



# A Policy and Practice Review of English Education in Chinese Primary and Secondary Schools

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**Abstract:** This study offers a comprehensive review of English education policies and classroom practices in China's primary and secondary schools, focusing on developments from 2001 to 2022. It examines the evolution of national curriculum reforms emphasizing communicative competence, intercultural awareness, and competency-based education, particularly the 2022 Curriculum Standards. Despite significant policy progress, persistent regional disparities in teacher qualifications, training, resources, and assessment practices continue to hinder equitable implementation. Case comparisons between urban and rural schools illustrate the challenges of translating policy into practice, revealing gaps in pedagogical approaches and infrastructural support. The study highlights systemic constraints such as the dominance of exam-oriented assessments and uneven digital resource distribution that limit the realization of curriculum goals. Recommendations include targeted teacher development, assessment reform, infrastructure investment, and enhanced policy-practice integration to improve the quality and equity of English education in China. This analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities in reforming large-scale education systems and provides insights for policymakers and educators aiming to foster effective English language learning in diverse contexts.

**Keywords :** English education, curriculum reform, teacher qualifications, communicative competence, regional disparities, assessment reform

## I Introduction

Over the past decade, China has redefined the goals of English education, shifting from a purely utilitarian approach to a more holistic model that integrates both communicative function and cultural awareness. According to the Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition) issued by the Ministry of Education (MoE), English instruction now aims to cultivate students' global perspectives while fostering national identity <sup>[1]</sup>. English becomes a mandatory subject starting in Grade 3, accounting for approximately 6%–8% of total instructional hours. For the first time, listening and speaking skills are treated as equally important as reading and writing in assessment practices <sup>[1]</sup>.

Despite notable improvements in teacher qualifications—98.7% of English teachers now hold a bachelor's degree or higher—the structural disparity between urban and rural regions remains significant. In urban areas, 21% of English teachers have attained a master's degree, compared to only 4% in rural schools <sup>[2]</sup>. Furthermore, while international best practices emphasize continuous professional development, Chinese secondary school English teachers undergo only 19 days of training annually, falling short of the OECD average of 26 days <sup>[3]</sup>. The UNICEF China 2024 report also highlights that less than 40% of teachers in central and western regions employ task-based language teaching (TBLT), with grammar-translation methods still dominating classroom practice <sup>[4]</sup>.

Challenges in regional equity and assessment reform continue to hinder quality improvement. For example, students in eastern coastal cities demonstrate significantly higher vocabulary levels—on average 1,500 words—compared to their counterparts in rural central and western areas, where the average is less than 700 <sup>[5]</sup>. Moreover, although recent policy shifts emphasize communicative competence, contextualized question formats make up less than 35% of the English section in high school entrance exams <sup>[6]</sup>. Initiatives like the "Excellent Teacher Program" and the integration of AI in national smart education platforms have begun to address these gaps. International collaborations such as the EU's Erasmus+ CLIL project in 12 pilot schools have also shown promising outcomes, boosting students' applied English proficiency by 28% <sup>[7]</sup>.

This study seeks to provide a comprehensive review of current policies and practices in China's K–12 English education, examining both achievements and persistent bottlenecks in implementation. The paper adopts a multi-level analytical approach, combining policy review, empirical data analysis, and comparative insights from international frameworks.

Research Questions:

- (1) What are the key policy shifts in English education in China's primary and secondary schools over the past two decades, particularly as reflected in the 2022 curriculum reform?
- (2) How do regional disparities in teacher qualifications, pedagogical practices, and access to resources affect the implementation of national English education policies?
- (3) What are the major barriers to aligning classroom practices with the communicative and intercultural goals outlined in national policy?



## II Literature Review

### 2.1 Policy Shifts in Chinese English Education

In the early 2000s, national policies emphasized English as a tool for modernization and internationalization, aligning with China's entry into the World Trade Organization and the rise of globalization <sup>[8]</sup>. Curriculum standards released in 2001 and revised in 2011 focused on basic linguistic skills and exam readiness. The most significant policy development in recent years is the release of the Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition), which redefines the purpose of English learning as “the unity of instrumentality and humanity” <sup>[1]</sup>. This curriculum stresses communicative competence, critical thinking, and global citizenship. The 2022 reform marks a philosophical shift from exam-oriented instruction to competency-based education (CBE), inspired in part by the OECD's 21st-century skills framework <sup>[9]</sup>. Listening and speaking skills are now given equal weight with reading and writing, and there is an increased emphasis on task-based learning, intercultural awareness, and formative assessment.

However, scholars argue that the ideological aspirations of the 2022 curriculum face significant obstacles in local adaptation. Hu notes that national curriculum reforms in China often encounter resistance at the implementation level due to entrenched exam culture and resource disparities <sup>[10]</sup>. More recent studies echo this concern, indicating a gap between policy rhetoric and classroom realities, particularly in less-developed regions <sup>[11]</sup>.

### 2.2 Regional Disparities in Teacher Quality and Resources

The urban-rural divide is particularly stark in English education due to uneven teacher distribution, access to professional development, and infrastructure. According to the Ministry of Education's 2023 statistics, while most English teachers hold at least a bachelor's degree, the proportion of teachers with postgraduate training is five times higher in urban areas than in rural areas <sup>[2]</sup>. TALIS 2018 reveals that Chinese teachers receive significantly fewer days of annual professional training compared to OECD averages—19 days versus 26—exacerbating pedagogical stagnation in under-resourced areas <sup>[3]</sup>. Further, the Chinese Education Science Research Institute (CESRI) reports that 56% of rural English teachers have no overseas learning experience, and many lack familiarity with communicative or digital teaching methods <sup>[12]</sup>. This impacts their ability to implement interactive, student-centered approaches recommended in the national curriculum.

Researchers such as Zhang and Liu emphasize that digital divides—both in infrastructure and teacher competence—further widen the educational gap. While urban schools benefit from smart classrooms and AI-powered platforms, rural educators often rely on outdated textbooks and chalkboard methods <sup>[13]</sup>. These disparities significantly affect student learning outcomes and the feasibility of national-level reforms.

### 2.3 Pedagogical Barriers to Policy Alignment

The effective implementation of communicative and intercultural goals is constrained by both cultural and systemic factors. The dominance of the Gaokao (national college entrance exam) remains a powerful force shaping English instruction. Although recent reforms advocate for communicative competence, grammar-translation and memorization remain widespread, especially in high-stakes test preparation contexts <sup>[14]</sup>.

A 2024 UNICEF report found that fewer than 40% of English teachers in central and western provinces employ task-based learning strategies, and most are unfamiliar with CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) or project-based approaches <sup>[4]</sup>. This is compounded by a lack of ongoing mentorship and reflective teaching communities in rural areas, which are vital for sustaining pedagogical innovation.

Furthermore, PISA 2022 results show that while Chinese students perform well in reading and math, their self-confidence in English communication ranks only 42nd globally <sup>[15]</sup>. This gap between technical proficiency and communicative readiness reflects deeper tensions in the curriculum–practice interface. Scholars such as Wang and Spencer-Oatey argue that real transformation requires not only top-down policy but also bottom-up capacity-building through teacher training, evaluation reform, and cultural mindset shifts <sup>[16]</sup>.

## III Methodology

This study adopts a documentary analysis framework that integrates policy review and practice evaluation to examine how national English education policies in China are implemented in classrooms and how they compare globally.

The research follows a qualitative design, combining interpretive policy analysis with evaluative review. It focuses on three analytical dimensions:

- A. Policy Analysis: A close review of national curriculum standards, policy updates (especially the 2022 revised Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards), and official government education reports.
- B. Practice Evaluation: Examination of empirical studies, institutional reports, teacher training data, and resource distribution across provinces.
- C. International Comparison: Use of global benchmarks such as the OECD's PISA and TALIS reports, and pedagogical models like CLIL, to contextualize China's English education practices.

Data sources include policy documents from the Ministry of Education, curriculum standards, white papers, educational statistics, and academic literature from both Chinese and international sources. The selection prioritized credibility, relevance, and recency—mainly from the last 20 years, with emphasis on the 2012 and 2022 reforms.

The analytical framework consists of two parts:

Policy Analysis Model: Based on Ball (1994) and Levin (2008), examining the policy context, text, and implementation.

Practice Evaluation Model: Informed by Fullan's educational change theory and the OECD's Education 2030 framework, focusing on classroom alignment with policy goals, teacher quality, resource availability, and assessment inclusivity.

Document analysis was conducted systematically. Documents were sourced from official databases and academic repositories, then thematically coded using a deductive approach. Key themes included curriculum goals, instructional

strategies, teacher training, and equity. Triangulation of data from government reports, academic studies, and international assessments ensured reliability and depth.

Since this study relies entirely on secondary data, there were no human participants involved. Ethical considerations centered on maintaining academic integrity, proper citation, and responsible use of publicly available materials.

IV Policy Review

4.1 Evolution of National English Education Policy (2001–2022)

The development of English education policy in Chinese primary and secondary schools has been shaped by changing national priorities, global engagement strategies, and educational reforms. Since 2001, a series of curriculum guidelines and government initiatives have reflected a progressive shift from grammar-focused instruction toward communicative competence and intercultural literacy.

The 2001 English Curriculum Standards introduced a learner-centered framework, emphasizing listening and speaking skills, especially in lower grades. English instruction was mandated to begin by Grade 3 in most provinces, with objectives aligned with students’ cognitive and emotional development <sup>[17]</sup>. By 2011, the National Medium and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010–2020) explicitly positioned English as a tool for national modernization and global competitiveness, advocating the integration of information technology, cross-cultural awareness, and problem-solving skills in foreign language education <sup>[18]</sup>.

Significant developments between 2011 and 2022 further aligned English education policy with national strategic initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative, where English became a medium to promote intercultural dialogue and international cooperation. The 2022 Revised Curriculum Standards marked a major policy leap, introducing four core competencies—language ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality, and learning ability—as guiding principles for English teaching across all grades <sup>[19]</sup>.

Table 1 summarizes the key policy milestones from 2001 to 2022.

Table 1. Major National English Education Policy Milestones (2001–2022)

Year	Policy Document	Key Focus Areas
2001	English Curriculum Standards	Communicative Language Teaching (CLT); lowered starting age; student-centered
2010	Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform Plan (2010–2020)	Lifelong learning, ICT integration, global competitiveness
2014	Core Competency Framework Proposal	Emphasis on key competencies including communication and cooperation
2017	Belt and Road Language Strategy	Use of English to promote intercultural and international communication
2022	Revised Curriculum Standards	Four Core Competencies; interdisciplinary integration; performance assessment

Recent data from the Ministry of Education indicates that as of 2022, over 180 million students in China are studying English in K–12 schools, with more than 3 million English teachers across urban and rural regions <sup>[20]</sup>. However, disparities persist: while over 90% of urban schools report access to qualified English teachers and updated textbooks, only 61% of rural schools reach these benchmarks <sup>[21]</sup>.

4.2 Analysis of the 2022 Curriculum Standards

The 2022 English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education represent a significant reorientation from knowledge-based instruction toward competency-based education. The document outlines four core competencies that students are expected to develop through English learning:

- Language Ability – Practical communication in real-life contexts
- Cultural Awareness – Respect for cultural diversity and global outlook
- Thinking Quality – Critical thinking, problem-solving, and reasoning in language tasks
- Learning Ability – Autonomous learning strategies and digital literacy <sup>[19]</sup>

This reform emphasizes task-based learning, interdisciplinary integration, and performance-based assessment. Students are encouraged to engage in projects such as interviews, collaborative presentations, and debates that blend language skills with civic and ethical education. The standards also highlight digital competence, promoting the use of multimedia and online tools to support English learning.

Table 2 details the structure of the 2022 curriculum in terms of key competencies and their instructional implications.

Table 2. Core Competencies and Pedagogical Focus in the 2022 Curriculum Standards

Core Competency	Instructional Emphasis	Assessment Focus
Language Ability	Listening, speaking, reading, writing	Communicative tasks, language fluency
Cultural Awareness	Global themes, intercultural topics	Discussions, cultural comparisons
Thinking Quality	Reasoning, inference, argumentation	Critical essays, analytical tasks
Learning Ability	Self-regulation, use of digital tools	Portfolios, self-reflection journals

Despite these advances, several challenges hinder effective implementation. A national survey conducted by the China Education Science Research

Institute in late 2022 found that only 42% of surveyed schools had fully implemented the new standards due to lack of training, exam pressure, and resource limitations <sup>[22]</sup>. Furthermore, over 58% of English teachers in rural schools reported unfamiliarity with performance-based assessment techniques.

To support the implementation of the 2022 standards, the Ministry of Education launched several regional pilot programs and professional development initiatives. These include collaborative lesson planning workshops, digital resource platforms, and ongoing training in task-based instruction and assessment methods <sup>[23]</sup>.

In conclusion, while the 2022 Curriculum Standards mark a progressive turn in policy toward holistic and competency-based English education, success depends on localized support mechanisms, sustained teacher training, and reform of high-stakes testing to align with the communicative goals of the curriculum.

#### 4.3 Goals, Competencies, and Pedagogical Shifts in Policy

The Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition) mark a pivotal transformation in the goals and pedagogical orientation of English education in Chinese primary and secondary schools. Moving beyond linguistic accuracy and examination performance, the 2022 reform places emphasis on cultivating core competencies, intercultural communication skills, and lifelong learning abilities <sup>[1]</sup>.

At the heart of this shift is the framework of “English subject core competencies,” which includes four key dimensions: language ability, cultural awareness, thinking skills, and learning ability. Compared to the 2001 and 2011 versions, the 2022 standards articulate clearer developmental benchmarks and stress integrated, performance-based assessments <sup>[1]</sup>, <sup>[14]</sup>. A major pedagogical transition emphasized in the 2022 policy is the promotion of task-based learning, project-based inquiry, and communicative teaching approaches—a shift aligned with international trends identified in OECD’s Education 2030 vision <sup>[9]</sup>. These approaches encourage learner autonomy, critical thinking, and meaningful use of language in authentic contexts.

Additionally, the curriculum explicitly incorporates cross-disciplinary themes (e.g., environmental protection, digital citizenship), fostering both language acquisition and global competencies <sup>[1]</sup>, <sup>[16]</sup>. For instance, instructional modules now commonly integrate English with subjects like science and social studies, creating a de facto Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach in pilot regions <sup>[7]</sup>.

These transformations reflect a broader recognition that English proficiency must serve real-world communication, intercultural interaction, and global competitiveness—not merely academic testing. However, scholars such as Li (2021) warn of the tension between these progressive aims and entrenched exam-centric teaching, particularly in senior secondary schools where Gaokao performance remains paramount <sup>[14]</sup>.

#### 4.4 Institutional and Governmental Reports: Insights from the MOE and OECD

Multiple governmental and international institutions have contributed valuable data and evaluations regarding the implementation of English education policies in China. The Ministry of Education’s 2023 National Educational Development Statistical Bulletin provides an overview of school infrastructure, teacher workforce, and curricular implementation <sup>[2]</sup>. According to the report, there were 467,000 full-time English teachers in China’s primary and secondary schools by 2023, with a teacher-to-student ratio of 1:56 at the primary level and 1:45 at the secondary level—still above the OECD average <sup>[2]</sup>, <sup>[3]</sup>.

Moreover, data reveal sharp disparities between urban and rural areas in terms of teacher qualifications and access to digital resources. While over 80% of urban English teachers possess bachelor’s degrees in English education, only 52% of rural counterparts meet the same standard <sup>[4]</sup>, <sup>[10]</sup>. This gap poses a direct challenge to equitable policy implementation.

The OECD’s TALIS 2018 and PISA 2022 findings also shed light on comparative international practices. TALIS data show that only 38% of Chinese English teachers feel well-prepared to teach with a communicative approach, compared to over 60% in countries like Finland and Korea <sup>[3]</sup>, <sup>[15]</sup>. PISA 2022 results highlight an increasing discrepancy between students’ reading proficiency in Chinese and their ability to apply English skills in real-world contexts <sup>[15]</sup>.

Table 3 below summarizes key institutional findings:

Indicator	Urban Schools	Rural Schools
% of English teachers with bachelor’s degree	82%	52%
Access to multimedia classrooms	94%	61%
Use of communicative teaching (self-reported)	58%	34%

according to the Basic Education English Teaching Quality Monitoring Report published by the China Education Science Research Institute <sup>[12]</sup>, over 40% of classroom observations in rural regions revealed continued use of outdated grammar-translation methods, with minimal student interaction. Table 4 highlights findings from recent monitoring studies:

Region	% of Classes Using Communicative Methods	% of Classes Using Traditional Methods
Eastern Urban	76%	18%
Western Rural	31%	60%
National Average	49%	39%

These institutional insights demonstrate the implementation gap between aspirational policy goals and actual classroom realities. While the policy vision aligns with global standards, successful enactment remains uneven—especially in under-resourced regions where professional development, digital infrastructure, and localized policy support are inadequate.

**V Practice Review and Field Realities**

**5.1 Regional Disparities in Teacher Qualifications and Training**

Urban schools in first-tier cities employ English teachers who possess degrees from prestigious universities, high levels of English proficiency, and exposure to contemporary pedagogical theories and international teaching methods. These educators often receive ongoing training through workshops, research projects, and international exchange programs, enabling them to align with the Ministry of Education’s evolving policy goals. In contrast, rural schools, particularly those in western and inland provinces, struggle to attract and retain qualified English teachers. Many rural educators are non-specialists who have assumed the responsibility of teaching English due to staffing shortages, lacking both formal training in language education and access to modern instructional techniques.

Professional development opportunities are also unevenly distributed across regions. Teachers in urban schools have regular access to national and provincial training programs, where they are introduced to the latest curriculum updates, technology integration, and communicative teaching methods. These opportunities are often accompanied by financial support, collaborative networks, and performance incentives. However, rural teachers frequently report being excluded from such initiatives due to geographic isolation, limited funding, and administrative neglect. Even when training is available, logistical barriers such as transportation, teaching loads, or lack of substitute teachers make attendance difficult. As a result, the majority of rural English teachers rely heavily on outdated teaching materials and traditional instructional methods, which fail to meet the communicative and intercultural objectives outlined in the national curriculum reforms.

This growing disparity has deep implications for educational equity and student outcomes. Students in urban areas benefit not only from better instruction but also from enriched learning environments, access to multimedia resources, extracurricular English programs, and parental support. Meanwhile, students in rural schools face a double disadvantage: underqualified teachers and a lack of learning resources. The mismatch in teacher quality directly translates into achievement gaps in language proficiency, particularly in listening and speaking, which are central to the new competency-based standards. Without targeted policies to address these human capital disparities—including financial incentives for rural teachers, differentiated training programs, and support networks for remote educators—the national goal of equitable and high-quality English education will remain aspirational rather than actionable.

**5.2 Curriculum Implementation in Urban vs. Rural Schools**

The implementation of the national English curriculum exhibits stark differences between urban and rural schools. In urban schools, the shift toward competency-based, student-centered teaching is more visible, driven by better resources, supportive school leadership, and parent engagement. These schools often integrate English with interdisciplinary learning, incorporate digital tools, and emphasize oral communication. As a result, students in urban areas tend to display stronger performance in listening and speaking tasks, as well as greater motivation to learn English.

By contrast, rural schools frequently experience obstacles in enacting curriculum reform. Insufficient access to updated teaching materials, limited multimedia infrastructure, and overcrowded classrooms constrain the ability of teachers to adopt interactive or differentiated instruction. In many cases, the focus remains on rote memorization, textbook recitation, and exam drills. These practices not only contradict the communicative and cultural objectives of the new curriculum but also perpetuate low student engagement and learning outcomes. Furthermore, in rural regions, parental support is limited due to socio-economic constraints and lack of English proficiency among caregivers, making home-based reinforcement of English learning difficult.

**5.3 Pedagogical Practices: From Grammar-Translation to Communicative Language Teaching**

China's English education system has witnessed a gradual but noticeable pedagogical shift from the traditional grammar-translation method to more communicative and student-centered approaches. This transition, heavily promoted in national curriculum reforms, particularly since the early 2000s, aims to cultivate students' practical language use, critical thinking, and intercultural competence. In elite urban schools, teachers have begun integrating task-based language teaching (TBLT), role-playing, project-based learning, and content-integrated language instruction (CLIL) into their classrooms.

Students are encouraged to use English in authentic communicative contexts, such as simulated interviews, debates, and multimedia presentations, which not only improve fluency but also foster engagement and confidence.

However, this pedagogical transformation is far from uniform across the country. In many mainstream and lower-performing schools, especially in small towns and rural regions, the grammar-translation method continues to dominate classroom practices. Lessons often emphasize vocabulary memorization, translation exercises, and detailed grammatical analysis aimed at exam success. Instruction is largely teacher-centered, with minimal interaction or spoken English practice. These practices are reinforced by institutional cultures that prioritize test results over communicative competence, as well as by teachers' own training backgrounds, which may not have included exposure to modern language acquisition theories or CLT techniques. The resulting classroom environment is one where English is treated more as an academic subject than as a medium of communication.

Several structural constraints impede the widespread adoption of communicative pedagogy. Large class sizes, rigid lesson schedules, insufficient classroom technology, and a lack of student motivation in exam-dominated systems present real barriers for teachers attempting to introduce interactive activities or differentiated instruction. Moreover, many teachers—especially those who themselves were educated under the grammar-translation model—express discomfort or insecurity in using English spontaneously in class, further limiting the effectiveness of CLT. Consequently, while policy documents strongly advocate for communicative, learner-centered instruction, actual classroom practices often remain rooted in traditional paradigms. This disconnect highlights the urgent need for more systematic, context-sensitive professional development programs and localized curricular support that enable all teachers, regardless of region, to embrace pedagogical reform in ways that are both practical and sustainable.

#### 5.4 Assessment Practices and Gaokao Constraints

Assessment in English education remains heavily influenced by the Gaokao, China's national college entrance examination. Although reforms have introduced speaking and listening components in some provinces, the dominant assessment model continues to emphasize reading comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, and writing accuracy. This examination-oriented approach reinforces the prevalence of test-based pedagogy, even in schools that aspire to embrace more holistic and competency-based teaching.

The tension between curriculum goals and assessment reality is a defining feature of classroom practice. While national policy advocates for formative assessment, self-evaluation, and portfolio-based approaches, summative exams still carry the highest stakes. Teachers, particularly in high school settings, often prioritize test preparation at the expense of communicative practice or creative expression. In rural and resource-constrained schools, the lack of infrastructure to administer digital or oral assessments further exacerbates this misalignment.

#### Case Comparison 1: Urban Excellence – Shanghai Minhang Experimental Primary School

Shanghai Minhang Experimental Primary School is located in a well-funded district with strong administrative support, the school employs highly qualified English teachers, many with postgraduate degrees in TESOL or applied linguistics. Teachers participate regularly in district-level professional development workshops and are familiar with updated pedagogical strategies such as Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). The school integrates technology through interactive whiteboards, language labs, and AI-based pronunciation correction apps, allowing for individualized student feedback and greater learner autonomy.

In practice, a typical English class at Minhang features student-led discussions, role-playing activities, and multimedia presentations. For instance, during a lesson on “global citizenship,” students researched an international issue and presented their findings in English, integrating language learning with content knowledge and critical thinking. The classroom layout encourages interaction, with students working in groups rather than fixed rows. Assessment practices include performance-based tasks such as group projects, portfolios, and speaking exams. Students are encouraged to reflect on their learning process and self-assess their communicative growth. The alignment between policy and practice in this urban setting demonstrates how adequate funding, teacher expertise, and institutional support can facilitate the effective realization of national curriculum goals.

#### Case Comparison 2: Rural Challenges – A County Middle School in Gansu Province

In stark contrast, a county-level middle school in Gansu Province illustrates the implementation difficulties faced in many rural areas. The school's English department consists of only three teachers, none of whom majored in English education. Their professional training is limited to local workshops that focus on exam strategies rather than pedagogical innovation. The school lacks functional multimedia classrooms, and internet access is inconsistent, further restricting the use of technology in English instruction. While the 2022 Curriculum Standards emphasize “communicative competence,” the reality is that instruction remains deeply exam-oriented, prioritizing reading comprehension and grammar drills in preparation for the high school entrance exam.

In the classroom, lessons follow a traditional format: teacher explanation, sentence translation, and written drills. English is rarely spoken by students, and opportunities for interaction are minimal. A lesson on “shopping in a foreign country” involved vocabulary memorization and sentence translation, with no role-playing or practical application. The teacher expressed reluctance to shift to communicative methods, citing a lack of training and fear that students would perform poorly on standardized tests. Furthermore, large class sizes (often 50+ students), outdated textbooks, and rigid school schedules prevent any significant pedagogical experimentation.

Despite the teacher's dedication, the school's constrained resources and examination pressures result in a significant gap between the national policy's aims and actual classroom practices. Students' oral and listening skills remain underdeveloped, limiting their ability to meet the “core competencies” prescribed in official documents. The case



illustrates that without systemic interventions—such as targeted teacher training, revised assessment frameworks, and technology investments—communicative language teaching will remain aspirational in many rural schools.

Table 2. Case Comparison of Urban and Rural English Education Practices in China

Category	Urban Case (Shanghai Minhang Experimental Primary School)	Rural Case (Gansu Middle School)
Teacher Qualifications	Postgraduate, trained in CLT/TBLT	Non-English majors, exam-focused workshops
Teaching Approach	Communicative, interactive, tech-based	Grammar-translation, teacher-centered
Classroom Resources	Smart boards, language labs, AI apps	Basic chalkboard, limited or no technology
Assessment Style	Portfolio, performance tasks	Written exams, grammar drills
Alignment with Curriculum Goals	High	Low

V. Challenges and Gaps

One of the most salient challenges is the uneven distribution of qualified teachers and professional development opportunities. As discussed in previous chapters, urban schools benefit from highly trained educators who have access to ongoing pedagogical training and technological resources. Conversely, rural and underdeveloped regions face a chronic shortage of qualified English teachers, compounded by limited access to high-quality professional development. This disparity creates a two-tiered education system that undermines national goals of equity and quality. The lack of incentives and support mechanisms to attract and retain skilled teachers in rural areas exacerbates this gap, limiting students’ exposure to communicative and competency-based instruction essential for language proficiency in today’s globalized context.

Another major gap lies in pedagogical practices that remain deeply rooted in traditional, exam-oriented methods, despite official policy shifts toward communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based language teaching (TBLT). The dominance of the Gaokao and other high-stakes exams places immense pressure on teachers and students to prioritize grammar, vocabulary memorization, and test-taking strategies over practical communication skills. This has led to a mismatch between curriculum goals and classroom realities, where students often lack confidence and competence in spoken English and intercultural communication. Furthermore, many teachers, especially those educated under older models, lack the training or confidence to implement innovative, learner-centered methods, perpetuating reliance on teacher-led, lecture-based instruction.

The assessment system itself presents significant constraints that limit pedagogical innovation. Despite policy emphasis on balanced skill development, high school entrance exams and Gaokao English tests continue to prioritize reading and writing skills over listening and speaking. Contextualized and communicative assessment items remain underrepresented, reducing the incentive for schools to adopt interactive teaching methods. This narrow assessment focus not only hampers students’ holistic language development but also perpetuates regional inequalities, as schools with more resources can better prepare students for diversified evaluation formats, while others remain focused on traditional test preparation.

Finally, resource and infrastructure limitations disproportionately affect rural and less-developed areas. Inadequate access to digital learning tools, insufficient classroom technology, and large class sizes hinder the adoption of modern teaching techniques aligned with the 2022 curriculum standards. Without systemic investment to upgrade educational infrastructure and ensure equitable access to teaching aids and digital platforms, rural schools will continue to struggle to implement communicative and interactive English instruction.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach: expanding targeted teacher training and incentives for rural educators; reforming assessment systems to align with competency-based goals; increasing investments in educational infrastructure; and fostering a cultural shift among stakeholders to prioritize communicative competence alongside examination success. Without such coordinated efforts, the policy aspirations embodied in recent reforms risk remaining unfulfilled, perpetuating disparities in English education quality across China.

Chapter VII: Conclusions and Recommendations

VII Conclusions

This study has provided a comprehensive review of English education policies and practices in China’s primary and secondary schools, highlighting significant progress alongside enduring challenges. The evolution of national policy reflects China’s commitment to aligning its education system with international standards and domestic development needs. However, the realization of these policy goals remains uneven across regions, primarily due to disparities in teacher qualifications, training opportunities, and resource allocation. Urban schools, exemplified by cases such as Shanghai Minhang Experimental Primary School, demonstrate effective implementation of modern pedagogies supported by well-trained teachers and technological infrastructure. Conversely, many rural schools continue to rely heavily on traditional grammar-translation methods, constrained by limited teacher expertise, inadequate resources, and the high-stakes exam environment.

Assessment practices, particularly those linked to the Gaokao and high school entrance exams, continue to emphasize reading and writing skills over oral proficiency, undermining the shift toward balanced language competencies. These

systemic constraints further exacerbate regional inequities and restrict pedagogical innovation.

## 7.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the quality and equity of English education across China:

- **Expand and Target Teacher Training:** Develop comprehensive professional development programs with a focus on communicative language teaching, task-based learning, and digital pedagogy. Special emphasis should be placed on rural and under-resourced regions through incentives such as scholarships, career advancement opportunities, and financial support to attract and retain qualified teachers.
- **Reform Assessment Systems:** Align national and regional English assessments with curriculum goals by increasing the proportion of listening, speaking, and task-based components. Introduce formative and performance-based assessments to encourage instructional practices that foster real-world language use and intercultural competence.
- **Invest in Educational Infrastructure:** Accelerate the deployment of digital learning platforms, smart classroom technologies, and internet connectivity, especially in rural areas. Ensure that schools have access to quality English learning resources, including interactive software and multimedia content, to support student engagement and individualized learning.
- **Promote Policy-Practice Integration:** Encourage collaboration between policymakers, school administrators, teachers, and communities to facilitate adaptation of curriculum reforms to local contexts. Foster teacher networks and mentorship programs that support reflective practice and innovation.
- **Raise Awareness of Communicative Competence Importance:** Conduct awareness campaigns targeting parents, educators, and students to balance the cultural emphasis on examination results with the broader goals of language proficiency, intercultural understanding, and lifelong learning.

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