

PERCEPTIONS OF SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS REGARDING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING: A STUDY CONDUCTED IN CHINA

1st ZHU XUEMIN, 2nd Velvizhi Murugesan

ABSTRACT

Learning and instruction methods have been impacted by the worldwide growth of English as shown in the Chinese secondary school system. Given its large student body, consistent academic atmosphere and emphasis on global competitiveness, it provides a valuable context for investigating how learners of EFL see the language. Assessment requirements, curriculum content, interpersonal interactions, learning motives, and resource availability are some of the introductory elements impacting Chinese secondary school students' views and behaviours towards English language learning. Stratified sampling which is a quantitative approach was used in this research to guarantee that all areas, school types, and grade levels were accurately reflected. After compiling 654 valid answers from the sample, the researcher employed ANOVA to find significant associations. The results show that the structure of the school curriculum significantly influences how well students learn English. Students asserted that they were more inspired, confident, and adaptable when the curriculum featured communication exercises, cultural insights, and real-world applications of the language. On the other hand, students stated that their enthusiasm was fading when the curriculum was largely focused on preparing for tests and learning by mechanical means which failed to offer them many opportunities to practise speaking English in real life. Urban and rural schools faced different challenges, including unequal access to updated resources and curriculum revisions. The research suggests that if the Chinese schooling system desires to experience long-term improvements in English education, it needs to modify the curriculum content. This will assist students in secondary school in developing better language skills, which will help them in their future careers, in school and in their capability to communicate effectively across cultures.

Keywords: English as a foreign language (EFL); Curriculum content; Secondary education; New Curriculum Standards (NCS); China

1. INTRODUCTION

More than 1.35 billion people speak English worldwide, and it is an official language in 67 countries. Numerous industries including global trade, higher education, the tourism enterprise and the scientific community rely significantly on the English language. Despite using English as a medium of education, students still struggle to master the language due to its complexity (Xiaoli et al., 2024). Aspects of learning English include challenges with motivation and learning new words as well as grammar. An important part of China's approach to cultivating future potential is the country's secondary school system. Secondary school English courses serve as a vital connection between mandatory and higher education in the English education system as a whole. Most of China's senior high schools teach English as a mandated subject to the country's over 40 million students. High school English class success is associated with a large number of students who are learning English as a second language making it even more critical to analyse their methods and ideas (Hang, 2020). Learning the details about English grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary may be challenging for some students. Additional areas where students struggle with English include listening, reading and creating content. When teachers teach Chinese students in English, some of those students find it challenging to

pick up the language. Another problem is using Chinese to explain English. Some EFL educators use "translanguaging" or "code-switching" to assist students in better understanding the material they cover in class. Translanguaging is using the first language to explain and define foreign words and phrases (Wu, 2020). The situation is the exact opposite in China compared to the rest of the globe where views on English and languages other than English (LOTE) mostly focus on English and the relative decline of LOTE. The recent implementation of new laws has many people wondering whether ESL classes are taking a winter break. Teaching English is mandatory in Chinese primary and secondary institutions. Teaching foreign languages in China seems to be a multifaceted and intricate problem.

2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Learning English became increasingly popular in China as the country's economy grew and more companies saw the benefits of communicating in a global language. Elementary schools in China were mandated to teach English as a foreign language in 2001. The national expansion of private language schools has contributed to the already impressive progress made in the English language. Learning English could be challenging even though it is spoken in many countries. The cultural awareness of the language and its subtleties is often lacking in both the classroom and the real world when it comes to authentic, practical English lessons. Students spend at least six years learning English in middle school and high school but they are too preoccupied with preparing for tests to really employ what they've learnt in conversation (Zou, 2023). The language is studied and committed to memory but it is never used in real-life situations. Yet, some high-ranking Chinese officials still find it difficult to accept the premise that English's economic advantages give it a hegemonic influence on Chinese ideology and culture. The unique spelling and syntax of the English language also present a limitation to language learners. The spellings of the words have not altered even when their pronunciations have. Additionally, because of the grammatical differences between the two languages, Chinese students have a challenging time differentiating English from Chinese. Students struggle to define themselves in English because learning a second language is hindered by their first language. There would be more tools available to help students whose first language is not English become better communicators (Karlen et al., 2023). A need for communication is the second dimension and it is influenced by a number of factors outside individual effort. The motivation for starting this investigation was worries about a negative shift in students' perspectives. Experienced language educators know first how a student's mindset affects their language acquisition.

3. PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The purpose of this study is to research the mindsets and behaviours of Chinese secondary school students as they attempt to become proficient in the English language. The goal of this research was to emphasise the urgent issues that both students and institutions face in the secondary school sector which is notably competitive and demanding. Exam pressure, learning motivation, instructional strategies, the availability of resources and cultural views are all examples of such obstructions. Connections among these elements were explored via the study which looked at students' language learning techniques, teacher competence, peer impact and levels of self-confidence about their use of English. The study also examined the less organised aspects of English language learning to make language acquisition more productive, enjoyable, and relevant to students' future needs. This research will better prepare secondary school students for opportunities in future education and international communication. Numerous considerations highlight the importance of this work. First, the research indicates that the socioeconomic situation of rural Chinese students significantly affects both their English

learning abilities and the amount of cultural and other capital they associate with English. Compared to their urban peers, students from rural areas must work harder throughout their academic careers because they are more likely to face barriers that restrict their access to higher education.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on attitudes in first and foreign language classrooms has been on the incline recently. The student's viewpoint is essential to successful pedagogies while understanding a second or foreign language, according to most studies on the issue. Researching students' perspectives on language education is crucial for several reasons. "English fever" explains the widespread usage of English as a second language in countries where it is not the official language of communication. A different sign of the "English fever" is the increased number of students in secondary schools who speak languages other than English. The 'double reduction', a regulation for the Gaokao (National College Entrance Examination), and the study of languages other than English were both particularly affected by a pair of laws that China enacted in 2021 (Jia et al., 2025). Even though more and more schools are providing various languages, English continues to be the most prevalent foreign language curriculum. Out of the five Chinese languages offered on the 2019 Gaokao, just 0.47% chose one other than English, while 99.53% preferred English (Galloway & Ruegg, 2020). Meanwhile, due to the "double reduction" methods, the Shanghai Municipal Education Commission chose to invalidate the final English exams for elementary school students. The reason behind this change was to lower exam anxiety. As a result, Beijing severely limited the use of foreign academic resources in high schools and outright banned their use in elementary and middle schools. The books ought to be supported by the appropriate authorities and based on the national curriculum. The variety of different Chinese English evaluation methods also contributes to the curriculum's lack of standardisation. Chinese students mostly use two tests for assessing their English proficiency: the English Majors exam and the English Promotion test. Tragically, there is now no national standard by which the test-takers may be considered (Cheng & Zhang, 2020). The People's Republic of China (PRC) has seen a division in its views on English education. Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials who support "modernisation" policies in the West see learning English as crucial to improving the country's technical capabilities and expanding its financial relations with other countries. On the other hand, English has uncomfortable associations with capitalism, imperialism or even barbarianism which Chinese authorities find unsettling. Many people believe it represents principles that are at conflict with Chinese culture and CCP ideology which is undesirable. Students should be encouraged to study independently via the use of English textbooks. Textbook exercises and activities should help students understand the language, use it, and summarise its principles on their own (Jiang & Zhang, 2021).

5. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What is the impact of curriculum content on learning EFL in China?

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

6.1 Research Design

Using a quantitative research technique, this study sought to comprehend secondary school students' views on EFL instruction. After gathering the data, the researcher processed it via SPSS 25. To incorporate demographic and project-related data, the researcher used descriptive statistics. For determining the nature and extent of the associations, researchers used inferential

statistics such as probability ratios with 95% confidence intervals. For statistical purposes, a p-value below 0.05 has been considered significant. To validate the data and identify statistically distinct groups, the researcher used a mix of component analysis and analysis of variance.

6.2 Sampling

Stratified sampling was employed by the researcher to gather data for the study. The study required 623 participants according to Raosoft's sample size estimations. For the purpose of reducing the response rate, the researcher randomly distributed 750 questionnaires to different strata. After that, 702 questionnaires were returned to the researcher. There were 654 complete responses with 48 people offering misleading or incomplete information.

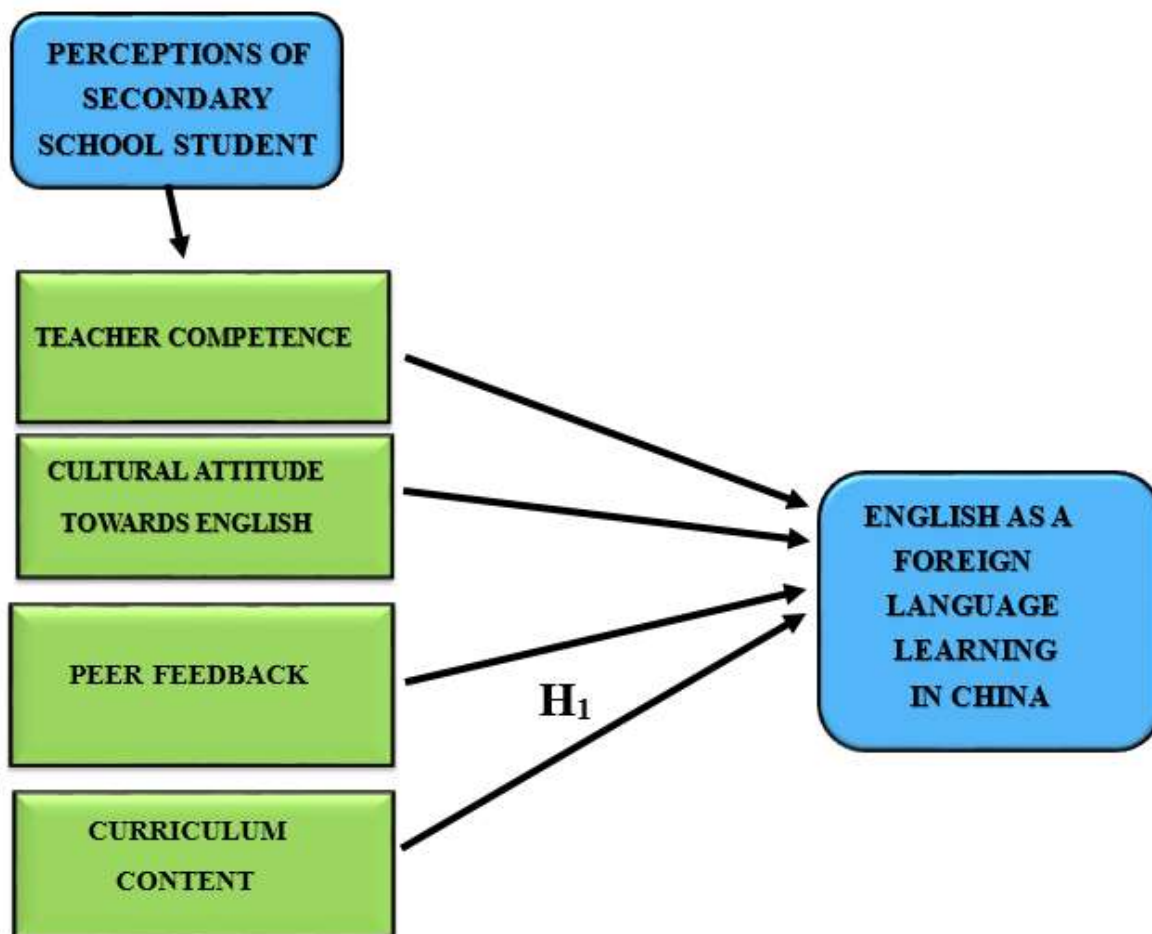
6.3 Data and Measurement:

The main technique of data collection was the use of scheduled questionnaire surveys. Part one included the researcher questioning participants about their demographics and the positions they had. The researcher enquired for their thoughts on several topics related to learning English using a five-point Likert scale in the second part of the survey. All sorts of projects and tasks were included thanks to stratified sampling. The secondary data included in the research were mostly collected from academic publications, business documentation and internet sources.

6.4 Statistical Software: The researcher used SPSS 25 and Microsoft Excel for statistical analysis.

6.5 Statistical Tools: Several demographic and project-specific characteristics that are distinct to strata have been clarified through descriptive analysis. Examples of inductive statistical approaches are analysis of variance (ANOVA) for comparing groups, factor analysis for ensuring the reliability of measurements and their theoretical validity and 95% confidence intervals for odds ratios.

7. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK



8. RESULT

- **Factor Analysis**

Factor Analysis (FA) aims to find latent variables within readily available data. Regression results are often used for appraisals in circumstances when straightforward visual or psychological indicators are absent. The primary objective of simulation is to detect potential vulnerabilities, breaches, and observable linkages. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test evaluates data obtained from numerous regression analyses. The mathematical model and its sample variables serve as dependable estimators. The data may indicate the presence of duplicates. Decreasing the proportions enhances the visibility of the information. KMO gives a numerical value between 0 and 1 to assist the investigator. A KMO value between 0.8 and 1 indicates that the sample population is sufficiently big. Kaiser has established the following criteria for certification: Absurd, varying from 0.050 to 0.059, well below the conventional range of 0.60 to 0.69. The standard range for middle grade is 0.70 to 0.79. An assessment on the quality scale ranging from 0.80 to 0.89. They become astonished by the spectrum of 0.90 to 1.00.

Table1: KMO and Bartlett's Test

Testing for KMO and Bartlett's

Sampling Adequacy Measured by Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin .905

The results of Bartlett's test of Sphericity are as follows:

Approx. chi-square = 3252.968

df = 190

sig =.000

Table 1: KMO and Bartlett's Test

KMO and Bartlett's Test		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.905
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	3252.968
	df	190
	Sig.	.000

Claims concerning sampling are fundamentally allowed by this. The significance of the correlation matrices was assessed using Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. With a value of 0.905, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin statistic shows that the sample size is acceptable. When using Bartlett's Sphericity test, a p-value of 0.00 is noted. It is reasonable to assume that the correlation matrix is not an identity matrix since Bartlett's Sphericity test was affirmative.

❖ **INDEPENDENT VARIABLE**

• **Secondary School Students' Views in China:**

The term secondary education or 'high school' encompasses the whole third year of secondary school in China. During this stage, vocational school students in China are not considered. Students in grades 10–12 often between the ages of 15 and 18 are generally a part of it. There has been a new inspiration in China to increase enrolment in high schools. There was a net enrolment in 56% of China's secondary schools in 2020. This rate is computed by dividing the total population of 15–17-year-olds by the number of students enrolled in high school. There have been many important changes in Chinese secondary English teaching over the last 30 years, bringing it in line with what seems to be a worldwide trend in language learning theory and practice (Xu et al., 2021). Lesson plans, student abilities and motivation, textbooks and examinations have all contributed to the development of English language training in China as per NCS. Lack of desire to communicate in a different language, especially while learning a foreign language is a dominant problem in most learning situations. Students either dislike it or fail to think it is important enough to convey, despite this. Concerned about how their classmates may react to them and their thoughts, many students refrain from raising their hands during class discussions. The unreasonable fear of rejection silences many students. Maintaining linguistic abilities with time is the first dimension, and it is defined by students' reading rates.

❖ FACTOR

• Curriculum Content:

From the 1950s to the 2020s, Chinese primary and secondary school English classes have developed a lot. The Ministry of Education (MOE) is behind the transformation since it has made it its responsibility to set particular grade-level standards for English language instruction. In 2022, the MOE accepted the English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (grades 1–9). In 2020, the MOE modified and issued the 2017 version for senior high schools (grades 10–12). The goal of both sets of standards is to assist students in developing subject fundamentals, which include language skills, cultural awareness, critical thinking and learning abilities. These skills are promoted through the use of theme-based units that teach six elements: the theme, type of text, language proficiency, cultural knowledge, learning tactics and language ability. The foundation of the English curriculum's New Curriculum Standards (NCS) in PRC senior high schools was a 15-year trial program (Zou et al., 2024). To get students more invested in their own English language studies and more comfortable representing themselves in class, the NCS paper offers an initial relationship between educators and their charges centred on the importance of Confucian humanistic principles. This analysis of the Standards reveals that the English curriculum has two distinct features which are its instrumentality and its humanity. It helps students develop a deeper comprehension of English as a medium of communication, highlights the significance of fostering diversity, and lays the groundwork for developing cross-cultural awareness.

❖ DEPENDENT VARIABLE

• English as a Foreign Language Learning (EFL) in China:

EFL is a process that non-native speakers use. People whose native countries do not recognise English as a formal language sometimes find themselves in this situation. The experience of acquiring a foreign tongue is both thrilling and challenging. As just one example, students whose native language is not English face identical problems while attempting to master the English language. Although EFL is most often connected with instructing students from countries where English is not the official language, it may also guide native English speakers in gaining a better command of the English language. EFL programmes are offered by a number of US universities to students whose native tongue is not English. An essential aspect of any language is its grammar. EFL courses provide great depth on the rules of grammar for a variety of nouns, adjectives, adjectival phrases, verb tenses and more (Wang & Guan, 2020). The ability to correctly form words and sentences is another talent that students discover. One must become proficient in its grammar of a foreign language to converse well in that language. English has emerged as the official language of business, politics, and culture in today's interconnected world and it is being utilised increasingly by Chinese businesses and citizens. Emerging powers like China whose significance is growing, place importance on fluency in English. Proficiency in English develops opportunities and enhances China's global competitiveness.

• Relationship between curriculum content and learning EFL in China:

The Standards state that for the curriculum to be executed, educators need to shift their focus from delivering material knowledge to educating individuals holistically and helping students become independent learners. The Standards are an attempt to improve education along the three axes of academic excellence, curricular content and educational outcomes via a structured "goal-teaching-evaluation" system. With the guidance of their teachers and engaging in activities both in and out of the learning environment, pupils are guided to learn with delight

and success by the curriculum content. It suggests ways to make better use of information technology. The curriculum content makes use of modern technology for education, incorporates various teaching strategies, develops rich theme scenarios, and plans interactive and life-oriented language practice activities to help students embrace their natural desire to play, imagine and express themselves while learning (Lei & Medwell, 2022). The textbook should provide theme-based discourse materials in each unit and provide students with practical suggestions and activities to help them get involved and think critically about the topic. Students produce an awareness of and skill in cross-cultural interaction and exchange as they learn and use English which aids in their knowledge of other cultures, evaluation of cultural parallels and contrasts, integration of cultural fundamentals, and general cultural competency.

Based on the preceding discussion, the researcher developed the following hypothesis to examine the impact of curriculum content on learning EFL in China:

- *“H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between curriculum content and learning EFL in China.”*
- *“H₁: There is a significant relationship between curriculum content and learning EFL in China.”*

Table 2: H₁ ANOVA Test

ANOVA					
Sum					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	58635.257	231	2658.367	1128.818	.000
Within Groups	986.331	422	2.355		
Total	59621.588	653			

This investigation provides substantial results. The F-value of 1128.818 indicates that there is statistical significance at the .000 p-value which is lower than the .05 alpha level. This signifies that the *“H₁: There is a significant relationship between curriculum content and learning EFL in China”* is accepted, and the null hypothesis is rejected.

9. DISCUSSION

The study outcomes indicate that the structure and content of the curriculum have an important effect on how well Chinese secondary school students develop English as a second language. Students' attention and involvement with the material increased when expressive exercises, cultural components, and real-world English applications were included in the program. Students were encouraged to see English as more than a mere exam to pass but as a tool for practical interaction and worldwide involvement via a well-structured curriculum. The research also identified a number of curriculum content-related barriers. Exam preparation, memorising grammatical rules, and completing translation tasks were the primary points of contention, according to several respondents. Students have fewer chances to practice their English language skills, which include speaking, listening, and creative writing. Many students lost interest and discovered it difficult to speak English with confidence in contexts other than tests. Some critics said that textbooks failed to engage students' interests and future demands by using outdated content and providing little exposure to culture.

10. CONCLUSION

The study's findings underscore how curriculum content might help Chinese secondary school students acquire English more effectively. Students become more engaged and do better academically when class time is filled with linguistic practice, cultural aspects, and interactive activities. Students' self-esteem, vocabulary, and opportunities for genuine expression may all benefit from a well-crafted programme. Additionally, the investigation exposed obstacles that delay advancement. Students' capacity to use English in everyday situations is limited by test-centred designs, obsolete materials and an overemphasis on grammar-related exercises. Students will still have a difficult time acquiring the real-world skills required for college and global communication until these restrictions are lifted. Practical abilities required for success in higher education and international communication will remain difficult for learners until these constraints are removed. Researchers discovered that placing a focus on balanced and modernised curriculum content significantly improves English language acquisition, laying these limitations aside. Including student-centred materials, updating textbooks, and developing opportunities for collaborative and task-based activities are all crucial. This strategy has the potential to help Chinese secondary school students in the future by getting them ready for both academic success and global interactions.

REFERENCES

- Chen, X. (2025). Return to English Skills in China: Using a Nonparametric Bounding Approach. *Eastern Economic Journal*, 403-435.
- Cheng, B., & Zhang, D. (2020). Cultivating citizens with confucian cosmopolitanism: defining the purpose of liberal arts education in the asian context. *Front. Educ. China*, 564-587.
- Galloway, N., & Ruegg, R. (2020). The provision of student support on English Medium Instruction programmes in Japan and China. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 100846.
- Hang, C. (2020). A corpus-based approach to comparing English textbook pedagogies: The case of Hong Kong and the People's Republic of China. *Pedagogies: An International Journal*, 256-285.
- Jia, R., Li, H., & Cousineau, C. (2025). *The Highest Exam: How the Gaokao Shapes China*. Harvard University Press.
- Jiang, A. L., & Zhang, L. J. (2021). Teacher learning as identity change: the case of EFL teachers in the context of curriculum reform. *TESOL Quarterly*, 271-284.
- Karlen, Y., Hirt, C. N., Jud, J., Rosenthal, A., & Eberli, T. D. (2023). Teachers as learners and agents of self-regulated learning: The importance of different teachers competence aspects for promoting metacognition. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 1-14.
- Lei, M., & Medwell, J. (2022). The Changing Role of Chinese English-as-Foreign-Language Teachers in the Context of Curriculum Reform: Teachers' Understanding of Their New Role. *Sec. Educational Psychology*.
- Wang, Y., & Guan, H. (2020). Exploring demotivation factors of Chinese learners of English as a foreign language based on positive psychology. *Revista Argentina de Clinica Psicológica*, 851.
- Wu, F. (2020). A Study on College English Education from Multiple Perspectives. *Chinese Journal of Multimedia and Network Teaching*.
- Xiaoli, S., Dorottya, R., & Zhang, X. (2024). A Cross-cultural Comparison of ELT Curricula of Senior Secondary Schools in Mainland China and Hong Kong. *Nordic Journal of Comparative and International Education*.
- Xu, Y., Zhang, G., Yan, C., Wang, G., Jiang, Y., & Zhao, K. (2021). A two-stage multi-objective optimization method for envelope and energy generation systems of primary and secondary school teaching buildings in China. *Building and Environment*, 108142.
- Zou, F. (2023). Exploring Teachers' Knowledge and Practices of Self-Regulated Learning: A Case Study in China. *English Language Teaching Perspectives*, 1-15.
- Zou, F., Zhiyu, C., Qiucheng, L., Rou, L., Sitong, S., Jiaying, Z., . . . Xiaohua, Z. (2024). Analysis of China's English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education from the Perspectives of Self-regulated Learning. 5-18.