

# Ethical Analysis on Commodification of Tutoring of English Language in China

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## **Abstract:**

English language acquisition is of crucial importance in Chinese learners' schooling, employment and even their career development. However, the present English language classrooms in China cannot meet English learners' and parents' demands for English acquisition, and commodification of tutoring of English language is gradually becoming a trend. Based on the previous research, this paper attempts to analyze the phenomenon of commodification of tutoring of English language in China from the perspectives of ethics of care, justice and profession. It finds out that the commodification of English language tutoring has caused much pressure and anxiety on English learners and their parents, which is not only detrimental to the learners' physical and mental health, but also a waste of valuable time. This paper also argues that English as a second language should serve for the best interests of learners. We must focus on the development of learners' communicative ability and cross-culture competence, rather than their performance in exams. Therefore, the administration must take the overall situation into consideration and take effective measures: increase education investment, establish mechanism to promote educational equity, optimize the admission test system, and promote the reform of academic evaluation, so as to fundamentally overcome the utilitarian tendency of English language tutoring.

**Keywords:** *Ethical analysis, Commodification, ESL.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

English language has been serving as a universal tool for people from different cultures to communicate. Since the new millennium, English has enjoyed an unprecedented status in China and has become a required school subject from kindergarten through college and graduate school. While the teaching and learning of English in China has been overplayed in recently years.

For the government and general public, English proficiency has become an important criterion for a person's education and career advancement. In many circumstances, English even overtakes Chinese in terms of the weight it carries in higher education and the job market <sup>[1]</sup>. In China, languages are more and

more seen as commodities that carry different values in an era of globalization. While the English learning in China is to a great degree exam-oriented for all the learners, parents, teachers focus on the students' performance on exams as English is required through the students' academic advancement and career development. The over-emphasis on English language learning test has commodified English and developed an enormous market for English learning in China. Together with various other exams there has been an enormous exam economy in China. The commodification of English language has been displayed in a variety of ways and some of them are listed as following:

- In addition to the exams throughout the English education from primary school to university, there are CET(College English Test), TEM(Test for English Majors), BEC (Business English Certificate), PETS (Public English Test), CNBECT(China National Business English Certificate Test), PRETCO (practical English Test for Colleges), TOEIC(Test of English for International Communication), CATTI ( China Accreditation Test for Translators and Interpreters), NAETI(National Accreditation Examinations for Translators and Interpreters), ETTBL(Certificate of English Translation Test of Business English), Certificate of Shanghai Interpretation Accreditation Test and those such as TOEFL, IELTS, GRE, GMAT for the purpose of overseas study.
- The above-mentioned numerous types of English exams have created a huge market in China for textbooks, exam training programs. According to estimation by Tutor Group, English training market for Chinese adults will grow by 25% annually, reaching US \$21 billion by 2016. The English language training market in China, mainly represented by the private institutes, comprises more than 50,000 English language schools with 400 million English learners <sup>[2]</sup>.
- A lot of schools of different levels advertise their bilingual teaching of English and Chinese to charge much higher tuition fee. English training programs of various kinds such as summer camp in English speaking countries such as USA, Canada and Australia are organized by charging an astonishing price.
- The views on the teaching profession have been changed to some degree in the last decade. Once conceived of as the most glorious profession, teaching is now constructed as a commodity under the market economy in China. Parents, who have the ability to pay, expect teachers to provide the best service to their children. Many teachers make much more extra income than their salary. Therefore the private activities of these teachers reinforce the notion of teaching as a commodity <sup>[3]</sup>.
- Schools try to attract teachers with a higher degree in English and from prestigious universities with high salary, which as a result create a disparity in the allocation of educational resources. The high tuition fee allows wealthy students to go to renowned schools while keep those from financially disadvantaged family out. Again this is a manifestation of inequality.

In a word, the present English teaching in China has greatly commercialized in every way. A question then arises to the leadership of Education: should we follow the trend of commodification of ESL teaching? Or should we challenge it for the interests of the students? What are the ethical decisions to make?

## II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to analyze the above dilemma, let us start with the Multiple Ethical Paradigms of justice, critique and the profession in the book entitled *Ethical Leadership and Decision Making in Education: Applying Theoretical Perspectives to Complex Dilemmas* written by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) <sup>[4]</sup>. In this context of commodification of English language teaching, we would like to focus on analyzing it from the perspectives of ethic of justice and ethic of profession.

### 2.1 Ethic of Care and Ethic of Justice

The ethic of care has been mostly discussed by female scholars in contemporary time to challenge the ethic of justice in the society by turning to the ethic of care for moral decision making <sup>[5]</sup>. This ethic asks the people to consider the consequences of their decisions and actions and it involves questions such as: Who will benefit from what I decide? Who will be hurt by actions? What are the long-term effects as a result of my decision? And what should we do to repay an individual or society in general for the help we received?

In the context of education, care is thought to be the first job of the school to do for children and the foundation for all successful education, by which way contemporary schooling can be revitalized <sup>[6]</sup>. Noddings (1992) also notes that the essential conversation on schooling should be focused on ways in which we might help students to be reflective, curious and caring in all subjects, with all people, and with our environment <sup>[6]</sup>. And it is this notion of care that guides her analysis and discussion in her 2005 edition of *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education*. She also suggests that care is the key for authentic learning. And by authentic, she considers learning where students are collaborators in both the selection of subject and the development of understanding. But for Noddings, care is not a matter of looking after someone or sympathizing with another ... or worse, pitying another. Noddings explains: "An ethic of care embodies a relational view of caring; that is, when I speak of caring, my emphasis is on the relation containing carer and cared-for" <sup>[6]</sup>. It is this bidirectional nature of caring that moves Noddings' assertions away from care as solely one person's responsibility. Reciprocal, egalitarian, openness, honesty, fairness, collaboration, reflection—these and other characteristics are the descriptors of Noddings' school built on care <sup>[7]</sup>.

Nel Noddings (1992) believes that 'caring' should surpass 'achievement' as the fundamental goal of our education system in order to relieve the competitive side of our current system <sup>[6]</sup>. Many other theorists concur with Noddings and believe that the inclusion of reason and emotion within our curriculum would

serve to strengthen the leadership qualities of our youth. With regards to disadvantaged youth, the care model is broken into three components; attention and support, discipline and staying on them.

For a lot of people, it is difficult to distinguish ethic of care and ethic of justice. One important difference between the two concepts is that the former is much more time-intensive than the latter. Care-giving entails the time-consuming identification of individual needs; justice, on the other hand, requires the application of formal rules that often abstract away from the particularity of individual needs. A simple example may help clarify the distinction between care and justice and at the same time show why care is more time-intensive. Consider the task of dividing up a pie among a group of people. An application of the ethic of justice would probably lead to some rule, such as equal division, that the participants could quickly agree upon and implement, but that would probably fail to take into account the idiosyncratic needs of those involved. Applying the ethic of care here, on the other hand, would require more time-intensive communication among the participants in order to reveal individual needs and tailor the allocation to meet those needs.

School leaders may lead by developing rules, policies, standard operating procedures, information systems and may work well when the ethic of justice, rights, and laws is the primary basis for making moral decisions, but they are not enough considering the other ethical paradigms such as ethic of care to deal with the multiple voices when decisions are made.

Beck (1994) also stressed that it is of fundamental importance for educational leaders to quit the top-down, hierarchical model for making moral decisions and instead to adopt a leadership emphasizing relationship and connections <sup>[8]</sup>.

## 2.2 Ethic of Profession

Considerable attention was given to the ethic of the profession by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) in their work on the Multiple Ethical Paradigms as well <sup>[4]</sup>. For application purposes, as school leaders are expected to have their own personal ethical code, it is only recently that professional educational organizations have developed codes for the teaching profession. The difficulty with standard codes is that they often serve to limit educators as they are universal in nature and do not conform to the day-to-day dilemmas we face. Professional codes should only serve to act as a 'guidepost' and aspirations for a field, stating image and character <sup>[9]</sup>. According to Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011), of utmost importance is the process of developing a personal code of ethics that is based on past experience and personal triumph. This personal code when combined with the professional code should serve as our 'ethical toolkit' and be in the best interests of the child <sup>[4]</sup>. Greenfield (1993) maintained that ethical presentation could enable a prospective principal or superintendent to develop the attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, and skills associated with competence in moral reasoning. It is also maintained that development of professional ethic is not a clear process and with pitfalls <sup>[10]</sup>. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) have identifies four clashes that may affect the formation of one's own professional ethical codes, namely, clashes between an individual's

personal and professional codes, clashes within the professional code itself, clashes among educational leaders, and clashes between a leader's personal codes and professional code of ethics and customs and practices of the community<sup>[4]</sup>. In spite of above-mentioned possible clashes, Greenfield (1993) contended that schools should aim at "preparing children to assume roles and responsibilities of citizenship in a democratic society"<sup>[10]</sup>. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) thought if there is an imperative for education, it must be to serve the best interest of the students<sup>[4]</sup>. That is to say, the ideal is the heart of any professional paradigm for educational leaders.

### III. DISCUSSION

As discussed above, both ethic of care and ethic of profession play important roles in ethical educational leadership. That is to say, to behave morally as an educational leader, we must have a guideline in our mind to follow in case our actions deviate ethically from what the students, community, and the profession expect of us. While dealing with the literature, there are still some outstanding questions worth further exploration.

One of the questions ethic of care asks about who will benefit from what I decide and who will be hurt while making ethical decisions. The problem here is how we can make such a judgment. Take the ESL exam economy nowadays in China, we may be sure the exam organizers make a lot of profit from it and they are quite happy with it. The reason why there are so many ESL exams is because the organizers have found this is a good opportunity to make money by creating all the exams. Then what should the students do in this situation? In my opinion they both benefit and suffer from the exams. They benefit from it because the more exams they take, the more certificates they will obtain, the easier it will be for them to graduate or find a job. While on the other hand, they suffer as well for firstly they have to spend a lot of money on the various ESL exams and enormous amount of time out of their busy schedule to prepare for the various test; on the other hand, the much efforts spent does not necessarily mean there is much actual improvement in their language proficiency. At the end of the day, perspective employers may also find they are the victims of the exams for finally they find the applicants' certificates are not justified by their language proficiency. For ESL teachers, in my opinion, they are both beneficiaries and victims for one the one hand they may receive a lot of pressure from the school authority to get students to pass the exams and on the other hand they can make a lot of money by preparing the students for the tests. Hence, considering the question of who benefit and who suffer from the exam economy, it is a complicated judgment to make when leaders from education authority are facing ethical decisions. Still, different groups of people may have different interests, but how about interests in the same group of students? Some students can be much wealthier than the others. Are they still in the same boat in terms of interests? While those from lower economic classes may find them struggling financially with the commodification of education, those other students form financially abundant backgrounds may welcome the reality for their rich parents have given them advantages in competing with those peers from poor families. In China, a lot of rich students can attend those private elite schools through paying very high tuition fees, which keep many other applicants away. That is to say, commodification of education is not a problem for all students and it does not hurt all

students for even among the massive body of students there are different interests groups. Sometimes and for something, students could have different interests at different degrees, how can it be possible to conduct the ethic of care to satisfy all of them?

I do agree with Noddings' belief that caring should surpass achievement as the fundamental goal of our education system in order to lessen the competitive nature of our current system<sup>[6]</sup>. In the reality of China, kids are born into a fiercely competitive society. Learning, in my opinion, should be something natural and happy, while in China, students are pushed too much to learn by the society, their parents, and educational institutions. Academic performance is over-stressed that students have to keep struggling to take a lead in the competition instead of enjoying the learning. The commodification of education just fuels the competition. As school leadership, more attention and support should be given to students considering their healthy all-round development instead of sole achievement at the studies. Another issue about the practice of ethic of care is standards. What are the standardized guidelines to follow when making ethical decisions? To ensure a decision is made justly, we only need to carry out our actions according to the law, policies, or regulations. Whereas ethic of care is a different issue, it is more subjective instead of objective. What can an educational leader do in terms of care could be depending on our different views upon a specific case. It is also true of to what degree we should display our consideration and care for those in need. If we come back to the example of dividing up a pie discussed in the previous part, considering the ethic of care, some people with idiosyncratic needs should be given more instead of equal share for everyone, the question here is how much more should be given to those people in need. And then if we do so, does it mean we are actually prioritize ethic of care to ethic of justice? If so, how should an educational leader balance ethic of justice and ethic of care to benefit students to a maximum extent. I also cannot understand what Noddings mean by saying the care has the bidirectional nature and is not one person's responsibility. Does it mean as an educator when give care to our students, we can also receive care from them? And how do this bi-directional care happen?

As for ethic of the profession, it does not go without any pitfalls as well. In spite of all the clashes identified to affect the development of one's own professional ethical codes, fortunately, it is agreed that the educator should make the well-being of students be placed at the first importance of all decision making and actions and an educator should promote the success of every student. But due to the complexity of the moral dilemma to address the student voice as a result of the variety of student populations and other background issues, the literature fails to define "the best interest of the student". And in the absence of a clarification, schools often referred to a student's best interests to justify adults' interest<sup>[11]</sup>. The obvious problem is here: Does the student really share the same interest with their parents? Maybe a lot of time, they do share the same interest, but how about some other times? In view of the above problem, students' best interest should cover individual rights, teaching students to be responsible for their actions, and respecting students. I do think it makes more sense here compared to the practice of referring to a student's best interest to justify adults' interest. Still I think something more important is missed out here. I still remember the Chinese Tang Dynasty poet Han Yu said in his works *On Teacher*, "The teacher, therefore proselytizes, instructs, dispel doubt." Therefore, to impart knowledge and educate are teacher's

sacred inherent responsibilities. It is hard to imagine what it would be like if a student cannot learn any skill from a teacher. Therefore to conclude, for an educator to make ethical decisions for students, in my opinion we must make sure they can learn something from us, their rights are protected, they learn to take responsibility, and they are respected.

With the above discussion in mind, I would like to analyze the commodification of English language teaching from the ethical perspectives of care and profession as following.

Commodification of education is quite a trend nowadays in China, but here in this paper I would only discuss the commodification of English language teaching from the perspective of ESL teaching. With the globalization and the increasing importance of the English language as an international language, Chinese people are attaching more and more importance to the English language learning. As a result, a huge market has been created for the language training and ESL teachers. Many ESL teachers even shift their focus on making money by running a private English language training class or taking a lot of part-time teaching in some famous English training institutions for extra income. In fact the English language has been greatly commodified as goods instead of being spread as part of a culture. More and more English teaching institutions and professions have become money-oriented instead of investing in their daily teaching. But is this a moral decision to follow the trend for more income? From the perspective of ethic care, let us first analyze who benefit from commodification of ESL teaching. It is not difficult to find that educational institutions from bilingual kindergarten to university which charge high tuition fees for English language classes, ESL professionals, English training institutions, and English-related test organizers make profit from the English language commodity. Then who suffers? Of course, the students suffer. Students or their parents are dragged into this commercial activity. They have to invest large amounts of money to keep up with the peers, which adds to their already heavily-loaded family financial burden. In order to learn to speak good English, parents encourage their kids to sign up for various kinds of English language classes for extra learning after class or during holidays. Most of these ESL classes charge many times more than other subject. For example, a one-to-one English tutoring costs at around 300 yuan an hour, six times more than a math tutoring which is at 50 yuan an hour. In spite of the high fee, a lot of students and parents are forced to accept it in order not to be lagged behind by the mainstream students even though it is far beyond the affordability of most families. In addition to the financial load, when students are involved into fierce competition of learning, a large number of students in China nowadays do not have enough sleep. It is quite common for a grade-nine student to stay up until 12:00 pm and get up before 6:00 am in the morning. Various kinds of ESL remedial classes further deprive them of their rest time. The heavy stress from the study and the competition not only hurt the students physically but also psychologically. Student suicide from stress is frequently heard in many cities. Students are also victimized in terms of decreased teaching quality at school when all the ESL teachers care more about the extra income off campus. I do agree with Nel Noddings (1992) that “caring” should surpass “achievement” as the fundamental goal of our education system in order to lessen the competitive nature of our current system <sup>[1]</sup>. As an educator, we should give students more care instead of involving them into an endless competition, especially those have been disadvantaged by this society. More attention, more opportunities and more support should be

given to them to achieve equity in this world instead of being further marginalized. For the educational authority, it is also of imperative importance to take measures to correct this trend of marketization of ESL teaching and exam economy to create a healthy language learning environment and atmosphere. Care and support should be given to kids for their healthy development.

If we take the commodification of ESL from a perspective of profession, there could be a lot of clashes here as well. As a teacher in China, we normally can only make an economically moderately life with moderate income. As I said, the commodification of ESL teaching has undoubtedly bought a good opportunity for some people to make a fortune and money making has become one's individual personal code, while the professional code may be to impart knowledge to students and help them with their growth instead of aiming at profit. Of course, a different case could be that you are running a private ESL school in order to make money and are more like a businessman, so the professional code here is to maximize profits for the teaching you provide and the same time your conscience tells you it is not wise to make profit in that rip-off way as an educator. Both dilemmas above indicate the clashes of codes. When a dilemma like this happens, it is a good idea for us to reflect on the best interests of the students. Students enjoy the rights of being educated, to be treated in an equally, to be created the same opportunity towards education instead of being ripped off, and to learn happily. Here the "best interests of the students" can serve as a guideline for any educators to make ethical decisions so as to fulfill our professional obligations.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

The commodification of English language education in today's China is gradually becoming a trend, and it is even getting worse, which has caused more pressure and anxiety on English learners and their parents. It is not only detrimental to the learners' physical and mental health, but also a waste of valuable time. Based on the previous research, this paper attempts to analyze the phenomenon of commodification of English education in China from the perspectives of ethics of care, justice and profession, which is tentative and creative.

In this era of turbulence, for educational leadership, we have too many moral decisions to make. The commodification of English language education is just one of numerous complexities and paradoxes challenging us in work with students. As educational leaders, we should have our ethical guidelines to follow for right actions. The Multiple Ethical Paradigms of justice, critique, care, and the profession will serves as good framework for us to refer to for ethical decisions. When there are conflicts between the personal values and organizational values, or community values, the right thing to do is to following the interests of the students. As an educator, students' voices should always be addressed at the first place for ethical educational leadership. Educators should also go extra mile to propose to education authority or government to take active measures to curb the harm brought to students by the commodification of English language teaching so as to reduce social injustice and inequity in this society.

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