

New Policies Orients Compulsory English Curriculum in China: Interpretation and Implications

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Abstract. This study is set in Chinese compulsory education English curriculum after the release of *the Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Homework and Off-Campus Training for Compulsory Education Students* (Hereafter referred to as *the Opinions*) and *Compulsory Education Curriculum Program and Standards*. It is based on existing literature to explore the changing curriculum orientations based on the theoretical interpretation of the two policies. The three primary scholarly themes include policy interpretation and identification of changes, orienting the English curriculum with the policies and implications for stakeholders in education. The ongoing change is identified to be a combination of academic-subjected and learner-centered curriculum orientations. This study summarizes the timely efforts required from each side regarding the new pattern of schools' self-repositioning and teachers' pedagogical innovation to serve students' multiple needs, parents' enhancement of confidence in the policy effectiveness, and students' transformation of learning modes. These findings may shed some light on the current policy implementation and the follow-up reform in practice.

Keywords: Compulsory education, English curriculum, curriculum orientations.

1. Introduction

Armstrong defined curriculum as an overall framework for instruction [1]. Currently, the curriculum is the plan to execute instructions given by policies. A recent sweeping educational policy in China is *the Opinions*. Targeting the reduction in on-campus and off-campus burdens of students it's commonly known as "Double Reduction". Hereupon, the *Compulsory Education Curriculum Program and Standards* was released as a set of realistic schemes in line with "Double Reduction" proposed by *the Opinions* [2]. This marks another milestone in the development of compulsory education curricula in China.

Viewed as the bellwether of educational reform, the release has sparked heated discussion, mainly about the changing curriculum orientations. According to Cheung and Ng, curriculum orientations are the indicator of teachers' views on curriculum goals and components, including objectives, content, teaching, and learning, activities, and assessment approaches [3]. In this respect, Yao listed the doubt that English curriculum orientations may be reduced from the academic-subjected of a compulsory subject to an optional subject [4]. This partly results from students' declining burdens of cramming for English off campus in response to 'Double Reduction'. The reduced time spent on English after school then causes doubt over the requirement of the English curriculum throughout learning, teaching and assessing. On the other hand, the change in on-campus English curriculum content in line with the revised standards (Hereafter referred to as *Standards 2022*) reflects the development of orientations. In this sense, elucidation of English curriculum orientations according to *the Opinions* and *Standards 2022* may provide an interpretation of the ongoing reform in the curriculum.

As a junction between policymakers and practitioners, the curriculum should facilitate effective endeavors in carrying out policies. In an effort to identify this direction for teachers, current studies are mostly exploring optimized teaching plans and perfected homework design from teachers' perspectives.

Wang looked into the challenge of tackling inequity and inequality in in-class teaching in the implementation of policies [5]. For after-class assignments, Feng highlighted the need for innovation

in design and requirements to achieve “Double Reduction” [6]. On a holistic level, Luo predicted the future reform in teaching in the current setting [7]. These efforts, largely teacher-sided, symbolize two major branches in the latest research: one focuses on the micro level of implementing policies in the arrangement of teaching and assignments, and the other on the macro level of forecasting systematic reform. Overall, practical implementation seems to be more emphasized than theoretical interpretation of policies among researchers since interpretation remains the initial point of implementing policies and orienting curricula.

Hence, this article aims to present the follow-up changes in compulsory English curriculum orientations in the current policy context. Backed by the policy review, it uses literature analysis to extend current research from practice to theory, intended to foster teachers’ acumen towards policies and locate the curriculum’s niche in this setting.

2. Policy Contexts

2.1. The Issue of the Opinions

Upon its issue on July 24, 2021, *the Opinions* has embraced a new round of discussion [8]. *The Opinions*, commonly referred to as “Double Reduction”, expounds overall requirements in three parts-guidelines, principles and goals [9].

The guidelines, rooted in *the Compulsory Education Law of the People’s Republic of China*, delineate the goal of this issue as to ensure education’s fundamental mission of fostering virtues, promoting education fairness and maintaining the educational organism balance, backed up by a well-established education system. In line with these guidelines, the document sets the principles of implementation for schools and governments, namely, the practitioners and the administrators.

For the goals, the document draws a blueprint for implementation with explicit targets and requirements. For the reduction of the burden of homework, *the Opinions* limits the amount of time spent on homework in different grades, no homework for Grade 1-2, no more than 60 minutes for Grade 3-6 [9].

The guidelines, principles and goals, on the whole, are in line with the ultimate goal of this issue. The improvement in the quality of in-school education and teaching, along with the design of more scientific and reasonable homework and well-equipped after-school services, can meet the needs of students. With timely rein in nonstandard off-school tutoring institutions, the overheated industry will gradually cool down. Subsequently, the days burdened with off-campus tutoring in cram schools will have gone. Instead, sound after-school services will supply students with necessary tutoring at school, freeing parents from the role of coaches at home. Finally, both sides will enjoy higher-level satisfaction with the education system.

2.2. The Release of Standards 2022

Following the issue of *the Opinions*, a press conference was held on April 21, 2022, updating the release of the *Compulsory Education Curriculum Program and Standards* for 16 subjects and a forthcoming educational reform [10].

The release is a landmark revision which involves the improvement of objectives, the optimization of structure and the perfection of design. Accordingly, explicit instructions were given for effective implementation. Meanwhile, the dispute over English curriculum orientations as academic subjects calls for a task to unscramble the signals given by the release and to orient the curriculum towards its niche. In this sense, *Compulsory Education’s English Curriculum Standards 2022* (Hereafter referred to as *Standards 2022*) is selected for interpreting its revised curriculum orientations in a new light, with combined consideration of the “Double Reduction” policy.

Like *the Opinions*, *Standards 2022* has its guidelines and principles presented in the preface [11]. What’s more, it manifests the key changes in the revision as well. Responding to the overall aim of quality and balanced development of compulsory education, the preface foreshadows the curriculum rationale and goals to be illuminated in the following chapters. As an entry point, the interpretation

of the curriculum orientations in *Standards 2022* is to promote the exploration of the English curriculum's niche in the current setting against the disputes over its academic-subject orientation.

3. Orienting English Curriculum With New Policies

Curriculum orientations are perceived as the indicator of views on curriculum goals and components [3]. In Armstrong's taxonomy, he grouped curriculum orientations into three major categories: learner-centered, needs-of-society and academic-subjects [1]. The academic-subjects curriculum, as transmitting bodies of knowledge, organizes programs into academic disciplines [1]. Considering its status as a mandatory subject in China, English is an academic discipline, and the compulsory English curriculum falls into academic-subjects orientation with a systematic body of knowledge. However, the release of *the Opinions* and *Standards 2022* heralds a developmental trend from academic subjects to a combination of learner-centered in compulsory English curriculum orientations. Following is the analysis of this pattern based on the two policies.

3.1. Orienting English Curriculum towards "Double Reduction"

Tanriverdi and Apak held imparting conceptual, content and language knowledge as the accountability of academic-subjects curriculum [12]. English curriculum, thus, is also the transmitter of disciplinary knowledge. The transmission, in the form of teaching, is mostly assessed by tests. To make teaching content well-received, teachers tend to tailor teaching and assignments tightly related to the tests rather than students' interests; to boost their performance in standardized tests, students may turn to after-campus tutoring institutions for the preview, review and supplementation of in-class knowledge. These, hereupon, exert "double" stress, both on-campus and after-campus, on students.

In that light, *the Opinions* is positioned as a remedy. With regard to the guideline of 'strengthening the role of the school as the main place of education', schools should be the major implementers of the policy and the builders of a policy-guided curriculum. Specifically, Part 3, 'improve the level of after-school services to meet the diverse needs of students', directs a new pathway for the development of curriculum orientation [10]. This chapter contains double-faceted messages: first, after-school services should be provided by schools instead of charged tutoring institutions; second, well-equipped off-campus services need to be student-centered and individualized [10].

Pan studied the after-school service guarantee system for compulsory education under "Double Reduction" and stressed that a full-fledged system should be established by schools to provide after-school service [13]. In detail, these services don't amount to those previously offered by tutoring institutions that take the form of supplementary teaching of on-campus curriculum or extra training of advanced subject knowledge. In essence, they featured a "learner-centered" curriculum orientation, heralding an ongoing trend in the combined development of orientation. Since teachers need to make prompt modifications to teaching plans based on students' feedback, for example, during off-class services, English teachers may provide advanced-level students with supplementary readings while further explaining the in-class texts to lower-level ones. This, moreover, is one of the successful applications of learner-centered orientations, which serve as a facilitator who assists in students' active learning process [14].

Specifically, this stands for a combined compulsory English curriculum orientation. It combines transmitting the traditional knowledge body in class with more customized services after class. According to *the Opinions*, the implementation calls for utilizing social resources to enrich students' off-campus activities and establishing online tutoring platforms [10]. These two ways actually draw a blueprint for the future curriculum development, conforming to the overall goal of promoting students' all-around development as stated in the guidelines [10].

3.2. Orienting English Curriculum Towards Standards 2022

Standards 2022 explores the nature of English and traces back to its function as a lingua franca, followed by the realization that the English curriculum holds the key to the development of students

and China as a whole [11]. This places the English curriculum at the core of compulsory education. According to the definition by Armstrong, English curriculum orientation in China belongs to academic subjects, viewed as more “essential” than subjects like P.E or Art [1],

Like the trend directed by “Double Reduction”, the fusion between academic subjects and learner-centered curriculum orientations manifests itself in *Standards 2022*, mainly in the revised goals and content (Chapter 2 and 3) [11]. Lunenburg used metaphors to showcase the relation between curriculum goals and content: the former is a road map; the latter is the route [15]. In short, goals draw the blueprint for curriculum construction and orientation combination as content constitutes the concrete ingredients of teaching to fit the setting of policies.

For goals, Wang compared *Standards 2022* with its former edition (*Standards 2011*): *Standards 2022* outlines the overall goal to cultivate “language skills, language knowledge, affective attitudes, learning strategies and cultural awareness”, and its starting point and ultimate purpose lie in “comprehensive language ability”; *Standards 2011* locates its goals as “centred around core competencies; in accordance with the nature of the curriculum and guidelines” [11, 16, 17]. Literally, the keyword “language ability” has been replaced with “core competencies”. Further, *Standards 2022* demarcates “core competencies” into five aspects: language ability, cultural awareness, thinking capacity, and learning ability [11]. One of the cores of “language ability” remains; it is no longer the only focus. Language ability, rudimentary for the academic-subjects orientation, now incorporates other abilities required for students’ overall development, reflecting the curriculum orientation’s departure from totally academic subjects to a combination with learner-centered.

On the other hand, for the content tailored to these goals, curriculum content in *Standards 2022* consists of six items: thematic contexts, text types, language knowledge, cultural knowledge, language skills, and learning strategies [11]. To differentiate between the emphases on each item, a figure is applied for illustration. (See Figure 1)

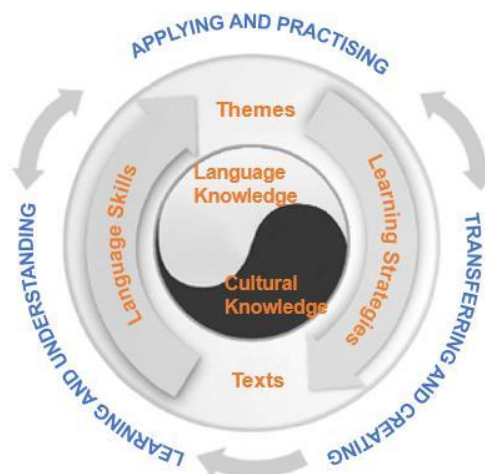


Fig 1. Compulsory Education’s English Curriculum Structure (original).

Figure 1 is in the form of Yin-Yang, a prominent Taoist symbol, cultural knowledge for Yin (the dark part) and language knowledge for Yang (the light part). This layout visualizes the combined curriculum orientations. Liu elucidates that Yin-Yang stands for equilibrium and inherent interconnectedness of all things [18]. From this, the curriculum orientations displayed in *Standards 2022* intend to create a balance between language knowledge and cultural knowledge. For academic-subjects oriented English curricula, whose traditional job is to impart language knowledge that constitutes the intellectual parts of language learning, now should also transmit cultural knowledge including mental parts of culture, such as beliefs, rules, and attitudes, so as to foster students’ intercultural communication skills [19]. For students, the acquisition of both knowledge will prepare them for intercultural communication, thus their perception of globalization and understanding of foreign cultures. On this level, the inclusion of cultural knowledge partly targets to meet students’ needs of development, indicating a learner-centered curriculum orientation.

Back to the diagram's structure, the outer circle and the external arrows symbolize specific content themes designed for imparting the two main types of knowledge above. Their interface with each other also points to the equal weight they carry in the curriculum content. By and large, two main knowledge bodies at the core, encircled by other learning activities, form a coherent whole in curriculum-building.

In summary, *Standards 2022* is leading *the* English curriculum towards a combination of academic subjects and learner-centered orientation. In light of the detailed content, it can be observed that concrete steps are to be taken in practice for the balanced transmission of language and cultural knowledge for more all-around development of students. English curriculum, currently, is not confined to a traditional academic subject but a more comprehensive one with consideration for students' needs instead.

4. Implications for Compulsory English Education

Stakeholders in education refer to individuals or groups with interests related to the success of schools, districts, or the larger public education system [20]. As per this definition, stakeholders in compulsory English education can be narrowed down to two sides-education practitioners, schools and teachers; education recipients, parents and students. To expound on the development of English curriculum orientations in the context of *the Opinions* and *Standards 2022* and interpret the ongoing reform in the curriculum, a summary of the implications for the stakeholders may be conducive for both teaching and learning.

4.1. Implications for Schools and Teachers

Armstrong equated curriculum orientation to the method of deciding what content is important [1]. This indicates that the implications shown by the guiding policies should come down to a message for teaching practice for schools and teachers.

The Opinions and *Standards 2022*, as the policy footing for the ongoing reform and the combination of curriculum orientations, provide role-based implications for schools and teachers and necessitate their timely efforts.

The implications, mostly driven by *the Opinions*, elicit schools' rethinking of their roles in curriculum-building and school-teaching. Zhou demonstrated that *the Opinions* and its proposal of "Double Reduction" have clarified schools' obligations to upgrade on-campus education and establish sound after-class services [21]. Overall, a clear understanding of obligations contributes to the practice guidance on the combination of curriculum orientations that schools ought to relieve parental anxiety and improve the overall development of students through the construction of cultural knowledge-based curriculum activities or diagnosis tutoring after-class, for example.

The implications received by teachers, mainly presented by *Standards 2022*, focus on pedagogy. Wei studied the reform of curriculum orientations and goals against the backdrop of *Standards 2022* and recognized the new requirements posed to teachers in the integration with a learner-centered orientation [22]. Different from their traditional positions as intellectual authorities to transmit the knowledge body (often textbook-based and exam-oriented), teachers are now expected to balance objectivity and subjectivity in teaching. On the strength of objective, written requirements of curriculum content and goals, they should display subjective initiative and flexibility in tailoring their teaching to students' multiple demands. For instance, blending task-based with grammar-translation methods may contribute to the simultaneous training of intercultural communication and authentic problem-solving. Hopefully, such teaching innovations may establish the curriculum as a living agent with human experiences, values, and beliefs, promoting students' internalization and application of knowledge.

4.2. Implications for Students and Parents

On the surface, *the Opinions* and *Standards 2022* act as the central plank of educational policies in current China by guiding the administrators and curriculum builders, mainly school-targeted and teacher-targeted. However, parents and students are also stakeholders of education, whose apt reaction towards the two policies has a bearing on the efficiency of the efficiency of policy enforcement.

As to *the Opinions*, Shao returned to the connotation of “Double Reduction”, which is to reduce on-campus and off-campus simultaneously and advised parents as well as students to actively adjust to the present curriculum orientations [23].

For parents, they should synchronize with the policy, trust in the follow-up efforts and appease extra “anxiety”. This emerging round of parents’ educational anxiety under “Double Reduction” is ascribed to their concerns about school selection--the quality of in-class teaching and after-class services may vary [24]. In effect, such “anxiety” is opposite to the goal of *the Opinions* and may be alleviated by confidence in the effectiveness of implementation. If parents readily accept the return of after-class services that tutoring institutions used to occupy and expect a well-established system with unified quality standards, they may feel confident enough to abandon the worries about unequal educational resources or poor-quality tutoring and enjoy a real-sense reduction of pressure, mentally, physically and financially.

Guo placed students as the principal factors in empirical research on education because all the curricula are developed and organized for students’ learning [25]. This echoes the ongoing combination of academic subjects and learner-centered orientations shown in *Standards 2022*, but she underscored students’ consequent subject roles in learning who should proactively “enter” the curriculum [25]. “Enter” can be paraphrased as “consciously engage in” curriculum activities tailored to curriculum orientation. In another dimension, the combination of curriculum orientations finally materializes in students’ adjusted learning strategies. In Appendices, *Standards 2022* elaborates on the grading of English subject core competencies [11]. Among the required attributes for different levels, “support”, “understand”, “work with”, and “develop interests in” are the high-frequency keywords. This pattern reflects a learner-center orientation as it stresses teachers’ job to tap students’ potentials and satisfy various learning demands, customizing teaching plans towards competency levels. Instead of rigid statements or regulations in the standards of an academic-subjects orientation, the flexibility of language in this version then insinuates the combination in orientation. Simply put, students should adapt to the transfer from traditional rote learning to multi-dimensional learning and strive for the overall acquisition of the core competencies.

5. Conclusion

This study unravels a developmental pattern in the compulsory English curriculum orientations in China currently. As per the theoretical interpretation of *the Opinions* and *Standards 2022*, it spots a pattern of combination between academic subjects and learner-centered orientations.

The purpose of unscrambling the two programmatic documents is to orient the construction of a compulsory English curriculum. In terms of the implications provided by the ongoing change in orientations, the study adopts a classified discussion about four main stakeholders in education. If first, it distinguishes between providers and recipients of education. The former are schools and teachers; it calls for schools’ relocation of their niches in upgrading both on-campus and off-campus education as well as teachers’ coordination with students’ multiple needs. The latter are students and parents: parents should cultivate confidence in the policy implementation and anticipate a balance in educational ecology; students should adapt themselves to the change in curriculum content and goals in time. Thus, this study enlarges the study objects from teachers to schools, students and parents, intended for a multi-faceted illumination of the reform in curriculum orientations and follow-up efforts.

It can be acknowledged that these findings offer pragmatic insight into putting the recent policies into effect with tangible and apt efforts. Meanwhile, there are still limitations to be addressed in the future. Only the English curriculum and the related policies are selected for research. To obtain a full picture of the possible educational reform in China's compulsory education, more research into other curricula and documents is needed. On the other hand, the suggestions given to the stakeholders of education are rooted in library research and literature analysis, and hence, qualitative case studies as empirical research should be conducted. Hopefully, future in-depth and extensive studies may help enhance the stakeholders' acumen towards policies and propel positive endeavors from all sides, with the ultimate goal of facilitating the optimization of China's compulsory education quality.

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