 of them, reckons Ms Pearlman, from family-run outfits to chains such as English First, Wall Street English and New Oriental, a Chinese operator that claims to be the biggest, with 2.5m enrolled students. While such schools were established for adults, the demand today is from parents willing to spend up to half their household income to boost their offspring's chances. The 550 students at English First's Shenzhen school used mostly to be adults; now more than 70% are children. And they are getting younger. The rage at kindergarten these days is English-speaking classes for four-year-olds.

Adults and college students, meanwhile, can choose from the many business-English classes at foreign colleges, such as the universities of Illinois, Maryland and Nottingham, which are establishing MBA courses and even entire campuses in China to tap into the huge numbers of potential students.

Yet not all this readily translates into profit. Education remains highly regulated. It is no accident that the state propaganda department controls the ministry of education, which only recently allowed (heavily edited) English textbooks from foreign publishers into the state

system. Foreigners still cannot publish in China, receiving only royalties on their content. Their partners (such as FLTRP) use their materials to do a roaring business training teachers and running conferences. Though selling books to private language-schools can be more lucrative, these schools are also shackled. Foreign chains need a Chinese partner and must have their teaching materials approved. The difficulties and costs prompted English First to franchise all but four of its 68 schools: after a decade in China it has yet to recoup its investment.

The Chinese government is not entirely comfortable with western teaching methods. China has no government drive to welcome native English speakers, unlike Japan, where the ministry of education runs the 19-year-old JET programme, which puts thousands of foreign teachers to work in state schools. Indeed, until a few years ago, private language schools in China could be fined for hiring foreign English teachers.

Although China's passion for English is palpable, it will become a lucrative and open market only if China's Communist Party allows it to. It is reluctant because, along with English textbooks and teachers come western ways of learning and thinking—ways that might one day threaten the party's authority. **1,039 words**