

English in China: Policy and methodology

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Number of students studying English & number of English teachers in China

- The overwhelming majority of over 226,000,000 students in primary and secondary schools and in universities study English taught by a strong force of English teachers numbering 850,000 in China (Wen & Hu, 2007).

State policies from a historical perspective

- China established its first formal foreign language schools in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou in the early 1860s after the country had lost in the Opium War and realized its backwardness and the importance of learning Western technology to strengthen the country.

State policies from a historical perspective

- Since 1949 when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took power, there have been several major policy shifts in foreign language education.
- In the early P.R.C. period when the CCP turned to the Soviet Union for mentorship, they condemned English officially as the language of the enemy and made Russian a prestigious foreign language in China.
- In the late 1950s, however, when the Sino-Soviet relation turned sour, Russian lost its popularity and English gradually became the favored foreign language (Fu, 1986; Ross, 1993; Adamson, 2004).

State policies from a historical perspective

- During the first half of the Cultural Revolution (from 1966 to 1976), foreign languages were broadly associated with bourgeois ideology and foreign language teaching was literally banned. Many teachers of foreign languages, particularly Western language teachers, were victimized. Some foreign language education programs resumed after China regained membership in the United Nations at the end of 1971 and when the then US president, Richard Nixon, visited the country in the following year (Wen & Hu, 2007).

State policies from a historical perspective

- Since 1977, English language education has been part of China's 'reform and open-door' strategy, and English has been increasingly taken as essential for its 'Four Modernizations' ambition, aiming to modernize agriculture, industry, national defense and science and technology (Ross, 1993; Adamson, 2004).

State policies from a historical perspective

- The nation-wide CET 4 (College English Test Band 4) (and the CET 6) has brought about a national campaign for English since its appearance in 1987. This campaign has affected all stakeholders in tertiary institutions and impacted strongly on the society as a whole.
- Primary and secondary schools have been particularly impinged upon due to the common belief that the nurturing of real communicative competence in English should start from an early age and thus English language education should be systematized for all stages of education (Dong, 2003; Yang, 2003).

A 'typical pupil' today

- English provision starts from Year 3 in all primary schools (Ministry of Education, 2001a).
- 5 to 10% of the tertiary courses for undergraduate students are supposed to be conducted in English or another foreign language.

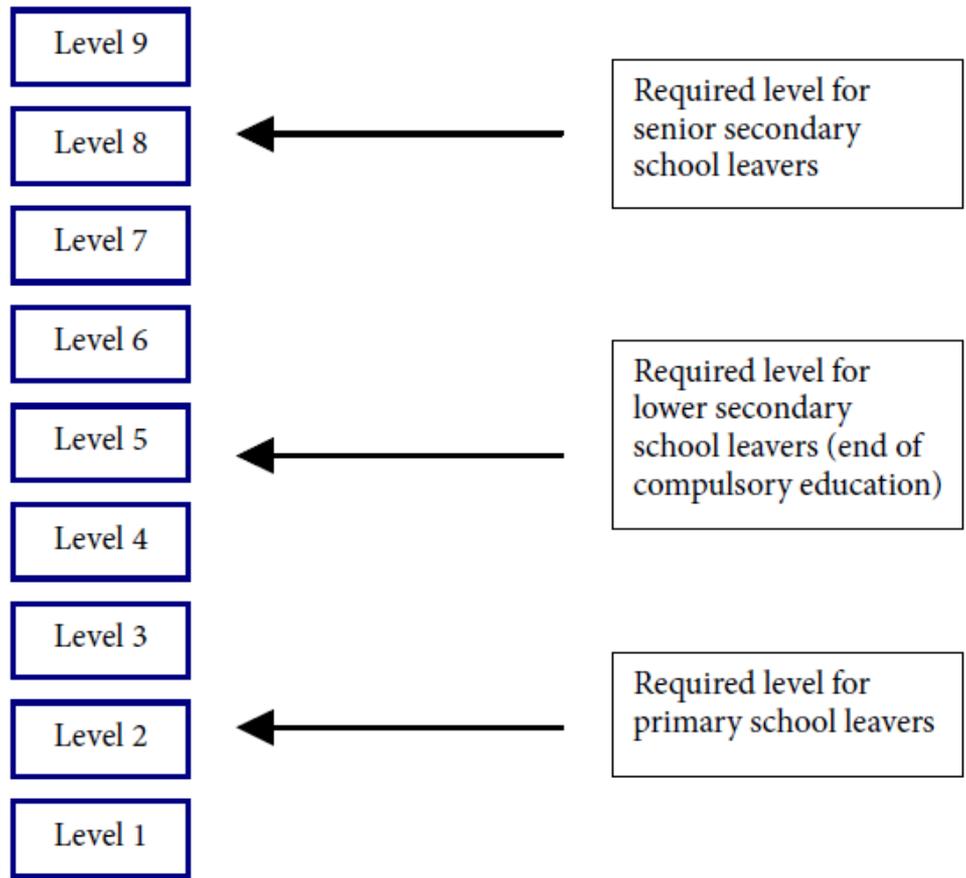


Figure 1. English proficiency levels from primary up to secondary school graduation (Source: Ministry of Education 2001a, b).

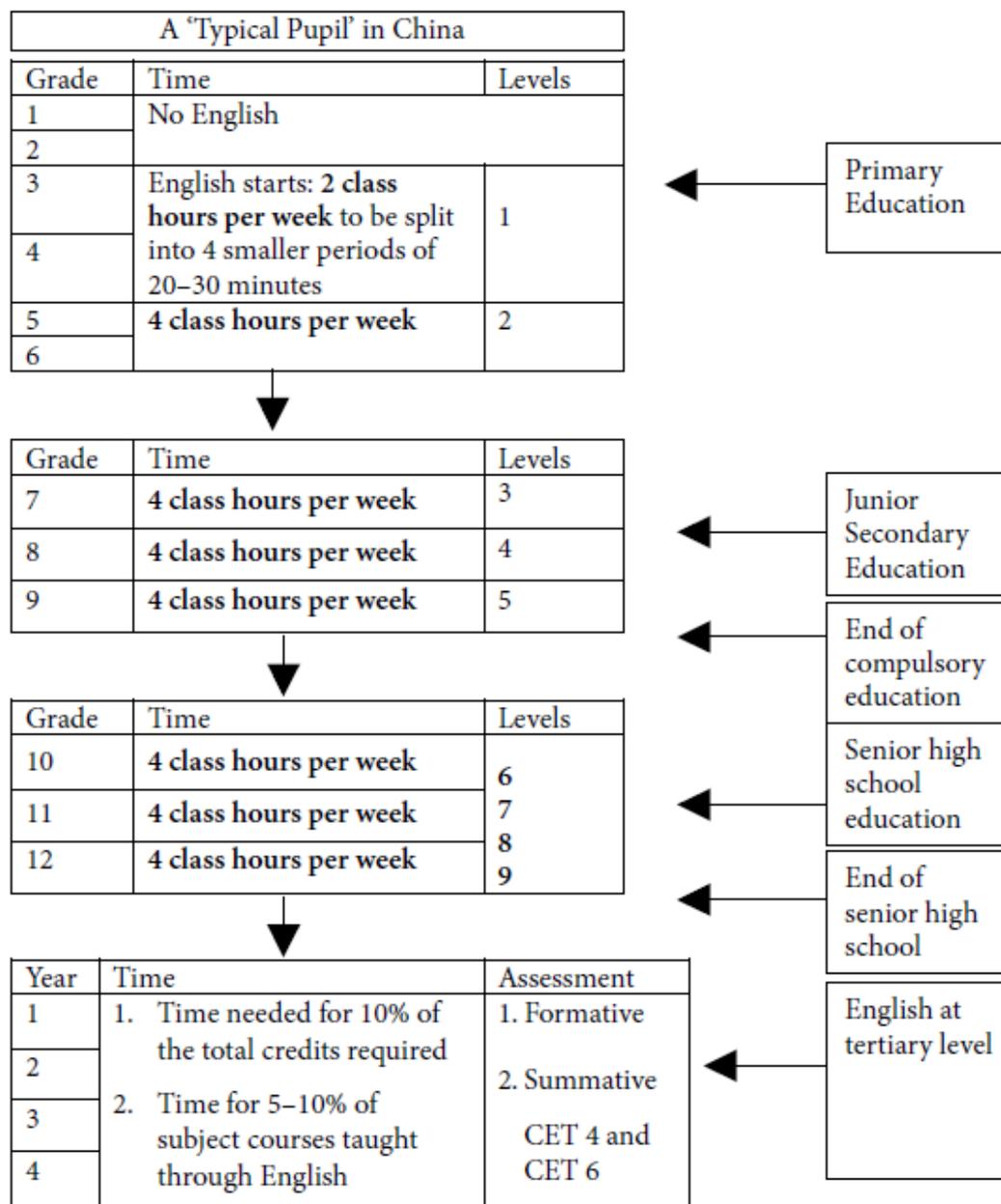


Figure 2. Time spent on English by a 'typical pupil' in China from primary schooling up to graduation from a tertiary institution

Cultural and linguistic tensions

- Some educators assert that learning English as a lingua franca is a double-edged sword (K.Q. Xu 2003). It eases communication with people all over the world, but at the same time it threatens mother tongue language and culture. Therefore, Xu (2003) argues that patriotism, traditional values, and 'mother tongue' language and culture must remain at the core of school curriculums.

Divergence of policy and practice

- Even though China is a country that has been traditionally characterized by a centralized, top-down system, regional variations do exist in terms of state policy implementation. The process of policy formulation at the local level in response to state policies can be rather complex (Feng and Sunnudula 2009), and the real-world practices can differ tremendously (Cortazzi and Jin 1996). These variations can be broadly grouped into two categories: coastal-inland and urban-rural disparities; variations in terms of access to English due to socioeconomic factors.

Divergence of policy and practice

- *Regional and urban-rural differences*
- In this most populous country, it can be argued that it is impossible for any policy to be implemented in a uniform, homogeneous fashion, and thus regional differences should be the norm (Hu, 2003).
- Regions differ not only with regard to infrastructural resources and thus pupils' language proficiency, but also in terms of teaching pedagogy and pupils' learning behavior.

Divergence of policy and practice

- *Differences in English accessibility by socioeconomic status*
- The Wall Street Institute with its headquarters in Baltimore, Maryland, USA, established in 2000 its sub-colleges in Shanghai and Beijing and charged a high fee of RMB 29,200 (USD 4,200) per student for a flexible 6- to 12-month course (J, Wang, 2002).
- In the same geographical location, socioeconomic factors contribute to a worsening situation with regard to inequality in education which may lead to further social divisiveness.

Culture of learning

- Chinese learners have often been projected as reserved, reticent and passive learners, and the English classroom has been defined as dominantly teacher-centered and grammar-focused (e.g., Hu, 2002; Wen, 2003; Yu, 2001). These assertions have been attributed to the Chinese culture of learning, Confucianism in particular, which regards teachers as authoritative figures and is assumed to be in conflict with some Western-generated teaching methods, for example, communicative language teaching (Hu, 2002).

Culture of learning

- Other survey findings (Shi, 2006) indicate that Chinese learners are active learners, preferring a more interactive relationship with their teachers, and they are willing to participate in classroom activities.

Culture of learning

- Question: Is Students' being quiet situation-specific or culturally pre-set?
- A number of possibilities (Wang & Gao, 2008):
- Students are unfamiliar with the topic or their English might not be sufficient for effective communication.
- Teachers are not teaching communicatively because their English does not allow for free interaction (Yu, 2001).
- Or, because, influenced by structuralism that underlies the grammar translation teaching method, teachers choose not to conduct communicative teaching.

Culture of teaching

- Communicative language teaching (CLT) is difficult if not impossible to implement (Li & Baldauf, 2011). CLT was only employed by a few teachers on some special occasions; for instance, when it is observed by teachers from other schools or when their superiors come for inspections.

Justification for not using CLT (Li & Baldauf, 2011):

1. Large class sizes made it impossible to implement communicative language teaching. The numbers of students in each class normally ranged from 40 to 80, a figure which is similar in each city.
2. Over-loaded teachers had no time to design tasks or classroom activities for training students' communicative competence in English language.
3. Teachers' lack of English language and curricular competence made it difficult to adopt CLT in classroom teaching.
4. Examination-oriented external assessment made it risky for teachers to use new methods.

Thank you!