

# A Review of Pre-university English Language Education Policies in China 2011-2022

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**Abstract.** Chinese foreign language education policies (FLEPs) are changing during years of development in aspects of national planning, education, and policy formulation. And the most widely acknowledged foreign language in China is English. This paper critically reviews English language education planning (ELEP) in China under the historical context from 2011 to 2022. The ELEP developments are related to the modern era's economic, ideological, and political changes. At the institutional level, English is considered without controversy as a universal language that promotes national development and offers personal opportunity. However, the English-as-threat notion has been repetitively mentioned in the history of policy development. Examining the political alterations shows that even with doubts and concerns, providing pre-university students with English language education is inevitably strategic. And from reviewing a series of officially published documents and relevant research reports, this study ends with the implications for both English learners and educators in China. As the instrumental role of English has remained essentially unchanged, the concept that teaching language with its culture should be emphasized and encouraged in relation to English teaching and learning standards. Learning English is not only about learning a foreign language, it also involves learning a fresh way of thinking.

**Keywords:** English education, language policy, education planning, foreign language education, China.

## 1. Introduction

Throughout the years, foreign language policy has been an important area of research in curriculum remodeling and educational policymaking. English is the most accepted foreign language in international communications and global exchange. In fast-globalizing China, the general conception regarding English proficiency is linked to prosperity and a higher quality of life and leads to educational and career success. Thus, since 2001, English has been a required subject of learning and one of the three core courses in all pre-university schools. Various studies have been conducted during the past 30 years. Numerous researchers and academics are concentrating on FLEPs in China between 1949 and 1999. While these studies highlight a crucial part of the history of FLEPs development, the evolution of FLEPs after the 21st century deserves to be explored further. This paper reviews the Chinese government's plans for English language education in China.

English language ideology and the changing strategic plans are two main factors significantly influencing English language education planning. This review paper begins by analyzing the English ideology in China and draws attention to two debatable ideas concerning whether English threatens China or offers more opportunities. Subsequently, this paper critically evaluates the choices made in English language planning from 2011 through 2022 within its changing social, economic, and political settings. Finally, based on the wide-ranging effects of these policy changes on English education, this paper concludes by underlining the implications for both English learners and teachers in China.

## **2. English Ideology in China**

### **2.1. English as a Chance**

The study of English is considered a crucial instrument for developing social links and global collaboration, international communication, promoting sustainable socio-economic development, and strengthening international cultural and educational interactions. [1]. Since the late 1970s, China has aimed to open-up and modernize itself, and as a result, learning foreign languages is an opportunity for China's future development. When China prepared to host the 2008 Beijing Olympics, English, as a global language, showed increasing popularity in society. Therefore, the English language serves as an opportunity for national development and individual achievement in the context of globalization.

Learning English has positive effects on both young people and seniors. Most Chinese youngsters tend to view English learning and language knowledge with multiple benefits, such as career opportunities, educational opportunities, social status improvement, and international connections. For retirees, studying English is widely appropriate for different reasons. Language learning allows seniors to improve their quality of life and keep up with the world's changes. Accordingly, although attitudes towards learning English differ, both age groups primarily attribute the importance of learning English to its practicality and instrument.

### **2.2. English as Threat**

China is a country that takes Chinese as its national language and values its Confucian tradition. As a result, the popularity of teaching and learning English has progressively become a phenomenon that caught scholarly and government attention. The English-as-threat notion alarms the public's perception of learning English. In 1995, the sense that English poisons Chinese society and traditional culture was brought to public attention. In the following years, considerable debate has been concerning whether Chinese learners should study English and whether the English language compromises Chinese identity and culture. Professor Xie Kechang debated in 2004 at the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) whether the whole nation should learn English [2]. Other scholars also agree with Xie's idea by pointing out that spreading western culture and learning English compromise the purity of traditional Chinese culture and confuse national identity [3].

### **2.3. The Role of English in China**

The Chinese government fully understands the linguistic and cultural challenges presented above. Thus, the official guideline for studying English during the late Qing era (the mid-1800s to 1911) is 'Taking Chinese knowledge as a framework while Western learning for practical use'. From the end of the 1970s until the mid-1980s, the Chinese government stated that English is the key focused foreign language taught in educational institutions. However, despite the fact that English is no longer seen as a risk, it is still viewed as a possible spiritual contamination. As a result, the English language is taught divorced from its culture, and it is a topic of study, not a mode of communication.

Due to the necessity for modernization and globalization, the idea of so-called English as a cultural treat has been shelved and abandoned since the 1990s. Since the year 2011, two-way cultural interchange has been encouraged. This concept is the upgraded version of the foreign language ideology from a century ago: learn from them to balance with them. English learners in China are required to not only learn the language but also know its culture. They are encouraged to use their knowledge to 'introduce the world to China and China to the world' through this, students can learn about the various cultures of other nations while sharing Chinese culture via communicating with people from different countries. Specifically, English can also be used to spread Chinese culture worldwide.

### **3. The Evolution of Pre-university Chinese English Language Education Policies Since 2011**

In this section, the development of Chinese English language education policies since 2011 is divided into three stages for presentation and analysis: Outcome-based English language education policy (2011-2016), Adjustments of English language education policy (2017-2020), and Essential-qualities-oriented English language education policy (2021 and onward). These stages are based on the evolution of pre-university English education planning and national English language examination policy.

#### **3.1. Outcome-based English Language Education Policy (2011-2016)**

In this period, English, as an international language, is a crucial instrument for intercultural communications and international exchanges. The information revolution and globalization continually stimulate the development of English language education in China, which has contributed to changing English perception. The standard of English proficiency has changed gradually, but there are difficulties in policy implementation.

##### **3.1.1. Conditions**

China has continually pushed the Reform and Opening-up despite having a stable base for governance and significant popular support. However, it has new difficulties in managing its relations with developed nations, emerging nations, and its neighbours. During this period, China has become more involved in international affairs to capture possibilities and remain on the path of peaceful growth in the age of economic globalization. It held the 41st World Exposition in Shanghai, hosted China-ASEAN Expo in 2013, and built Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road in 2015. These global events in various industries have inspired English-learning activities in Chinese society. For communicating with international tourists, government servants and public transportation workers in major cities are expected to understand basic conversational English.

The market-oriented economic reform began, which provoked the idea of the Chinese Dream. At first glance, the Chinese Dream is similar to American Dream. Even though both terms represent spiritual impetus to national advancement, the way they are manifested in reality differs. American Dream emphasizes creating a happy life through individual struggles, whereas China Dream is to achieve national prosperity and people's happiness. Chinese Dream concentrates on Chinese national identity and the ideal of life.

##### **3.1.2. Decisions and Effects**

The discourse that high English proficiency benefits national economic development and individual advancement still plays a leading role in public perception. The 2011 edition of the English Curriculum for Chinese Primary Schools and Junior/Senior Middle Schools (2011 Edition of the English Curriculum) highlights the social status of the English language and the criteria for testing English language proficiency. For the purpose of improving students' mutual communication skills, communicative teaching methods are incorporated into the 2011 Edition of the English Curriculum. However, these communicative abilities are not tested on both Zhongkao (High School Entrance Examination) and Gaokao (College Entrance Examination). Thus, these new standards have been significantly compromised in English courses. In other words, a macro-level strategy that seems to be successful may have quite different outcomes in the classroom.

Students in China are frequently tested, which profoundly impacts their future life chances. Tests function as a way to enter higher educational institutions. And grades are the main form for evaluating students' qualifications. Among all the subjects, English is the main subject that counts the majority of scores. As a result, for most students, English examination performance is the key to academic and future success. In 2011, Beijing's Zhongkao English test had a 120-point scale with four sections, including 24 points for listening, 27 points for general knowledge, 44 points for reading, and 25 points for writing. In the same year, Beijing's Gaokao English test has a 150-point scale, including 30 points

for listening, 45 points for general knowledge, 40 points for reading, and 35 points for writing. At this stage, both major examinations' English tests are message-based tests of English's interactive and contextualized use.

Since test result represents academic achievement, educators find it challenging to fully apply the 2011 edition of English curriculum standards and decide to teach language skills in an examination-driven setting. Li and GAO note that most English language teachers in China view test results as the one and only aim of student learning [4]. Under the pressure of examinations, instructors concentrate on vocab, grammar, and reading comprehension, while students spend countless hours on homework and exercises but rarely use it as a language. The 2011 edition of the English Curriculum states that students should develop the fundamental skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English through English courses [5]. However, due to the exam-oriented education system, English education in schools focuses heavily on preparation for examination and testing and encompasses the performance in the municipal-level school entrance examinations [6]. Most students learn the language primarily for academic results rather than practical purposes. As a result, with the English examination policy blocking the way, the 2011 edition English Curriculum is not effectively promoting students' overall English proficiency. Modifying English education policy and examination system in a mutually beneficial way for both students and teachers in boosting English language proficiency is extremely necessary.

### **3.2. Adjustments of English Language Education Policy (2017-2020)**

During this period, China's economy shifted from an era of rapid expansion to a time of high-quality development. At this stage, China significantly eases market access and protects foreign investors' legitimate rights and interests. As a result, foreign languages in the use of communication and interaction have become more critical than ever. Relevant issues that were discovered in the previous period have found their solutions.

#### **3.2.1. Conditions**

China has actively promoted its relations with developed nations and its neighbors. English has played a critical role in cross-cultural communications, mutual appreciation exchange, and joint development discussions. In addition, the success of building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road have promoted policy communication and high-quality financial development. In 2020, China became ASEAN's top trading partner and the EU's largest trading partner.

Meanwhile, the international community has higher expectations of China, the world's most populous nation and the second-largest economy, on matters regarding human rights. Voices concerned issues including China's unbalanced economic reform, undemocratization, and the high socio-economic disparity between regions [7]. As a result, the government has turned its attention to fostering social fairness and education equity, beginning with major cities like Shanghai and Beijing.

#### **3.2.2. Decisions and Effects**

China wants to lead the world in education. China's State Council issued the official Thirteen Five Year Plan on Education, defining key goals and objectives for the education sector, such as encouraging worldwide cooperation [8]. China is expected to have a strengthened and modernized education system by the end of 2020 and to be able to play a more influential role in world education. The Plan focuses on several major priority areas, such as moral education, structural change, education equality, and teacher development. Enhancing education fairness is central to this Plan. Therefore, it is necessary to improve fundamental English language proficiency. So, China's policymakers have already begun tackling some complex problems plaguing the English-language education community. In 2019, the China English Test was successfully linked with the TOEFL test. This move reflects the determination of China's English reform, which aims to promote the opening up and development of English education in China. English teaching in China has made considerable

progress in the past 40 years of reform and opening up, but it still needs further strengthening its connection with the world.

At this stage, promoting educational equity is another prerequisite. Improving the quality of rural English teaching is a crucial way to improve educational equity. In March 2017, the Ministry of Education and three other government agencies jointly issued the “Plan for Promoting the Development of Senior High School Education (2017-2020)”, intending to increase the total enrollment rate of secondary schools to 90% by 2020, and thereby promoting educational equality [9]. The shortage of teachers is the root cause of the unbalanced development of compulsory education in remote areas. In order to solve the lack of high-tech teachers in Tibet and Xinjiang and the quality of teaching in high schools in both regions, the Ministry of Education issued the “Guidelines for the Implementation of the Educational Assistance Plan” for 10,000 Teachers helping Tibet and Xinjiang [10]. The first group of English teachers is sent to Xinjiang Awati Middle School and has significantly improved students’ English skills.

One important aspect of education equity is the examination policy reform. As mentioned in the previous section, the exam policy greatly influences English education planning. The Examinations and Admissions Reform Implementation Plan (2017) proposes that from 2017 onwards, the English listening score in The National Higher Education Entrance Examination will be worth 30 points using computerized examinations [11]. The English listening examination is held twice a year, separate from the written exam, which remains once a year. Compared to original examinations, the new form offers students one more chance to take the exam and file their highest grade for applying to higher educational institutions. At the same time, as a leading city, Shanghai has adopted a new criterion for students facing High School Entrance Examination. The examination result is no longer the sole criterion for entering a higher educational institution. The entire learning process is also taken into consideration. This policy ends the single log bridge examination period. This decision also eases the pressure on both students and teachers.

In addition to the reform of the scoring system, there have also been changes in the form of the exam. The topics read are related to daily life, such as technology, economy, and culture. Many articles are excerpted from American TV programs, magazines, and English newspapers, such as New York Times, Guardian, and Financial Times; British and American newspapers, such as the US Environmental Protection Agency. Some listening materials are excerpted from American TV series. The new test standard emphasizes the focus of English teaching reform in the future, that is, the ability to interpret everyday English.

### **3.3. Essential-qualities-oriented English Language Education Policy (2021 and Onward).**

During this period, the celebration of the Party's 100th anniversary leads a new political cycle. The future strategy includes and is not limited to joining the ranks of the world's most innovative countries. With the development of the Chinese Dream, Sinology has started to catch the world's attention. The rising popularity of English education causes arguments at the ground level. English relationship with Chinese culture and language also draws the central government's attention.

#### **3.3.1. Conditions**

The phrase Chinese modernization has drawn broad attention globally. It comprises components common to the modernization processes of all nations, but it has more distinguished characteristics suitable for the Chinese environment. Many countries hope to learn from China as they search for a development model based on their own realities. Busting the myth that the Western path is the only path to modernization, Chinese modernization represents a new path for developing countries. China's success shows that it can be an option for world countries seeking progress and development. China's unique approach also contributes to Chinese wisdom and solution for the global modernization drive. Accordingly, China needs to use international languages to spread its idea of building modernization country.

### 3.3.2. Decisions and Effects

A new edition of the English Curriculum has been released. The 2022 edition of the English Curriculum highlights the idea of an essential-qualities-oriented English language education policy. The new standards delete the fixed grading criteria by adding “teaching research and teacher training” [12]. English education adapts a scientific approach. And teachers at the pre-university level required systematic training. Moreover, the 2011 edition of the curriculum divides English proficiency into five levels, whereas, in the new edition curriculum, English proficiency is now divided into four groups. It provides more flexibility for students whom ego to learn beyond the curriculum standard. The 2022 edition of the English Curriculum re-emphasizes the actual use of language, including communication and social interaction. Hence, the 2022 edition of the English Curriculum marked the idea that future development of English language education focuses on learning English as a Global Language. Practical use of English should be the key focus of the English language learning process.

Furthermore, as the grading scale is changed, the examination policy has been reformed further to follow the pace of the new curriculum. With the need for communication in this era, the importance of English speaking is increasing. Since 2021, English-speaking tests have been built up nationwide. The examination grading scale is once again changed. In 2022, the High School Entrance Examination English test remained 150-point scale with sections including 50 points for listening and speaking and 100 points for reading and writing. The National Higher Education Entrance Examination English test in the same year has a 100-point scale, including 40 points for listening and speaking and 60 points for reading and writing. At this stage, fundamental English listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills are equally important in English courses and examinations.

However, under the change in the grading scale, students hold a gloomy attitude toward English. And parents worry that the overemphasis on English in the education system and society will damage the Chinese language and culture. As the grade changes, they are calling for excluding English from future entrance tests. Chinese language should be the only focused language in the Chinese education system. In 2021, educational institutions in Shanghai, Shandong, Jiangsu, and other major cities and provinces stated that in order to promote the development of the Chinese language, they intend to remove English from Gaokao [13]. The status of the English language in China is once again in doubt.

Although the relationship between English and high-stakes exams seems to slowly lose its connection, the Ministry of Education has never formally approved such a request. Also, removing English from the high-stakes exams does not change the fact that it is an important social resource and a global language. In the era when English is a leading language in the world, the removal of English from the education system may lead China to lose opportunities on the international stage. Deemphasizing English will not increase the spread of the Chinese language. The Chinese language has not yet been used as a common language or a global language, and it is uncertain whether Mandarin will become a critical worldwide language in the future. Therefore, English and Chinese should be complementary in teaching to develop Chinese learners’ intercultural communication abilities sufficiently.

## 4. Conclusion

Over the years, globalization and China’s domestic and international aspirations have driven forces behind the introduction and development of English in China. New economic superpowers are concurrently rising, with developing countries like China, India, and Russia significantly affecting the global economy. The shifting world order and pattern remind people of the importance of the world hearing the Chinese voice. Consequently, English proficiency may play an increasingly crucial role in international affairs, finance, sciences, technologies, and intercultural understanding. Therefore, in terms of language planning and instruction, it is time for Chinese policymakers, educators, English language teaching practitioners, and students to redefine the goals for English language education in light of the changing global situation and strategic plans for the future.

This study analyzes the development of Chinese English language education policies since 2011 and divides them into three stages. At stage one (2011-2016), outcome-based English language education policy strongly affects the language teaching and learning process. A macro-level policy leads to quite different results in the classroom. English is more like an obligation than a second language. In the second stage (2017-2020), English examination reform starts to change along with the English language education policy in the previous stage. This stage is primarily focused on improving education quality and promoting educational equity. At the final stage (2021 and onward), the concept of essential-qualities-oriented English language education has been emphasized by the new edition of the English curriculum. The ability to intercultural communication is the required focus in this period. As the three stages described above, English education policy in China tends to teach English as a global language.

Under general social content, learning English brings economic, educational, and social advantages and opportunities for personal development. This ideology is served as positive and powerful motivation for English language learning. Nonetheless, English instructors must provide a more accurate image of what English adds to the lives and studies of their students. English language tutors are encouraged to think beyond the teaching methods and adopt a more social and cultural approach to language teaching instructions. It would help the learners to critically identify their learning requirements and operate language knowledge more realistically and reflectively.

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