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Is English a Force for Good or Bad?

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Abstract

A survey of university students in China and Kuwait asked for their opinions about the effects of English on various aspects of their life and world: personal character and morals, material well-being, spiritual or religious development, family ties, local social change, international peace or conflict, and international interpersonal harmony. The results were overwhelmingly positive. Both the literature review and specific comments by some respondents suggest positive effects of English that can be encouraged and negative ones that may be countered through language policy, curriculum and materials, or classroom teachers. I also offer suggestions for future research and classroom teachers.

Key words: China, EFL, Kuwait, language attitudes, social values, World Englishes

Introduction

American Christians often hold up the world's desire to learn English as a good thing, as it opens doors for Christian English teachers to teach and build relationships with students from around the world, speaking to them about spiritual truth and positive values. For example, Tennant (2002) wrote, "Teaching English may well be the 21st century's most promising way to take the gospel to the world," in an article about the ultimate language lesson (p. 33).

Another positive impact English may have is that it can also play a major role in the development of a nation (Coleman, 2010). One factor is the income gained from international business, international tourism, students studying abroad and returning with greater earning power, and migrants working abroad and sending remittances home. All of these require some use of English as an international language. A second way English contributes to development occurs when English is a means of international cooperation, for example in bodies like the U.N. or events such as disaster relief. This is related to the third role of English in development – accessing information, whether it is from a scientific journal or a W.H.O. conference. Fourthly, English can be an impartial language in multilingual contexts where ethnic tensions threaten development. Examples given by Coleman (2010) include English-medium instruction at Kabul University in Afghanistan serving students who speak Dari, Pashto, or many minority languages at home; post-conflict programs in Sri Lanka bringing together Tamil and Sinhala speakers; and

distance education community development and health programs run by an exile opposition group seeking to reach the 34 different armed ethnic groups in Burma. Friedrich (2007b) gives another example from India, where “English has become an element of peace...between the different states, religious orientations and cultural affiliations that are so intricately connected to the local languages” (p. 43).

Besides helping groups of people communicate with each other, English is also a means for individuals to better understand each other. Peace Camps for Japanese, Chinese, and Korean young people are conducted in English (Eberly, 2010). A curriculum for young people in Southeast Europe (where there has been much ethnic tension) called *Living Together* is in both local languages and English (British Council, n.d.).

At the same time, English brings the potential for negative consequences as well (Master, 1998). One is a widening gap between rich and poor. According to Graddol (2006), a positive economic effect of English happens when it provides access to global knowledge and to jobs that entail customers and colleagues sharing a common language; however, English has also become “one of the main mechanisms for structuring inequality in developing economies” (p. 40). Our enthusiasm for English must be moderated with concern for those who cannot easily access it, says Coleman (2010).

A second negative consequence occurs when English is the medium of education without adequate teacher training or school resources. In Nigeria, for example, young learners are taught school subjects in English, which they do not know very well, thus preventing them from mastering basic content. Adamo (2005) says this practice contributes both to low levels of educational achievement in individuals as well as “the underdevelopment of Nigeria” (p. 24).

Thirdly, English is often associated (at least in people’s opinions) with western media and values such as materialism, consumerism, and self-indulgence. Research done in China, for example, found that “frequent exposure to Western media content was ... related to increased hedonistic pursuits and individualistic values among urban Chinese” (Chaffee, Pan, & Chu 1997, cited in Paek & Pan 2004, p. 494). Xie, Fung, and Erni (2006) also found connections between foreign media consumption and materialist values. Yang (2007) writes that China has become more vulnerable to violence and eroticism because of western media. I have noticed in my travels in North Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia in the last few years, a proliferation of satellite dishes and of shops selling DVDs of shows like *Prison*

Break, Desperate Housewives, and Gossip Girls. Students with excellent English explained that they had learned the language by watching such shows. I wondered whether the impact of these shows might be better English but worse morals.

Finally, families may also be affected when the pressure to learn English is too high. In Korea, what are known as “wild geese families” are increasing – 400,000 school children living outside Korea, usually with their mother, but not their father, in order to learn English (Onishi, 2008). These families have chosen to split up in order to give the children a better chance at avoiding the pressure-cooker of Korean schools and at speaking English well. “The allure of English,” writes Piller (2010), compels people to “trade close family bonds for high levels of proficiency.” In these cases, English, in a broad sense, would seem to have a negative effect on their family life.

Economic inequality, educational failure, materialism, hedonism, and family divisions are clearly not values that belong in the kingdom of God. I have to question whether by teaching English I am promoting these negatives more than the good that English might bring. How then should Christians approach English language teaching? With eager anticipation for its potential to open up doors to the gospel and to personal or national development, or with fear and trembling because of its potential to open doors to all kinds of ills?

I am not the only one asking these questions. For example, a government official in Singapore, Goh Chok Tang, opened Parliament in 1989 by saying:

Singapore is wide open to external influences. Millions of foreign visitors pass through each year. Books, magazines, tapes, and television programmes pour into Singapore every day. Most are from the developed countries of the West. The overwhelming bulk is in English. Because of universal English education, a new generation of Singaporeans absorbs their contents immediately, without translation or filtering. This openness has made us a cosmopolitan people, and put us in close touch with new ideas and technologies from abroad. But it has also exposed us to alien lifestyles and values. Under this pressure, in less than a generation, attitudes and outlooks of Singaporeans, especially younger Singaporeans, have shifted. Traditional Asian ideas of morality, duty and society which have sustained and guided us in the past are giving way to a more Westernized, individualistic, and self-centred outlook on life. (cited in Vaish, 2008, p. 450)

To investigate this contradiction between potentially good and ill effects of English, I used the opportunity of travels in 2011 in China and Kuwait to survey university students on their perceptions of the effects of English on their lives.

Literature Review

Research on how learners feel about English and its effects covers some broad ground. Evans (2010) surveyed Chinese students' attitudes toward English varieties, e.g., British or American. Al-Bustan and Al-Bustan's (2009) survey of Kuwaiti students focused on the importance of studying English and their preferences for classroom methods such as the use of computers in class or a focus on technical rather than general vocabulary. Some researchers have investigated the impact English has on motivation to study third languages, e.g., Hungarian students studying French, German, or Russian (Dörnyei, Csizér, & Németh, 2006) or Swedish students studying German (Henry, 2010).

One study with results that illuminate how students think English might be impacting them or their world is by Ryan (2009). He was interested in the experience of English learners in Japan, where "the language poses no obvious threat nor offers the prospect of any immediate material rewards," but where learners often claim that they "like English" (p. 405). Some of the responses of female students in university and graduate studies indicated that they are able to express their emotions in English. Ryan interprets this to mean that English, compared to the gendered codes and formalized registers of Japanese, offers more freedom of expression. Other responses were about times of transition. Ryan (2009) hypothesizes that English provides a ready-made opportunity to fulfill oneself with a new challenge or direction in life. Finally, responses about social status and English were ambiguous. It seems that the respondents felt that speaking English in a classroom setting comes across as "stupid," while speaking English in the real world is considered "cool" (p. 417). Ryan (2009) sums up his research by saying that the status of English does not mean it is always admired nor are the values associated with English always identified as positive.

Although the primary focus of Gao, Cheng, Zhao, and Zhou's (2005) study of more than 2000 Chinese college students across the mainland was whether their study of English resulted in additive or subtractive bilingualism, the researchers also asked about self-confidence. Items in their survey included, "English learning has a great impact on my self-confidence" and "Whenever I have overcome a difficulty in English learning, I can feel my own growth" (p. 42). Nearly 70% of the respondents agreed with these statements. Another item relevant to the present research was, "After learning English, I'm often caught between contradicting values and beliefs" (p. 42), with which 11.5% agreed, 20.2% were uncertain, and 68.3% disagreed.

Several studies have looked at English in the Muslim world. Malay students aged 17-19 years in an elite school in Brunei were surveyed by O'Hara-Davies (2010) in light of the complexities of that nation's colonial past, bilingual education, and Islamic identity. Several themes emerged regarding what English does, has, and is. One was a strong recognition that English is needed in the global modern world, linked to "success, modernity, technology, job opportunities and access to knowledge" (p. 111). Another theme was the contradictory view that English can "further the cause of intercultural, international and inter-religious harmony" while also "creat[ing] and/or perpetuat[ing] elitism and alienat[ing] its users from their own culture and people" (p. 111). Participants expressed some concern about "the possible dilution of cultures such as their own by the encroachment of Western culture" (p. 113). O'Hara-Davies writes, "Participants were wary of some of the cultural associations of the English language which could put them in conflict with their religious beliefs and their own cultural heritage. One interviewee conceded that while she did not find this a problem on a personal level, 'Western culture (is) bad for my religion maybe'" (p. 115). O'Hara-Davies (2010) sums up her research suggesting that "English is not a colonial burden but a legacy that they are making their own and using to pave the way to a brighter future" (p. 116).

Al-Abed Al-Haq and Smadi (1996) surveyed more than 1000 Saudi university students in light of the "sense of fear among the Saudis that the use of English entails Westernization, and detachment from the country, and is a source of corruption to their religious commitment" (p. 308). The respondents were ambivalent about some statements related to English and Westernization, for example, whether the promotion of English in Saudi Arabia is for "imperialistic purposes," whether the use of English is a sign of "cultural advancement," whether learning English will protect the nation from "backwardness," or whether English is a threat to Arabic, Arab unity, or Arab identity (p. 310). They were a little more unified in their opinions about "learning English is an indication of Westernization" and "care for English entails care for and imitation of Western culture," as about two-thirds disagreed with these statements (p. 312). There were several questions related to the effects of English on personal religion. 17% said that learning English makes a Muslim less pious and 19% said it spoils one's religious commitment. 82% agreed that English is necessary for preaching Islam to non-Muslims. The authors find this is in agreement with Islamic teachings that encourage the quest for knowledge in general and the

learning of foreign languages in particular. They conclude that most participants believe that they can use English while still being attached to their religion, their country, and national identity.

Though not a survey, Mahboob's (2009) research comes to a similar conclusion. He looked at the discourse of Pakistani English in light of the association of English with colonialism and the relationship between Christianity and TESOL. He writes in his introduction of several problems for Muslims learning English. One is how "some TESOL practitioners see teaching English as a way to spread the love of Jesus Christ" (p. 176). Another is that the native-speaker model for teachers adds to "strong Christian undertones/overtone of the classroom... Although these classrooms did not impart Christianity in any official manner, their discourses were strongly in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, which worked on the premise of promoting Western cultures and ways of thought" (p. 176). Mahboob phrases his questions this way:

Considering that the ESL classroom was and still is steeped in the values and cultures of Christianity in many countries, and that the English language continues to spread messages of the subordinate status of people of color and especially Islamic cultures and Muslim peoples, the obvious questions that need to be asked are: Of what use is English to the Muslim world? Can English be forged to make it a language "friendly" to Islam? How can that be done if English is still a tool of the former colonizer and is intertwined with messages of Christian superiority and Muslim inferiority? (p. 177)

Mahboob's data come from a variety of sources: English language textbooks used in Pakistan, the acknowledgements sections of some MA and PhD dissertations, and previous studies of Pakistani English. He provides lexical, semantic, pragmatic, and discourse examples (for example, a textbook reading about Islam as the religion of peace, or a thesis that acknowledges the help of Allah) of Pakistani English. Mahboob (2009) concludes that in Pakistan today English, in fact, "represent[s] a language of opposition to colonial discourses...represents Islamic values and embodies South Asian Islamic sensitivities" (p. 188).

Finally, the effects of English on religion in multicultural Singapore were explored by Vaish (2008). Data came from a survey of 10-year old Singaporean school children, stratified as Chinese, Indian, and Malay. Through a survey of 700 children and follow-up interviews and observations with 12 children, the researchers explored, "who speaks what language to whom in what context with what attitude with what level of fluency and to what end?" (p. 454). Children across all ethnic groups use English as their dominant language in the domains of school, media, and public space. However, English is not as widely used in the domains of family and friends and of religion. Vaish's article focuses mostly on religion, describing survey questions which

included, “What languages do you usually use to pray?” (specifying prayer in a house of worship, at home, and silently) and “What languages do you usually use to learn about religion?” Results indicate the Malay Muslims use Arabic as the language of prayer and both Arabic and Malay in religious instruction. For Indian Hindus, Tamil and Sanskrit are used in temples and Tamil and English are used in religious instruction. For Chinese, Mandarin is the primary language for Buddhists and English for the Christians. Vaish concludes that for each of these groups, each of these languages provides a way of maintaining cultural traditions.

The Inquiry

The present study sought to address the research question, “How do university students perceive the effects of English on their lives?” by surveying students in China and Kuwait. Four survey questions were about the students personally, that is, the effect of English on their:

- Personal character and morals
- Spiritual or religious development
- Family ties
- Material well-being

Three survey questions related more broadly to their views of the effect of English on:

- Social change
- Conflict and peace among nations
- Interpersonal harmony

There were 315 survey participants in China and 386 in Kuwait, facilitated by a variety of teachers I knew who were willing to hand out surveys in their classes on a given day while I was visiting. The Kuwait data came from non-English majors studying science at a major university. The respondents were 18-25 years old, mostly 18 and 19, and were roughly 55% women and 45% men. The China data came from English majors in a major university in south central China. They were freshmen, juniors, and seniors, aged 19 to 23, mostly female.

The survey is found in the Appendix. It was translated into Arabic for use in Kuwait, thanks to some very helpful staff members. (The staff also translated the students’ comments back into English for me.) It was given in English in China, since the administration felt that the students, as English majors, would be able to read it without trouble. The surveys were given to instructors who then distributed them in their classes.

For each question, respondents circled a number on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 and 2 being positive, 3 being neutral, and 4 and 5 being negative. When I analyzed results, I calculated the percentage of respondents who indicated that English had no effect on the issue (that is, they chose 3), the percentage of respondents who were positive (choosing 1 or 2), and the percentage who were negative (choosing 4 or 5).

A few of the respondents added written comments. To analyze these I highlighted them for repetition or themes. I also divided them into comments that (1) explain a positive response, (2) explain a negative response, and (3) seem to indicate a misunderstanding of the question. For the findings section, I chose comments that represent these three perspectives, in order to give a more complete picture of some of the respondents' opinions.

Findings

Overall Picture

Overall, respondents were very positive about English. Table 1 shows a summary of the China responses. The prevalence of black bars indicates positive responses. The Chinese did not choose the neutral option very often so there is less light gray. There is just a little dark gray, indicating few negative responses about the effects of English – less than 10% for all questions.

Table 1. *Summary of Responses from Chinese students*

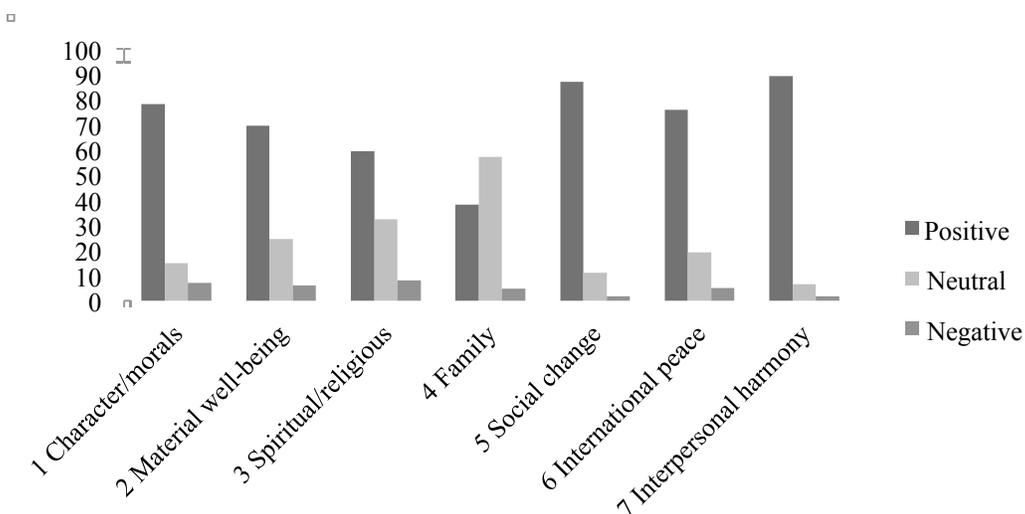
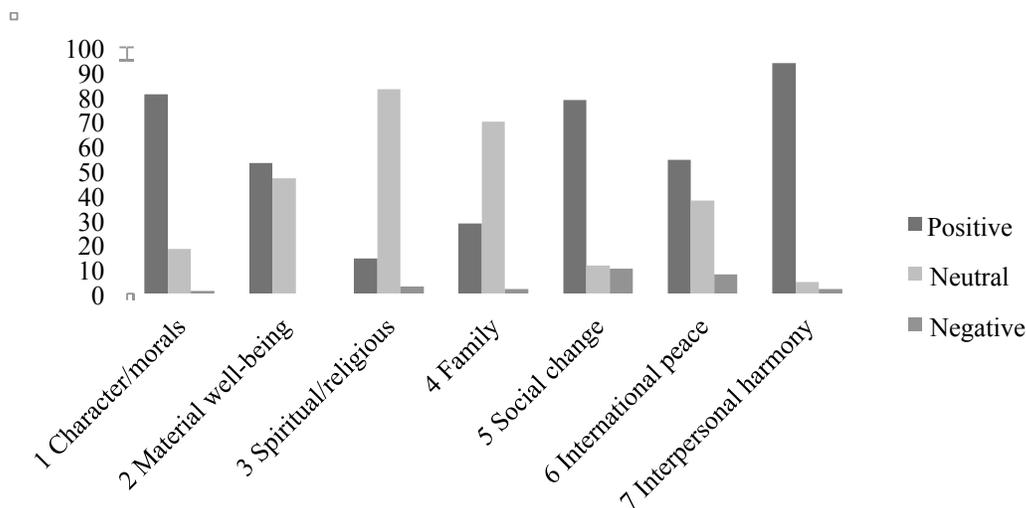


Table 2 provides a summary of the Kuwait responses. The black bars again show that the majority of responses referred to participants’ responses on the positive effects of English. There were also quite a few responses that indicated English had no effect or was neutral in regard to an issue – more in Kuwait than in China. The light gray bars show this was especially true for spiritual or religious development and for family ties. Finally, there were even fewer respondents in Kuwait than in China who felt English had negative effects or was harmful in any way. The gray bars show that at most 10% marked this option, in regards to social change.

Table 2. *Summary of Responses from Kuwaiti Students*



In spite of the translation into Arabic and the Chinese university’s confidence that English majors would have no trouble understanding the survey, it was obvious that some respondents had some trouble with the questions. For example, in response to “What is the effect of English on your personal character and morals?” one Chinese student wrote, “I can English a little.” Another wrote, “I hope there will be less examinations.” A Kuwaiti student wrote, “It helps in communicating with foreigners.”

Specific Questions and Responses

1. What is the effect of English on your personal character and morals?

78.1% of the Chinese respondents indicated English had a positive effect, 14.9% that it had no effect, and 7.0% that it had a negative effect. About 100 out of the 386 respondents wrote additional comments.

While more than half of the 100 or so comments were confusing or irrelevant in my opinion, several helped clarify their responses. The comments show that Chinese students often saw this question in terms of personality, rather than morality. *Confidence, courage, or bravery* was mentioned by 16 (similar to Gao et al.'s (2005) results). Five mentioned that English made them more outgoing. Four used the words *easy-going* or *relaxed*. Four mentioned *broadened horizons* or *accepting new things*. The following were also noted: *hardworking, creative, open, patient, careful, steadfast, friendly, enjoying life*, and “*becoming a man.*”

Eight Chinese framed their comments not as who they had become but as what they admired in foreigners, including: *open, friendly, frank, encouraging, hardworking, religious, and smiling*. Five Chinese students spoke in general about being inspired by the literature, movies, or heroes they had encountered in English classes. Unfortunately, none of the comments helped explain the 7% who indicated that English has had a negative effect on their character or morals.

Kuwaiti respondents were more positive than the Chinese, with more than 80.8% choosing a positive response and only 1.0% choosing a negative response. 18.1% were neutral. Not very many of them wrote additional comments, but the comments still elucidate the responses.

I had worded the question in terms of “character and morals” to emphasize my intended meaning of being a person of integrity and ethical behavior. However, three comments along the lines of “it makes the character stronger, but it doesn’t affect the morals” show that “character” seems to have meant something different to some respondents. For example, nine Kuwaitis mentioned *confidence* or *courage*. Three mentioned *social life* or *sociable*. Two mentioned *having the appearance of being well-educated*. Finally, two mentioned *discernment*: “It depends on the person himself and how much he is affected by the West.” “I learn the good things and ignore the bad ones.”

This last comment highlights one way Christian teachers might help their students cope with the variety of input they are getting in the world, in English as well as other languages – identify and choose what is good, and try to disregard what is bad. Our role as teachers of critical thinking is important here. The students who wrote about being inspired by those they had watched or read about in English classes also remind us of the value of the materials we choose, when possible.

2. What is the effect of English on your material well-being (rich or poor)?

Chinese students were generally positive about this effect of English, with 69.5% marking a positive response and 24.4% being neutral. 6.0%, however, were on the negative side. This might be explained by some comments that indicated misunderstanding (e.g., “Some material translated into English is out of original meaning.”). Other negative choices were because respondents weren’t thinking of the future. “Now I am a student,” wrote one person who marked the item on the negative side. Finally, four respondents made comments such as this one, reflecting a painful Chinese reality: “Maybe it’s hard to find a good job because of the intensive competition.” However, of the approximately 100 comments, more than half were about good jobs in the future. The specific jobs mentioned by these English majors who live near a major national park included tour guide, teacher, and working for a foreign company. Seven respondents also mentioned current jobs, especially tutoring English.

The Kuwaiti students are more likely to have government-guaranteed jobs for life. Not one person indicated a negative effect of English on material well-being. Among the 46.9% who felt that English was irrelevant to this wrote things like, “It doesn’t affect because being rich has a relation with GOD Almighty,” and “Being poor or rich has a relation with the personality, work and being clever.” The 53.1% who felt that English had a positive effect on one’s material well-being wrote things like, “Many jobs prefer people who speak English even if he/she doesn’t have experience.” “It’s the common language, so it’ll give you more chances to have a job.”

Christian teachers might assume that our students come to English classes with material well-being in mind. While it is true that English can help a person get a better job, most students know that riches are not guaranteed. Ways to deal with the economic uncertainty of today’s world, the blessing but elusiveness of wealth, and appropriate ways to use money might be important topics for our students to consider as we have opportunity in our classes.

3. What is the effect of English on your spiritual or religious development?

This question generated a relatively wide spread of opinions among the Chinese students. 59.4% said English had a positive effect, 8.2% were negative, and 32.4 were neutral. There were nearly 80 comments, but, again, nearly half were hard to understand and the others consisted of a variety of statements that only partially explain the numbers.

Fourteen Chinese students wrote, “I’m not interested in religion.” Four said, “I won’t change what I believe.” Four wrote about others, for example, “I notice that other countries pay more attention to religion.” “We know more about beliefs in English-speaking countries.” Seven mentioned that they were “inspired” by literature, movies, historical heroes, etc. Three used the word “spiritual” as in: “It really makes me spiritual.” “I like the spiritual of American.” “Broadens my spiritual vision.” One wrote: “I have a better understanding about the morals which helps me be a civilized person.”

Eight people referred to the Bible, perhaps because their university requires English majors to take a class in the Bible as Literature. “English makes me know Bible, God, Christ.” “By studying Bible I became more spiritual.” “I know more about Christ from Bible class.” (One of these respondents noted she was a Christian.) Other comments about the Bible were along different lines. “The Bible is too hard for us to learn it.” “‘God bless you’ works well.” “It makes me believe that ‘Tomorrow will be better’ in the Bible.”

The response of the Kuwaiti students to this question was quite different. 82.9% said English had no effect. Comments such as “It doesn’t affect my religion because my religion depends on Arabic” or “It has no relation with any religion” are to be expected in a strongly Muslim context. 14.2% were positive and 2.8% were negative. There were four other comments that I found interesting. Two implied spreading Islam: “I can use it in inviting people to Islam.” “To communicate with other religions.” Two implied an openness to dialogue: “To find out about religions.” “When my knowledge changes, the way I see my religion changes, too. So I could see different points of view in my knowledge, but it doesn’t go against my religion.”

Question three is key for Christian teachers who have gone into the field with a desire to have a positive influence on students’ spiritual lives. The results show teachers at universities in China that there is tremendous potential for this to occur, but also potential for misunderstanding. For those teaching in the Muslim world, “seeing different points of view” seems to be an important initial perspective for our students.

4. What is the effect of English on your family ties (i.e., how close you are to family members)?

As expected, most (57.1%) of the Chinese respondents indicated that English had no effect on their family. About 60% of the comments included things like, “We only speak Chinese in my family.” The other comments were quite interesting to me and help explain the 38.1% who

were positive about the effects of English on their family ties as well as the nearly 4.8% who said it had a negative effect. Seven people wrote of helping family members with English, for example, “I can chat with my younger brother in English so that it can improve his English level.” Five people wrote about fulfilling family obligations: “My family expects me to study English well. If I master English, they will feel happy.” Three people explained that English provides a bonding experience: “We have a common interest in English.” “We watch English movies together.” “I could tell my family members some funny things happened in other countries which will make them very excited and it can help me closer to my family.”

One Chinese respondent, explaining a negative choice, wrote, “English stresses the individual.” However, sixteen wrote about new and positive ideas about family relationships they had learned or wanted to emulate: “Many foreigners has a close relationship with family.” “I learn how to deal with the relationship among my family ties.” “Affect by English culture, I feel that family members are the most important person.” “American people treat their families as their friends. I like it.” “Like Mother’s Day, our family will celebrate some foreign festival.” “I will show my love to my families instead of putting in my heart.” “Now I can say, ‘I love you’ to my parents.” “I kiss them and tell them I love them just like foreign people do.”

Kuwaiti responses to question four were similar. Even more (69.7%) indicated that English had no effect on their family, while 28.5% indicated positive effects, and 1.8% negative ones. Like the Chinese, six people said they helped family members learn English or they studied together, for example: “Sometimes I help my brothers in teaching them.” “English makes us cooperate and learn together (family).” Two people wrote about family obligations: “My father wishes me to learn it.” Finally, one person mentioned what he/she had learned about family life: “We know more about family ties from their [the people who speak English] knowledge.” A positive comment (by two people) that seemed distinctly Kuwaiti was: “I have many relatives that live outside the country, so I speak English with them.”

As Christian teachers, these responses can affirm our desire to prevent our students from absorbing negative family values from western media, while also learning ways to strengthen the family in today’s changing world. We could include in our curriculum content about positive family interaction that is culturally appropriate for our purposes.

5. What is the effect of English on social change in your state or country?

Most Chinese students (87%) were quite positive in response to this question. Although many of the comments seemed vague or perhaps irrelevant (e.g., “More and more Chinese study English”), six were explanatory of these positive responses: “It stimulated the development of economy because more and more visitors come to visit our country.” “English makes China more international and important.” “We can do some business with foreigner.” 11.1% of the responses were neutral and 1.9% were negative. One comment sheds light on the negatives: “Parents are too care about English’s importance so most of their children have been learning English since childhood while neglect some other education.”

There was a relatively wide range of Kuwaiti opinions on this question. 78.5 % were positive and among the comments, people mentioned knowledge, openness, business, communication, getting to know others, and education. 11.4 % of the responses were neutral and 10.1 % were negative. Here are the four cautions that were expressed in the comments: “It can be positive, but many youth are getting away from their mother culture and heading to foreign one.” “Sometimes it has a negative effect, when girls wear [dress] like women in the West, because it doesn't fit with our religion.” “It could be a negative impact in learning the attitudes of the West.” “Because they follow the culture of the countries that speak English without thinking.” Three of these four commenters marked the question with 4 (negative) but one marked it with 2 (positive), highlighting again the need to be cautious in interpreting the numbers.

The comment “without thinking” is perhaps the most important one here, again bringing us back to critical thinking. How can we as Christian English teachers help our students think more deeply about the social changes they adopt or resist?

6. What is the effect of English on conflict and peace between nations in the world?

Both Chinese and Kuwaiti students were varied in their responses to this question. In China 75.9% of respondents indicated positive views, 19.1% were neutral, and 5.0% negative. In Kuwait 54.4% responded in the positive, 37.8% neutral, and 7.8% negative.

Most of the 80 written comments by Chinese students were general comments about communication, understanding, and peace. Similarly, the 24 Kuwaitis who commented wrote statements such as: “It’s a universal language and people need to understand each other to live in peace.” “To understand each other and get the best solution for their conflicts.” “To express

ourselves and make a conversation with others which leads to peace.” One Chinese student wrote about conveying one’s identity to others: “By learning English I can introduce our nation’s culture to the people all over the world. They can understand my country better and better.” One Kuwaiti student wrote about international cooperation in the face of trouble: “Communicating in political problem and disasters.” Another Kuwaiti noted the opposite effect of rapid communication: “It helps us to know more facts, which gets us in problems.”

The views of those whose responses chose a negative option on the survey might be explained by the three Chinese who wrote comments such as, “Many English countries constantly take military action to other countries.” “Some English countries want to get more national market and resources, especially oil, then they just kick off the war.” A similar Kuwaiti comment was: “It’s the cause of wars.” Interestingly, another Kuwaiti comment was: “Many Arabian countries suggested to use Arabic as a first language for all countries, that causes conflicts between the countries and affects peace.”

Conflict between neighbors, ethnic groups, and nations is an unfortunately increasing reality in today’s world. Christian English teachers might be prompted by the varied responses to this question to emphasize in their classes the value of English for promoting peace.

7. What is the effect of English on interpersonal harmony in the world (i.e., how well individuals understand and get along with each other)?

I had intended this question to focus on personal relationships as opposed to nation-to-nation relationships as in question 6. 89.2% of the Chinese respondents were positive about the role of English in people getting along with each other and wrote comments about “communication” and “friendship.” However, some Chinese focused on pragmatic functions in English. Among those who were positive were the writers of comments such as these: “The English manner is polite to us.” “‘Thank you’ and ‘sorry’ are used in our daily life frequently.” “Some words which aren’t proper to speak in Chinese can be expressed in English.” “We always communicate with each other in Chinese. However if I’m very angry I will use English.” 4.1% of the respondents were negative. The following comments might explain their choice: “I think English is so frank that it is offensive sometimes.” “In American films or plays we saw violence often.” Finally, 6.7% of the responses were neutral, exemplified by these comments: “It lies in appreciation of each other [not English].” “Depends on everyone’s personality.” “English is not an almighty language. I don’t think it has this use.”

Kuwaitis were even more positive in answering question 7, with 93.5% of the responses being positive. Some positive comments were general, such as “It’s the common language.” Others were more specific, such as: “It has a great effect. People can convey their ideas and opinions to others.” “To be close to each others in culture/knowledge, then people don’t feel strange to each other.” “As we communicate with foreigners like Filipino or Chinese.” 4.7% of the responses to question 7 were neutral and 1.8% were negative. Two respondents (one of whom was neutral and one of whom was positive) added comments about the need to learn Arabic and not neglect the mother tongue.

Christian English teachers can take these results as a call to both learn about and include in our curricula more content related to intercultural communication. It is true that English is not an “almighty language,” but case studies of people from different nations using English to not only speak to each other but also learn from each other can help Christian teachers encourage uses of English that are more of an influence for harmony.

Discussion and Future Directions

As I have mentioned, and as is usually the case with survey data, there are constraints which mean one must be cautious in generalizing the results. One is the fact that in spite of being piloted, the survey had flaws, such as the question conflating character and morals. It was also open to misinterpretation, regardless of whether the questions were translated or not. Another caution is that all of the respondents were studying English, which suggests they might have had an investment in and therefore some reason to be positive about English, compared to the general population of China or Kuwait as a whole. I am eager to see future research deal with these constraints. A slightly revised questionnaire, interviews in addition to the survey in order to deal with potential misunderstandings, and surveys in additional contexts would be important ways to continue exploring this topic. In particular, Christian English teachers who are interested in learning whether students in their classes are experiencing any change in their spiritual or religious development might expand question 3 in the survey.

In addition, even though I started this study simply thinking of English as a force for good or ill, it might be useful to carry out future research with a stronger conceptual framework. Let me briefly introduce several that may prove relevant and useful.

One such framework would include a focus beyond English itself with a clearer picture of the learners and the communities in which they live. Dörnyei's (2005, 2009) L2 Motivational Self System is a good framework for this purpose. This model consists of the "ideal L2 self," or the person speaking the target language that we want to become; the "ought-to L2 self," or the way we meet others' expectations and avoid negative outcomes; and the "L2 learning experience," which concerns the impact of the teacher, the curriculum, and peers, as well as the whether we experience success in learning. Practically speaking, Dörnyei (2009) says that learners need to create and maintain a vision of their ideal L2 self. Some of the subjects' comments in the present study, particularly in response to question 1, reveal that they have a vision of a new English-speaking self which is confident or sociable, for example.

Critical pedagogy may also provide a useful framework for examining how language teaching might effect change. The chapter "Teachers for Social Responsibility" in Brown (2007) is an accessible summary of this field. Peace linguistics may be another framework relevant to some of the questions in this survey. Is English a language which displaces other languages, promotes communicative inequality, and results in linguistic and cultural homogenization? Or is English, as an international lingua franca, especially when used responsibly, capable of being a tool for peace? This debate is nicely summarized by Bolton (2005) and Friedrich (2007a).

One who has written passionately and practically about Peace Linguistics is the Brazilian Gomes de Matos. For example, he has a set of 12 pairings to encourage more peaceful communication, e.g., "Don't denigrate, appreciate," and an alphabet of suggestions that starts with Aim at Affect and Amiability and Build Bridges of Blessings, and goes on to Veto Violent Vocabulary, and Weigh your Words with Wisdom (Gomes de Matos, 2008). He states the importance of learning how to read political texts and engage in constructive political discourse for the sake of healthy democratic societies (Gomes de Matos, 2000). Snow's (2001) classic *English Teaching as Christian Mission* has a chapter on English teachers as peacemakers, which can also guide Christians hoping to explore this more.

Several of the survey responses brought up the importance of critical thinking, in particular, identifying elements that may somehow become attached to the English language which one does not want to embrace. Atkinson (1997) and Davidson (1998) provide a starting point for teachers who want to pursue this direction.

Finally, I think that the literature on change and transformation from other fields, such as anthropology, business, missiology, and psychology, could be exploited to provide relevant frameworks. As we research whether the study and use of English is bringing about positive or negative change (or no change at all), insights from fields beyond TESOL may be helpful.

Potential Implications for Teachers

Despite the need to be cautious in making generalizations from this study, I believe there were enough positive results to reasonably claim that English is likely to be a force for good rather than bad, especially in the hands of good teachers. At the same time, even a few people noting that English has a negative effect on any of the categories should be a concern. So then, how can teachers use this data to counter negative effects and foster positive effects from English? It seems to me that awareness is a first step. Knowing the negative issues that might arise from the study of English can alert teachers to course content that might need to be problematized for their learners. Teachers might want to use the survey (in the Appendix) with their students to start them also thinking about these issues.

As I summarized responses to each question, I noted some specific ideas for materials and class content. Let me reiterate them here. Teachers can choose materials which give students positive role models to emulate and stories to be inspired by. Content can include appropriate attitudes toward wealth, ways to strengthen families, and techniques for effective interpersonal and intercultural communication. Teachers can help students navigate what they read, hear, and click on to identify and choose what is good, and discard what is bad. Teachers can give their students a vision for using both English and their other languages for good in their community and for peace in the world. This means that we need a principled approach to teaching assessment, curriculum design, materials selection, and materials writing which takes into account such goals. As Smith and Carvill (2000) point out, typical textbooks teach students the language of buying, but not charitable giving, complaining but not necessarily praising, and apologizing, but usually not forgiving. The people students read about in English often exemplify freedom, play, and love – not responsibility or sacrifice.

One such framework for materials and teaching assessment is based on Stassen and Gushee (2003) and outlined in Purgason (2011). Stassen and Gushee's (2003) *Kingdom Ethics* describes the marks of God's reign (such as justice, healing, peace, and community), the virtues

characterizing the people of God's kingdom (such as gentleness, forgiveness, patience, endurance, and self-control), areas of the world most in need of ethical solutions (a few examples are war, human rights, the value of life, and the right use of money), and dimensions of character needed to bring about God's reign (including how we reason, our worldview, and our loyalties). English language classes that feature these qualities, promote these virtues, discuss these needs, or develop these characteristics might be said to be bringing about God's kingdom and making English a force for good.

Conclusion

As the results of this survey suggest, Christians can no longer blithely go into their communities or around the world teaching English as though in and of itself it is a good thing. Instead, we need to recognize English's potential for both good and ill, in both individual students and societies. This will help our work contribute to Jesus' message and mission and give our students reasons to be positive about all the aspects of their lives covered in the survey.

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Appendix: The Survey Instrument

This survey is about the effects of English. “English” is used in a broad sense to include “studying and learning English,” “using English,” and “the English language.”

Age: _____ Male or female: _____ Current city: _____

Circle (or highlight) the number above the phrase that matches your personal **opinion** and **experience**.

1. What is the effect of English on your personal character and morals?

1	2	3	4	5
strengthening them a lot	strengthening them a little	no effect	weakening them a little	weakening them a lot

Comment: _____

2. What is the effect of English on your material well-being (rich or poor)?

1	2	3	4	5
making it more likely to be rich	making it somewhat likely to be rich	no effect	making it likely to be poor	making it more likely to be poor

Comment: _____

3. What is the effect of English on your spiritual or religious development?

1	2	3	4	5
making me a lot more spiritual	making me a little more spiritual	no effect	making me a little less spiritual	making me a lot less spiritual

Comment: _____

4. What is the effect of English on your family ties (that is, how close you are to family members)?

1	2	3	4	5
strengthening our ties a lot	strengthening our ties a little	no effect	weakening our ties a little	weakening our ties a lot

Comment: _____

5. What is the effect of English on social change in your state or country?

1	2	3	4	5
bringing a lot of positive change	bringing some positive change	no effect	bringing some negative change	bringing a lot of negative change

Comment: _____

6. What is the effect of English on conflict and peace between nations in the world?

1 making peace much more likely	2 making peace a little more likely	3 no effect	4 making conflict a little more likely	5 making conflict much more likely
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Comment: _____

7. What is the effect of English on interpersonal harmony in the world, that is, how well individuals understand and get along with each other?

1 leading to much more harmony	2 leading to a little more harmony	3 no effect	4 leading to a little more tension	5 leading to much more tension
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Comment: _____

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