



English education and Double reduction policy in the post-pandemic China

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Abstract. After the release of the double reduction policy, there has been a new educational trend in English language teaching in post-pandemic China, namely, reducing the importance of English subject while improving the quality and equity of English education. This paper examines the challenges of developing English language education in China in terms of quality (i.e., the examination-oriented English education system) and equity (i.e., the educational gap in school education and shadow education). Suggestions are provided for English education stakeholders to better develop high-quality and equitable English education.

Keywords: ELT in China, Double reduction policy, Bourdieu.

1 Introduction

In response to the adverse impact of educational involution on the quality and equity of Chinese education, the Opinions on further reducing the burden of homework and after-school training of compulsory education students (hereinafter referred to as the "double reduction policy") was issued in 2021. The "double reduction" policy emphasizes alleviating the educational burden of students in compulsory education and aims to provide possible guidance for pre-school and senior high school education.

With a total of 30 policy guidelines, the "double reduction" policy primarily regulates the Chinese K-12 education system in the landscape of after-school tutoring education or metaphorically shadow education. The latest data from the Ministry of Education presents a remarkable impact of the "double reduction" policy on the quantity of after-school tuition. Specifically, the amounts of online and offline after-school tutoring institutions have dropped dramatically from 263 and 124 thousand to 30 and less than 10 thousand, respectively [1]. In addition, charging standards for subject-based after-school private tutoring lessons are proposed among provinces and municipalities, with a maximum price of 80 yuan per student per class hour [2]. The suggested fees would greatly benefit parents as they may significantly release the heavy burden of educational expenses.

The "double reduction" policy also provides provisions for in-school education, highlighting the significance of developing the quality of school education. This

coincides with the transition in the focus of compulsory education in China from the accumulation of quantity to the improvement of quality [3] and is to ensure the alleviation of students' excessive academic burden would not lead to the reduction of their educational performance.

To better implement the requirements of the "double reduction" policy, specific regulations are successively announced at the provincial and municipal levels. Among the various local regulations, there are provisions indicating a calling for the public to reduce the amount of effort paid to English learning. For instance, the English exam has been canceled among primary schools in Shanghai, and the proportion of English exam will be reduced in the high school entrance examination of Liaoning province. These measures have sparked a heated debate in the media and among the public on the topics of changing the status of English from a compulsory academic subject to a minor subject, as well as the tendency to eliminate English from the national college entrance examination (NCEE). While the change in the subject status of English and the reform of NCEE might not be accomplished overnight, the debate implies a necessity to make adaptations to English language teaching (ELT) in China so as to meet the requirement of the "double reduction" policy to achieve the high-quality school education.

Nevertheless, current research on the "double reduction" policy has mainly focused on its essence value [4]; obstacles to implementation [5]; impacts on basic education, shadow education, non-academic subjects such as PE, and parental perceptions [6, 7]. Limited research has been conducted to provide specific strategies for ELT in China in response to the requirements of the "double reduction" policy.

The present paper investigates English language teaching under the "double reduction" policy in post-pandemic China. Challenges to the quality of ELT in China will be primarily revealed, followed by challenges to the fairness of ELT (including concerns after the implementation of the "double reduction" policy) based on Bourdieu's theory of capital. Strategic suggestions for the supply side (i.e., teachers, shadow education institutions, online platform) and demand side (i.e., parents) of English education will be provided to develop high-quality and equitable English education.

2 Challenges to the Quality of English Education

2.1 The Significance of English

As a language with considerable influence in the globalized world, English has been promoted in China for its better participation in international affairs [8]. Students in most parts of China learn English systematically in school from grade three onwards. The latest version of the compulsory education English curriculum standards highlights the importance of English as conducive to effective cross-cultural communication and the establishment of a human community with a shared culture. As a widely used lingua franca, learning and mastering English benefit students' success in international communication. English proficiency is also seen as key to providing people with more opportunities to achieve higher socioeconomic status (SES) [9].

2.2 Dumb English in Exam-oriented Education System

Nonetheless, English is in a marginalized position with a low frequency of use in China, where people prioritize the educational purpose of English in an exam-oriented education system over its application in everyday communication [8]. This exemplifies a widely criticized learning situation in China, namely, the deaf-and-dumb English.

The examination-oriented Chinese education system is rooted in the historical emphasis on examination and the current impetus of high-stake selective examinations. The high emphasis on examination engenders the washback effects that motivate students and teachers to adjust their behaviors according to the requirements of examination [10]. Consequently, in order to attain higher scores, English teaching is largely guided by textbooks, with extensive use of memory-based repetitive exercises, and Chinese learners tend to learn English passively in the teacher-dominated classrooms. Moreover, without a direct assessment of students' English-speaking proficiency in examinations, the practice of English expression is likely to be insufficient in Chinese EFL classrooms [10]. The neglect of developing students' oral English skills further contributes to the situation of deaf-and-dumb English [11].

The foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) in exam-oriented education in China is also related to the dumb English situation. FLCA is widespread among Chinese EFL learners, and its degree is higher than that of the international sample in the previous studies [12]. As an essential affective factor in second language acquisition, FLCA significantly impacts learners' behavior and mastery of English because it is negatively related to Chinese students' English learning engagement and self-awareness of English proficiency [13]. Therefore, students with higher FLCA levels tend to have lower confidence in expressing themselves in English and remain silent in English class.

Teachers and peers are other influential variables affecting students' FLCA and willingness to speak English. Under the test-driven education system where linguistic accuracy is highly valued, teachers seldom tolerate students' language errors and devalue the Chinese accent [14]. Hence, students' FLCA level tends to be high, with the concerns of being criticized by teachers and made fun of by peers, exacerbating the situation of dumb English.

3 Challenges to the Equity of English Education

3.1 Bourdieu's Theory of Capital and English Learning

Bourdieu defines capital as accumulated labor manifesting in three forms -- economic, cultural, and social capital [15]. Economic capital includes every material resource and is the root of all other capitals. Cultural capital can be presented in three different forms: the embodied state, which is the cultural preferences and behaviors; the institutionalized state, which associates with educational qualifications; and the objectified state, referring to the accessibility of cultural products. Social capital highlights the network of relationships within which members' goals are reached.

These three forms of capital are convertible and transmissible and significantly influence people's educational environment. Economic capital indirectly determines the provision and aggregation of high-quality education resources. People with more economic capital might obtain better teaching quality and education networks. The institutionalized cultural capital of academic certificates and the social capital of reciprocal network connections indicate the conversion from cultural and social capital to economic capital. The three capitals are transmissible from parents to children; therefore, families with high socioeconomic status are likely to retain their advantages, while disadvantaged groups find it difficult to break out of the status quo and achieve more capital.

The difference in the economic capital of families indicates the discrepancy in students' English learning outcomes. The socioeconomic status of the family (economic capital) is positively related to students' English academic performances in compulsory education [16] and contributes to the imbalanced development of students' English-speaking proficiency [9]. Students from families with high SES are more likely to attend schools in metropolitan cities that provide high-quality and diversified English education. In contrast, students from low-SES families may even fail to afford the basic educational costs.

Moreover, due to the convertibility of capital, children from rural regions and low SES families tend to be more utilitarian in English learning. More specifically, with the acknowledgment of the significant role of English and education for upward mobility, rural students may endeavor to figure out a more efficient way of connecting their English academic achievement to future development. They might emphasize the development of English literacy skills of reading and writing for higher scores in the examination and pay less effort to practice speaking and listening skills. In addition, in areas where English is the third language of local people (e.g., several ethnic minority groups in China), students tend to prioritize Mandarin learning instead of English learning [17]. Since learning Mandarin is relatively more relevant and valuable for them to obtain more economic capital.

Additionally, the transmissibility of capital from parents to children can be seen in children's English learning process. Parents' education level and parental involvement are influential factors in students' educational attainment [18]. With better educational resources, parents in economically developed areas are more likely to enjoy high English proficiency (more cultural capital), enabling them to help their children during the English learning process. Nevertheless, parents in rural areas may obtain lower English proficiency due to limited access to qualified education (less cultural capital), leading to their potentially lower involvement in their children's English education. The parents who migrate to work in urban areas are even less likely to be effectively involved in their children's education due to prolonged child-parent separation. As a result, students from different family backgrounds might share a similar amount of cultural capital to their parents regarding English proficiency, with students from low-SES families having more difficulties learning English.

3.2 English Education Disparity within School Education

The discrepancy of economic capital in different regions results in the large gap in English education quality in the school context. While adequate and qualified English educational resources are well-equipped in economically developed areas, economically backward regions suffer from relatively poor English education conditions and a severe shortage of English teachers and other resources.

The unbalanced distribution of human resources is one of the most prominent examples of the maldistribution of educational resources between rural and urban areas. In rural areas, there is a severe lack of access to English teachers, exceptionally qualified teachers with advanced degrees [19]. It is because the marginalized geographic location of economically backward areas hinders effective social connection networks for accessing and employing highly qualified English teachers. Additionally, the reported underpayment of rural English teachers [19] presents the limited economic capital of rural English teachers. Without financial support from supportive social networks, there might be fewer chances for rural English teachers to be exposed to the English language context and attend teacher training programs to update their teaching philosophy and pedagogy. Consequently, rural English teachers may remain an adoption of the outdated monotonous style of teaching in class with limited language output activities. It may further demotivate rural students' English learning interests and contribute to students' higher level of FLCA, constraining their development of English-speaking competency.

The limited access to technological resources also displays the uneven rural-urban distribution of educational resources. The inadequate access prevents students from obtaining well-designed online English lessons and mass media to supplement their learning in terms of English knowledge and culture. Whereas, due to the limited social capital of schools in rural China, the shortage mentioned above of different English educational resources is less likely to be addressed by community partners and non-profit organizations, further enlarging the rural-urban education disparity.

3.3 Inequitable Shadow Education

Private tutoring (PT) or shadow education (SE) refers to paid private teaching of academic subjects outside of standard classroom hours [20]. SE takes various forms, including individuals, groups, online, and face-to-face formats. Before the release of the double reduction policy, China's education system witnessed a vigorous development of SE. The popularity of SE comes from the widespread existence of the hyper-competitive examination and selection system, which closely links educational achievements with future development. The high-stake NCEE has even transmitted the competitive pressure of learning to the compulsory education stage [4]. Parents attach great importance to sending their children to PT to outperform in compulsory education to enter better senior high schools and make better preparation for the NCEE. As a critical subject and a challenging course for students, English has become a popular subject for parents to invest in SE. Therefore, in order to better analyze the English education

disparity in China, the imbalance in shadow education, especially in English shadow education, is of considerable significance to explore.

Similar to the division of school education quality, the difference in shadow education is also related to socioeconomic status. Students whose parents with higher SES and educational qualifications are more likely to participate in SE with an earlier start time of the first participation [4]. Because those parents are able to afford the expenditure (more economic capital) for sufficient and high-level supplementary tutoring and are more likely to equip the knowledge on the operation and significance of SE (more cultural capital). The discrepancy is also revealed in the investment in four English skills. Reading and writing skills are more likely to be the focus of parents' investment under the exam-driven education system valuing higher scores in English exams. The varied affordability of families and the inequitable English education contribute to parents' rising anxiety about their children's education [8], intensifying the educational involution and widening the gap of social inequities.

Additionally, while there is a sharp decrease in the number of registered tutoring institutions for compulsory education after the promulgation of the "double reduction" policy, parental anxiety towards children's education and utilitarian perception might remain unchanged. Parents may worry about the actual impact of the "double reduction" policy on alleviating the academic burden and the possibility of children's backward academic performance without the support of SE [6]. As a result, parents who stay hypervigilance on children's education contribute to the new developing direction of SE – going underground by changing the name of courses and providing home-visit private tutoring of “live-in teachers” [21]. This may expand the advantages of children from higher-income families and exacerbate the current social stratification [4].

4 Suggestions

4.1 Supply-side: Teacher

Assessment

Responding to opinion 17 in the "double reduction" policy of overcoming the utilitarianism on scores, teachers are suggested to adopt multiple assessment approaches that combine the formative and summative assessments.

Predominantly, teachers' perceptions of test scores are supposed to change as the examination is the most frequently used assessment method. Chinese EFL teachers are expected to regard students' English test scores as staged feedback on their previous English learning rather than summative judgments on students' English competency. Teachers can also reduce the mere emphasis on examination results by analyzing the knowledge applied behind students' errors in English examinations to provide guidance for future instruction.

Alternative assessments can also be applied to monitor students' development and achievement in English learning. For instance, in terms of English writing, teachers can ask students to collect their best writing samples to create a personal best work portfolio

to help students identify their development of English writing and build their confidence in English proficiency.

Noteworthy, teachers ought to distinguish the high-quality self and peer assessments from simply asking students to correct the homework themselves, which is also suggested to be avoided in opinion 17. Teachers can improve the effectiveness of the self and peer assessments by introducing the significance and procedures before students assess themselves or their peers and by incorporating the self and peer assessments in daily English teaching.

Teaching Pedagogy

In order to optimize the teaching quality emphasized in the "double reduction" policy and to deal with the deaf-and-dumb English situation, teachers are suggested to make adjustments in their teaching pedagogy to emphasize the practicality of English.

The principle of the communicative language teaching approach (CLT) and task-based language teaching (TBLT) are beneficial to be engaged in the current Chinese EFL classroom to address the situation of dumb English. That is because the CLT and TBLT approaches will provide students with more activities focusing on language output to practice language expression, especially oral English skills. In addition, teachers are suggested to revise the CLT and TBLT based on the textbook-based exam-driven Chinese EFL education. Specifically, the weak forms of CLT or task-supported language teaching (TSLT) are expected to be adopted to provide adequate grammatical inputs focusing on the form in the pre-task stage to meet the emphasis on grammatical accuracy in the examination. A supportive learning environment is also of great importance for students' willingness to speak. Teachers may give more tolerance to students' mistakes and the Chinese accent of English so that students will be more likely to learn English constantly and practice their English-speaking skills.

4.2 Supply-side: Shadow Education Institutions

With the emphasis on the quality of education in the "double reduction" policy, private tutoring institutions can establish closer relationships with schools as a supplement to provide diverse content and build on students' comprehensive learning of English. For instance, extra-curricular tutors can expose students to English culture products such as English dramas, storybooks, and musicals, to motivate students' interest in English learning and develop their language literacy.

4.3 Supply-side: Online Platform

While several online learning platforms have been created during the outbreak of COVID-19, a national English learning platform is supposed to be developed. This platform may allow broad access to English learning resources with high-quality and diverse content; synchronous communication among teachers, students, parents, and volunteers; technological support for individuals with low ICT proficiency. Establishing this national English learning platform will narrow the rural-urban divide in the

quality of English teaching, the quality and quantity of English teachers, and digital proficiency. It may also contribute to alleviating parents' anxiety about English education and the propitious implementation of the "double reduction" policy.

4.4 Demand-side: Parents

Though the "double reduction" policy would significantly benefit parents by releasing their heavy burden of educational expenses, its implementation is hindered by parents' mistrust and high-level education anxiety [7]. Therefore, it is critical for parents to adjust their hypervigilance on children's academic attainment, to reach a balance between the appropriate preparation for examination and children's healthy and holistic development. Additionally, a supportive family atmosphere is suggested to be created by parents for it positively influences students' language learning motivation.

5 Concision

The unbalanced development of English education in China hinders students' access to high-quality English education resources and prevents their development of English proficiency. Under the "double reduction" policy's callings, changes should be made on both the supply and demand sides of English education to improve the quality and equity of English education.

As the "double reduction" policy requires teachers to improve teaching methods and provide after-school services during flexible working hours, the pressure on Chinese EFL teachers may increase. Future studies may examine the well-being of Chinese EFL teachers to provide advice on developing teacher resilience and to ensure the successful implementation of the "double reduction" policy. Additionally, since students are the main body of the double reduction policy, it is also of great value for scholars to further analyze the changes in students' perception of academic burden after the implementation of the double reduction policy so as to present the actual impact of the policy and provide guidance on the future educational reform.

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