

# Comparing the Attitudes towards English Language between Chinese-English Circumstantial Bilinguals and Elective Bilinguals

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**Abstract.** Alongside the tendency of globalization and economic development, more and more Chinese people are likely to master more than one language. In contemporary condition, English as the second language is the most common choice for Chinese people. Chinese people who can use both Chinese and English can be called as Chinese-English bilinguals. To be more detailed, there are two types of Chinese-English bilinguals in general --- circumstantial bilinguals and elective bilinguals respectively. The first type refers to acquire English without personal choice, for example, social mainstream language is English; meanwhile the second one refers to acquire English intentionally, such as choosing to learn language in language schools. The attitudes towards English between these two groups may have similarities and differences because of various acquiring ways. This paper would focus on the different and similar attitudes towards English language of Chinese-English circumstantial bilinguals and elective bilinguals, furthermore, to investigate the potential reasons leading to these differences and similarities.

## Literature Review

### Circumstantial bilingual versus elective bilingual

In current linguistic field, it seems that there is not an absolute definition of bilingualism. Though it is a consensus that bilingualism refers to use two different languages, what levels of linguistic proficiency can be recognized as bilingualism is still controversial. The different opinions about definition of bilingualism are from 'can use more than one language' (Macky, 1962) to 'using both languages as native-like speaker' (Bloomfield, 1933). Nevertheless, the definition of bilingualism is commonly accepted as 'the ability to use two language to produce meaningful and complete utterance' (Huagen, 1953), which is a moderate level of language proficiency. Doubtlessly, Bilingual people definitely are not the people who achieve two monolingual skills. It is impossible that a person has abilities to utilize two languages in all situations with a native-speaker level proficiency.

Valdes and Figueroa (1994) propose the perspective of circumstantial bilingual and elective bilingual. Whether the bilingual can make a self-choice to acquire an additional language is the main way to distinguish these two bilinguals. In other words, circumstance bilingual concentrates more on group or community language needs. The people whose mother tongue is different from mainstream language of surrounding communities; they have to acquire the mainstream language. Meanwhile, elective bilingual concerns on the people who choose to acquire another language owing to individual preference. The process of language acquisition usually is through artificial or conscious ways, such as acquiring through language school or private teacher. Furthermore, due to different language acquisition settings, both languages for circumstantial bilingual complement each other; the domain language varies in various settings. In contrast, elective bilingual tends to be more unbalanced bilingually, whose domain language always is their mother tongue.

Nevertheless, since elective bilinguals are always assumed that they are native-speaker of their first language, most of investigator tends to only assess their second language proficiency (Wigglesworth & Ng, 2007). As for circumstantial bilingual, both language proficiency levels are assessed. Though assessing ways are not similar, De Groot and Kroll (1997) indicates that bilingual cannot be regarded as the sum of two monolingual minds, the interaction between two languages should be concerned. Hereby, two languages of bilingual mutually effect on each other. Different

domains of language as well as various language acquisition settings significantly influence on second language performance. In regard to circumstantial and elective bilinguals, the distinction of language acquisition leads to different interaction between two languages. Thus, the performances on second language might not be similar between circumstantial elective bilinguals.

### **Chinese-English Bilingual**

Alongside the era of globalization, Chinese economic development, as well as more interaction between China and the world in various aspects, acquiring English as a second language consciously or unconsciously has been a considerable phenomenon. In recent decades, especially after Chinese cultural revolution, both Chinese government and Chinese individual have realized the benefits of acquiring English for economic values and the political power attributed to the context of globalization (Li, 2012). English rather than Russian becomes the first choice of the second language for most Chinese people, and the government also establishes a complete curriculum of English education from primary school to tertiary education. The efforts of both Chinese government and individuals produce more and more Chinese-English bilinguals with different proficiency levels.

Learning English as a second language in traditional language school and acquiring English as a second language in surrounding community are two major approaches for most of Chinese-English bilinguals. Most of Chinese people learn English through public or private English curriculums in school. But recent decades, an increasing number of Chinese go abroad for the purpose of residence, attending school, transnational marriage, etc., to reach the language needs of their surrounding communities, they have to acquire English through their surrounding contexts. To an extent, the first group of Chinese-English bilinguals we mentioned above can be regarded as elective bilingual group and the latter group is circumstantial group. In Chinese context, the elective bilingual group always learns academic English only in language school. In contrast, the Chinese-English circumstantial bilingual group is likely to use different kinds of English according to various settings. For instance, using slangs with friends, using prestigious accent when making a presentation. This phenomenon is just in line with the concept of 'linguistic capital'.

### **Attitudes towards minor language**

As well known, it is impossible to achieve absolute balance of two languages for bilingual people. Therefore, major language and minor language exist in bilingual field. In general, major language usually defines as the language used in the mainstream society or community; minor language is regarded as the language used in a certain small group. Language is deeply associated with culture; bilingual people always sustain two different cultures. How to use the major language and minor language respectively for bilingual people is due to different cultures from different languages. In Chinese condition, English is the minor language for most Chinese-English bilinguals. The bilinguals only use English in certain conditions, such as in English-speaking classes, using English with English-speaking friends. Hence, Chinese culture is more influential than British or American culture on Chinese-English bilinguals.

Rather than cultural influence, there are plenty of elements resulting in different personal's bilingual achievement, such as personal preference, gender, age and attitudes. This paper would concentrate on the element of 'attitude' which influences on bilingual achievement. Baron, R., & Byrne, D (1997) indicates that 'attitude' is related to individual mental schema that orientates conscious language acquisition. This study would explore the different and similar attitudes towards minor language --- English of Chinese-English circumstantial bilinguals and elective bilinguals.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the different attitudes towards English of Chinese-English circumstantial bilinguals and elective bilinguals?
2. What are the similar attitudes towards English of Chinese-English circumstantial bilinguals and elective bilinguals?

## Methods

### Participants

50 participants will be involved in this study. 25 participants are Chinese-English circumstantial bilinguals, who acquired English in English-speaking communities; the rest of 25 participants are Chinese-English elective bilinguals, who acquired English in English language schools or by self-learning. All of 50 participants regard English as their minor languages.

### Material

The researcher of this study develops the questionnaire (See Appendix). There are 10 questions in this questionnaire, 5 of them are positive attitudes towards English (Question 1 to Question 5); the rest of 5 questions are negative attitudes towards English (Question 6 to Question 10).

### Procedure

The participants will be required to answer the questionnaire by online survey. The results will be analyzed by SPSS t-test to investigate the different attitudes towards minor language --- English between Chinese-English circumstantial bilinguals and elective bilinguals.

## Results and discussion

Table 1 showing below is the t-test results of the questionnaire. According to Table 1, it is easy to find that the significance figures (p value) of all the 10 questions are above 0.05 ( $p > 0.05$ ), which indicates there are not significant differences between Chinese-English circumstantial bilinguals and elective bilinguals in all 10 questions. As mentioned in the part of 'methods', in this questionnaire, the first 5 questions are positive attitudes towards English; the last 5 questions are negative attitudes towards English. Non-significant results of 10 questions imply that both groups have the similar attitudes towards English language in both positive and negative aspects.

**Table 1: Independent Samples Test**

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Q1	Equal variances assumed	.465	.499	.000	48	1.000	.0000	.1929	-.3878	.3878
	Equal variances not assumed			.000	44.765	1.000	.0000	.1929	-.3885	.3885
Q2	Equal variances assumed	2.888	.096	1.463	48	.150	.3200	.2188	-.1199	.7599
	Equal variances not assumed			1.463	40.458	.151	.3200	.2188	-.1220	.7620
Q3	Equal variances assumed	1.604	.211	.858	48	.395	.4000	.4663	-.5376	1.3376
	Equal variances not assumed			.858	45.829	.395	.4000	.4663	-.5388	1.3388
Q4	Equal variances assumed	1.492	.228	.786	48	.436	.2000	.2546	-.3118	.7118
	Equal variances not assumed			.786	43.306	.436	.2000	.2546	-.3133	.7133
Q5	Equal variances assumed	.000	1.000	.772	48	.444	.2400	.3109	-.3851	.8651
	Equal variances not assumed			.772	42.935	.444	.2400	.3109	-.3870	.8670
Q6	Equal variances assumed	.561	.458	2.176	48	.035	1.0800	.4964	.0819	2.0781
	Equal variances not assumed			2.176	47.677	.035	1.0800	.4964	.0818	2.0782
Q7	Equal variances assumed	.047	.830	-.570	48	.571	-.2800	.4910	-1.2672	.7072
	Equal variances not assumed			-.570	47.999	.571	-.2800	.4910	-1.2672	.7072
Q8	Equal variances assumed	.733	.396	1.137	48	.261	.4000	.3519	-.3076	1.1076
	Equal variances not assumed			1.137	47.766	.261	.4000	.3519	-.3077	1.1077
Q9	Equal variances assumed	.003	.958	.769	48	.446	.3600	.4683	-.5816	1.3016
	Equal variances not assumed			.769	47.998	.446	.3600	.4683	-.5816	1.3016
Q10	Equal variances assumed	.250	.619	.829	48	.411	.3600	.4344	-.5133	1.2333
	Equal variances not assumed			.829	47.938	.411	.3600	.4344	-.5134	1.2334

Alongside the globalization and economic development, more and more Chinese people have a deeper understanding towards English. Even though the Chinese-English circumstantial bilinguals and elective bilinguals acquire English in different ways, most of these bilinguals are stay in Chinese society or are deeply associated with Chinese society. The two group we investigated are under the similar Chinese social situation and the same era, hence, they are likely to have the similar attitudes towards English in order to comply the globalization and achieve personal improvement. Therefore, it is not difficult to explain why there are non-significant different attitudes towards English language between Chinese-English circumstantial bilinguals and elective bilinguals.

Table 2 showing below is the statistic results of every question between the two groups. 1 in the column 'Bilingual groups' represents Chinese-English circumstantial bilinguals meanwhile 2 represents Chinese-English elective bilinguals.

**Table 2: Group Statistics**

	Bilingual groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Q1	1	25	6.560	.7681	.1536
	2	25	6.560	.5831	.1166
Q2	1	25	6.560	.5831	.1166
	2	25	6.240	.9256	.1851
Q3	1	25	5.720	1.4583	.2917
	2	25	5.320	1.8193	.3639
Q4	1	25	6.280	.7371	.1474
	2	25	6.080	1.0376	.2075
Q5	1	25	6.280	.8907	.1781
	2	25	6.040	1.2741	.2548
Q6	1	25	4.000	1.8257	.3651
	2	25	2.920	1.6813	.3363
Q7	1	25	4.600	1.7321	.3464
	2	25	4.880	1.7397	.3479
Q8	1	25	5.760	1.2000	.2400
	2	25	5.360	1.2871	.2574
Q9	1	25	4.840	1.6503	.3301
	2	25	4.480	1.6613	.3323
Q10	1	25	3.120	1.5631	.3126
	2	25	2.760	1.5078	.3016

\* In the column of 'Bilingual groups', 1 represents 'Chinese-English circumstantial bilingual group', 2 represents 'Chinese-English elective bilingual group'.

According to Table 2, it is obvious that the means of Question 1 to Question 5 of both two groups are very high (1 to 7 indicates strongly disagree to strongly agree) --- the means are all above 5. As mentioned above, Question 1 to Question 5 reflect positive attitudes towards English. High means indicate that both two groups consider that mastering English language is necessary for Chinese people and English culture does not lead to the loss of Chinese traditional culture; in an addition, using English brings plenty of benefits in Chinese social conditions. Alongside the rapid economic development and globalization, more and more Chinese people have realized the importance to learn English. Even though the two groups acquire English in different ways, using English make them engage with the modern world; furthermore, they have more chance to continue their further study and to have better career development. Therefore, The means of Question 1 (related to further study) and Question 2 (related to future career) are extremely high (all means are above 6). Different from Question 1 and 2, the means of Question 3 are slightly lower compared with the rest of positive questions, which indicates that though most of bilinguals from 2 groups believe that mastering English reflects good education, English is not the only element which is connected with good education.

As for negative questions of the questionnaire (Question 6 to Question 10), both Chinese-English circumstantial bilinguals and elective bilinguals show lower means compared with positive questions (Question 1 to Question 5). However, the means of Question 7, 8 and 9 are all above 4 (4 means neutral attitudes) --- both two groups agree with the Question 7, 8 and 9. The answers of Question 7, 8 and 9 indicate that both two groups believe that even though acquiring English is very important for Chinese people, Chinese language still is indispensable, it is one of the most essential basic competences for the people who are living in Chinese society. In contrast, the means of Question 10 of the two groups are under 4 (4 means neutral attitudes), which indicates opposite opinions towards the question. The results of Questions reflect that both two groups believe that understanding English culture does not influence on the maintenance of Chinese traditional culture. The results of Question 10 exactly work in concert with Question 5 that is a positive question --- understanding English culture is not associated with the loss of Chinese traditional culture. As well known, a specific culture usually relates to a certain personal identity. Since most of Chinese people try to experience English culture for the sake of English language learning, overseas travel, study or work, but not change their Chinese identity to English identity. Therefore, in most of Chinese-English bilinguals' minds, understanding English culture is only to understand some unknown knowledge, which does not change their inner culture identity.

In conclusion, there are not significant different attitudes towards English language between Chinese-English circumstantial bilinguals and elective bilinguals. Both two groups tend to have positive attitudes towards acquiring English language. That is because English plays an essential role in the tendency of globalization and economic development. No matter circumstantial bilinguals or elective bilinguals can benefit from using English; hence, they have the similar positive attitudes towards English language. However, both two groups believe that though English is very necessary for personal development, Chinese language is the one of the most basic competences for Chinese people living in China. Moreover, most of Chinese-English bilinguals believe that understanding English culture does not result in the loss of Chinese traditional culture since they think understanding English culture is for the sake of personal development rather than changing their inner Chinese identity. Furthermore, insisting Chinese identity indicates insisting Chinese traditional culture. Though this study investigates the attitudes towards English of Chinese-English circumstantial bilinguals and elective bilinguals in depth, the sample size is not large enough (totally 50 participants). Small sample size may leads to inaccurate results. Therefore, further researches involving more samples are required in this aspect.

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## Appendix

1. Using English well is good for individual further study.

**Strongly disagree**                      **Strongly agree**

1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7

2. Using English well is good for individual career development.

**Strongly disagree**                      **Strongly agree**

1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7

3. People who can use English well are usually good educated.

Strongly disagree                      Strongly agree

1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7

4. English as a global language is a basic competence for younger generation.

Strongly disagree                      Strongly agree

1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7

5. Understanding English culture does not influence on maintenance of Chinese traditional culture.

Strongly disagree                      Strongly agree

1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7

6. Using English too much results in the loss of Chinese language competences.

**Strongly disagree**                      **Strongly agree**

1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7

7. In China, knowing how to use English is not necessary because Chinese is the major language; meanwhile English is seldom used in most conditions.

Strongly disagree                      Strongly agree

1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7

8. Using English in Chinese public seems very strange.

Strongly disagree                      Strongly agree

1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7

9. In China, people who only speak Chinese can live, work and study very well.

**Strongly disagree**                      **Strongly agree**

1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7

10. English culture is not good for the maintenance of Chinese traditional culture.

Strongly disagree Strongly agree

1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7