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China's foreign language policy on primary English education: What's behind it?

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Abstract This paper examines the formulation of China's foreign language policy on primary English education issued in 2001, specifically exploring factors contributing to the formulation of the policy and problems in its formulation. Drawing upon official documents, newspaper archives, publications, and an interview with an education official, it identifies five contributing factors and six problems in relation to policy formulation. The paper argues that the policy, jointly shaped by social, economic, educational, linguistic, and political forces, was the outcome of top-down, assumption-based, and hasty policymaking. The Chinese case exemplifies the impact of the global spread of English on foreign language policy in non-English speaking countries.

Keywords China · Contributing factors · Foreign language policy · Primary English education · Problems in policy formulation

Abbreviation
ELT English language teaching

Introduction

On January 18, 2001, China's Ministry of Education issued a document entitled *The Ministry of Education Guidelines for Vigorously Promoting the Teaching of English*

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in Primary Schools, mandating that students start to learn English as a compulsory subject in the third grade (Ministry of Education 2001).[1] The release of the document marked the birth of a new foreign language policy in China, prior to which English had been introduced to the majority of students in the seventh grade—the first year of junior secondary school. The policy document provides a schedule for implementation: beginning in fall 2001, primary schools located in cities and county seats are to ''gradually'' teach English; beginning in fall 2002, primary schools located in towns and townships are to ''gradually'' teach English. It also provides general guidelines for curriculum design, textbook selection, teacher training, and local administration. Given that China has the world's largest population of primary school students—estimated at 130 million in 2001 (Liu and Gong 2001), the impact of the policy is not hard to envision.

Several researchers have expressed concerns about the policy. Nunan (2003: 605) concludes in his survey of recent changes in English language teaching (ELT) in a number of countries, including China, that their decisions regarding teaching English to young learners were made based on an assumption that ''younger is better.'' Lu (2003) points out that the policy has created educational inequality in that some rural schools have not been able to implement the policy due to various constraints. Shu (2004) questions the feasibility of implementing the policy nationwide through exploring policy implementation in Shanghai. Hu (2005) argues that China's Ministry of Education released the policy in the hope of addressing the gap between the increasing demand for English raised by the prospects of winning the bid to host the 2008 Summer Olympic Games and joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, and the unsatisfactory outcome of ELT reforms at the secondary school level in the 1990s. In his opinion, the policy ''seems to be a poorly deliberated one'' (2005: 11), given that China overall lacks favorable conditions essential to the success of a primary school foreign language program.

In view of the doubts raised about the policy, this paper examines the formulation of the policy, specifically exploring factors contributing to its formulation and problems in policy formulation. Drawing upon official documents, newspaper archives, publications, and an interview with a provincial-level education official, Official Zhao, it aims to shed more light on what is behind the policy.[2] The paper identifies contributing factors, analyzes the context and purpose of the policy, presents a reality check on the policy back in 2001, discusses problems in policy formulation, and offers concluding remarks.

Contributing factors

Analysis of collected data found that five factors—ever-increasing demand for English in China, basic education reform, pre-policy primary English education, belief in benefits of an earlier start, and the Vice Premier's

[1] In this paper, titles for Chinese documents and quotations from Chinese sources are my translations.

[2] I collected my data mainly during May and June 2005. The interview with Official Zhao (a pseudonym) was conducted face-to-face in Mandarin on 9 May 2005.

involvement—contributed to the formulation of the policy. Evidence leading to the identification of each factor is presented below.

Ever-increasing demand for English in China

Lianning Li, then Director-General of the Department of Basic Education under the Ministry of Education, wrote in 2001 addressing a range of issues central to the policy, including the rationale for the decision to teach English in primary schools and specifics in relation to primary school ELT. As discussed in his article, the first reason to teach English in primary schools is to satisfy escalating demand for English created by further opening up of the country:

> Currently, economic globalization is accelerating; our country is on the verge of joining the WTO and is opening its doors wider to the outside world. In the meantime, communications and co-operations between our country and others are increasing day by day, which requires us to improve our ability to use a foreign language for communicative purposes… . The decision to teach English in primary schools was made precisely to address the needs of opening up; it also reflects our country's determination to accelerate the pace of opening up.

Similarly, in Li's (2001a) there is a report about her interview with an official of the Ministry of Education regarding the teaching of English in primary schools; the official mentioned the following as part of the reason for promoting it on a large scale:

> Facing a new century when technology is developing rapidly and English has become an important tool in international interactions as a result of informat-ionization and globalization, learning and mastering a foreign language has become a basic requirement that citizens of the 21st century should fulfill… .

As the above excerpts show, the Ministry of Education released the policy in anticipation of the necessity to upgrade citizens' competence in English for the sake of the country's continuing development in an age of accelerated globalization.

Basic education reform

As articulated in the Ministry of Education policy document, ''the teaching of English in primary schools constitutes an important part of China's basic education reform in the early 21st century.'' Lianning Li (2001) stated that it is a significant move to boost basic education reform.[3] He added:

> The primary English curriculum initiated this time is different from our traditional teaching model featured by subject-centeredness, textbook-centeredness, and teacher-centeredness. The new curriculum, with emphasis on the integration of technology into foreign language teaching, student-centeredness, and task-based instruction, develops students' competence in listening, speaking, reading, playing, and acting under the guidance and

[3] ''Lianning Li'' instead of ''Li'' is used in the text for the purpose of differentiation.

> direction of teachers. It is also a decisive breakthrough in the attempt to reform the [traditional] teaching model. (1)

Major documents in relation to China's basic education reform are reviewed below in order to provide more historical background to the policy.

On December 24, 1998, the Ministry of Education announced its *Action Plan for Rejuvenating Education in the 21st Century*. One important plan promotes quality education through the ''Trans-century Quality Education Project,'' which focuses on reforming basic education in terms of curriculum, evaluation system, content and methods of teaching, etc.[4] As part of this project, a new curriculum framework and standards for basic education were expected to take tentative shape by the year 2000. The need for reform of basic education was reiterated in a document entitled *Decisions on Deepening Education Reform and Fully Promoting Quality Education*, released by the State Council on June 13, 1999. The document suggests that a new curriculum system for basic education be constructed.

Both documents set the direction for the reform in basic English education. In May 1999, in response to the ''Trans-century Quality Education Project,'' the Department of Basic Education under the Ministry of Education formed a committee to embark on the development of English curriculum standards (Hao 2000).

Pre-policy primary English education

According to Li's (2001a) report, the official she interviewed cited the expansion of primary English education since the 1980s as one reason for the decision to teach English in primary schools. This official said, ''Since the '80s of the last century, primary and secondary English education in our country has been expanding rapidly due to increasing demand [for English]. The number of regions where English has been taught in primary schools kept rising…'' (Li 2001a). The following historical review of primary English education from 1978 to 2000 provides background for understanding the official's statement.

From 1978 to 1990

In 1978, the Ministry of Education released a draft ELT syllabus for primary and secondary schools, according to which English could either be introduced in the third grade or the first year of junior secondary school (Hu 2005). In fact, English was not widely taught in primary schools. The Ministry of Education later stressed that primary schools should not teach English unless required conditions were met; as a result, most regions discontinued offering English classes for primary school students (Chen et al. 2002).

Then in the national primary school curricula released in 1984, there was no foreign language requirement: ''English disappeared from the curriculum for rural schools and was restricted only to urban primary schools which had qualified teachers and whose programs were well connected with secondary ones'' (Hu 2005: 9).

[4] Quality education, suzhi jiaoyu in Chinese, aims to enhance the well-rounded development of students.

Indeed, in the mid 1980s, a very small proportion of primary schools—mostly key urban schools—started teaching English (Wang 2002).[5]

From 1990 to 2000

During the 1990 to 2000 decade, primary English education expanded (Liu 2001): an increasing number of primary schools initiated their own English programs. Since 1994, the population of primary school English learners had grown by more than 1 million per year; and according to a partial estimate, approximately 7 million out of 130 million primary school students were learning English at school in 1999, having an average of 3 class periods per week (Liu and Gong 2001).

However, primary English education was replete with problems attributed to the absence of a uniform policy. A large proportion of schools located in towns, and the vast majority of countryside schools, did not teach English (Wang 1999a). And among schools that had already started, there were salient disparities in ELT due to lack of a unified national English syllabus (Wang 1999a). For example, the age at which students started to learn English varied from 8 to 11 years old, and the time allocated to English ranged from 1 to 4 class periods per week (Wang 2002). The overall quality of instruction was hindered by a shortage of qualified teachers and appropriate teaching materials (Wang 2002). Moreover, there was no articulation between primary and secondary English education; as a result, it was common for English to be taught anew to first-year junior secondary school students who had already been taught English for several years in primary school.

In response to the expansion of primary English education, a national symposium on primary school ELT was held biannually starting in 1990. During the fourth symposium in 1998, participants generally agreed that five further steps should be taken, the first of which was to develop guidelines or curriculum standards to regulate the teaching of English in primary schools (Wang 1999b).

Belief in benefits of an earlier start

As Li (2001a) reported, the official she interviewed mentioned benefits of an earlier start when asked about the rationale for teaching English in primary schools. This official said,

> Some researchers have studied how children learn foreign languages. Experience shows that the optimal age to learn a foreign language is around eight; students who start to learn a foreign language at this age can learn it more efficiently, without getting confused between the target language and their native language.

Similarly, Lianning Li (2001) wrote,

> …from the perspective of children's language-based cognitive abilities, it is appropriate to lower the starting age for foreign or second language learning. This has been proved by scientific studies and experience of other countries; in

[5] Key urban schools are well-resourced schools receiving extra government funding.

> some other countries, it is also generally in the third grade that a foreign language is introduced to students… . (1)

It is worth pointing out that these arguments were used to support the claim that basic conditions for teaching English in primary schools had been met in China. In addition, Lianning Li (2001), in his explanation of why most regions are required to introduce English in the third grade rather than in lower grades, had the following to say:

> One of the very important reasons lies in the necessity to deal with the relationship between teaching Chinese Pinyin and teaching English because Chinese Pinyin—Chinese phonetic alphabet—uses the 26 letters of English. If we teach simultaneously two phonetic alphabets in lower grades, they are likely to confuse students. Given that the quality and ability of English teachers cannot yet meet teaching challenges, introducing English in the third grade rather than in lower grades can be a way to avoid confusing students. Of course, in regions where conditions permit, especially in regions where the English alphabet is not taught when English is first introduced, it is possible to introduce English in the first grade. (2)

Public belief in benefits of an earlier start may also have influenced the Ministry of Education's decision-making. According to Wang (1999a), there was strong demand for teaching English in primary schools from the general public and parents; as a result, ELT even became an important aspect of competition among primary schools. Official Zhao (interview, 9 May 2005) mentioned that some primary schools took advantage of the inclusion of English when advertising themselves.

The Vice Premier's involvement

According to Official Zhao (interview, 9 May 2005), then-Vice Premier Lanqing Li played a decisive role in accelerating the formulation of the policy:

> The large-scale promotion [of primary English education] in 2001 could be directly attributed to Lanqing Li's speeches. A certain amount of preparation had been made, otherwise it might not have started merely because of his speeches. But his speeches had direct effects on the large-scale promotion.

An official from the Department of Basic Education, who asked to remain anonymous, also mentioned Lanqing Li's speeches when asked to recall the background to the policy.

Vice Premier Li's involvement in primary English education can be traced to his visit to Zhejiang Province during June 15–20, 2000.[6] As Zheng (2001) has reported, during that visit, Lanqing Li commented that such an economically developed province as Zhejiang should significantly improve ELT—in cities where conditions permit, English could be uniformly introduced in the third grade or even in lower

[6] Zhejiang Province, located on China's southeast coast, is one of the most economically developed provinces in China.

grades. Immediately after Lanqing Li's visit, the local government, particularly the Zhejiang Province Department of Education, convened meetings and drafted a tentative plan for province-wide promotion of primary English education (Zheng 2000, 2001).

A closer look at Lanqing Li speech may shed more light on the then-Vice Premier's impact on the policy. Lanqing Li served two 5-year terms (1993–2003) as Vice Premier of the State Council, during which he was put in charge of education, among other things. After his retirement, he wrote *Education for 1.3 Billion*, a book looking back on education reform and development during his tenure.[7] The following excerpts from the section ''Promoting foreign language teaching reforms'' reflect his views on foreign language teaching (Li 2005):

> A strong feeling has been stirring inside me since the day I was put in charge of education, compelling me to be particularly concerned about foreign language teaching. My feeling is that we spend a long time learning foreign languages in schools—in some places, 14 years, and in others, ten years, depending on when it is first introduced. (346–347)
>
> Of course local conditions vary, but I believe that the starting year for foreign language studies should be unified for schools in the same city. Where conditions permit, it can begin in first grade. Otherwise, it can begin in third grade, or even as late as the first year of junior secondary school. In short, we need uniformity and standardization, rather than each place doing things in its own way. (349)
>
> Of course, behind these disparities is the major problem of a lack of teachers. It was a huge problem in the past, which should have been alleviated to some extent with our universities supplying more and more foreign language professionals. Especially today, steady progress in audiovisual and information network technology has brought down costs, making it possible to use technological means to incorporate the best textbooks and most standard pronunciation in English teaching, thereby addressing the shortage of English teachers and lack of teaching skills. (350)

From the above excerpts, we learn that Lanqing Li, concerned about the quality and efficiency of foreign language education, stresses the importance of ''uniformity and standardization'' and recommends the use of technology in addressing the issue of teacher quantity and quality.

Context and purpose of the policy

These five identified factors reveal the context in which the policy was formulated: at the turn of the 21st century, China was on the verge of joining the WTO; it embarked on reforming education including basic education; primary English

[7] The Chinese version of the book was published in 2003. The English version, translated from the Chinese version with some modifications, was published in 2005. The excerpts cited in this paper were taken from the English version.

education was overall chaotic and falling short of national standards, even though a growing number of primary schools had initiated their own primary English programs; there were public voices demanding that English be taught at the primary school level; and Vice Premier Lanqing Li, who attaches great weight to foreign language education, gave speeches on primary school ELT. These interrelated factors indicate that social, economic, educational, linguistic, and political forces jointly shaped the policy.

Meanwhile, the contributing factors show the purpose of the policy—it was formulated to upgrade citizens' competence in English, to standardize the teaching of English in primary schools within the context of the basic education reform, and to respond to direction from then-Vice Premier as well as to the public's demand for teaching English at the primary school level. It can be argued that the policy was issued in response to China's demand for English in the context of ''linguistic globalization'' (Sonntag 2003).

A reality check on the policy

The Ministry of Education's decision on the teaching of English in primary schools in 2001 aroused strong reactions from the public (Li 2001a). For example, between February 1, 2001 and April 26, 2001, a series of opinion articles written mainly by leading scholars in the field of basic English education were published on the *Guangming Daily*'s weekly education page.[8] They covered a wide range of issues relating to the decision, including teacher training, student workload, approaches to teaching primary English, and teaching materials. A reality check on the policy back in 2001 reveals major concerns prior to implementation of the policy.

Teacher shortage

One of these concerns was an existent teacher shortage problem, as the policy document implies:

> In cities or regions where the [English] teacher situation is satisfactory, English audiovisual media should be actively utilized in classroom teaching. And in regions where English teachers are temporarily unavailable, resources such as English TV programs, video tapes, CDs, and audio tapes, should be actively utilized to start teaching English… .

Moreover, regarding teacher development, the document suggests that ''priority should be given to training leading primary school English teachers and assistant teachers to meet the urgent need following the teaching of English in primary schools.'' Specific suggestions for solving the teacher shortage problem can be summarized as follows: (1) teachers of other subjects who have some English background can be assigned to teach English full-time or part-time after being

[8] *Guangming Daily*, founded in 1949 in Beijing, is a Chinese newspaper influential in the fields of science and technology, education, and culture.

trained and certified as qualified; (2) teachers colleges, normal universities, teacher training schools, and teaching and research divisions at all levels should offer in-service teacher training under the guidance of local educational departments; (3) teachers colleges and normal universities should develop primary school English teacher preparation programs; (4) secondary teacher training schools should teach English as a compulsory subject and if conditions permit, they can develop primary school English teacher preparation programs or be transformed into secondary foreign language schools; and (5) college graduates holding a non-education degree in English can be encouraged to teach primary English.[9]

The teacher shortage problem was also acknowledged by administrators from the Ministry of Education. Lianning Li (2001) called it ''the biggest challenge for the teaching of English in primary schools,'' and pointed out that ''accelerating the development of primary school English teachers is critical to the success and quality of English language teaching.'' He recommended three measures to alleviate immediate staffing needs:

> In the current situation, first of all, currently available primary school English teachers should play a key role in guiding the teaching of English in various schools. In principle, each school should have at least 1–2 leading English teachers. Secondly, we can make some adjustments to optimize personnel utilization: teachers of other subjects who are fairly competent in English can be assigned to teach English or become assistant English teachers. Thirdly, class advisors and teachers of other subjects in a school can be trained to become assistant English teachers as long as they have some English background; they can help students learn English by playing video tapes and CDs for them. (2–3)

In addition, Lianning Li (2001) recommended that educational agencies at all levels offer training to pre-service teachers prior to fall 2001 to ensure a smooth startup. As to long-term measures, he suggested that teachers colleges and normal universities at all levels be committed to developing primary school English teachers and that secondary teacher training schools teach English as a compulsory subject.

An official from the Ministry of Education's National Center for School Curriculum and Textbook Development also expressed concern over the teacher shortage problem when interviewed by Li (2001b) about how to promote the teaching of English in primary schools, as the following excerpt shows:

> Question [Li]: Teacher preparation is critical to the teaching of English in primary schools. What measures will be taken in this regard?
> Answer [Official]: According to statistics, there is a severe shortage of full-time primary school English teachers across the country. To ensure that the implementation goal can be achieved as scheduled, short-term and long-term plans for teacher development and training should get underway. In addition to relying on graduates from colleges, universities, and technical secondary

[9] Secondary teacher training schools used to be the principal institutions where primary school teachers were cultivated. English was not in the curriculum of secondary teacher training schools.

> schools, the teacher shortage problem is to be solved mainly through full utilization of current teachers.

In response, the official recommended the following specific measures: (1) training teachers of other subjects who have some English background and assigning them to teach English full-time after they are certified as qualified; (2) encouraging English teachers to teach in multiple schools; (3) employing retired primary or secondary school English teachers; (4) assigning class advisors or teachers of other subjects as part-time assistant teachers, responsible for tutoring students and organizing them for activities such as watching English videos and listening to cassettes; and (5) encouraging college English majors to be part-time assistant teachers in primary schools.

Finally, the existence of the teacher shortage problem was also confirmed by insiders in the field of basic English education. For example, Zhang (2001)—a researcher from China National Institute for Educational Research—thinks that the country was not ready for a large-scale promotion of English in primary schools, given the shortage of a large quantity of qualified English teachers. According to him, at the secondary school level, the quality of English teachers, which was the lowest in comparison with that of other teachers, hindered the development of basic English education. At the primary school level, the quality of English teachers was worse: few English teachers held even an associate degree in English. He argued that the country would be burdened by having to offer continuing training to primary school English teachers. In conclusion, he stated that it was very necessary to teach English in primary schools, but a large-scale promotion should not be launched unless qualified teachers were available.

Liu (2001)—a veteran in English textbook development from the People's Education Press—also thinks that the country was not ready for a large-scale promotion of English in primary schools in that ''new [English] curriculum standards have not yet been released, [new] teaching materials are under compilation, there is a lack of teaching facilities, and the worst of all, there is a shortage of qualified teachers.''[10] She roughly estimated the demand for primary school English teachers as follows:

> In the second half of the year, if primary schools located in cities universally introduce English [in the third grade], there will be an increase of at least 5 million English learners, and accordingly a total increase of about 20 million English learners over the next four years, for which approximately 20,000 teachers are needed. But it takes three years to produce a teacher. Where to recruit teachers for the fall?

It is worth mentioning that Liu's estimate took into account city schools only. In her opinion, assigning unqualified teachers to teach English would eventually lead to a waste of labor and resources. In view of the teacher shortage problem, she suggested that primary English education be promoted through well-planned steps rather than in haste.

[10] The People's Education Press is a state-owned educational publishing house under the direct leadership of China's Ministry of Education.

Wang (2002)—a member of the English Curriculum Standards Committee—pointed out that immediate actions were needed to train a large quantity of qualified teachers. She further raised the following questions:

> Where do all the teachers come from? What kind of training is needed and most effective for preparing qualified primary English teachers? Who will be responsible for conducting training, as most teacher training institutions and universities have been involved exclusively in training secondary school English teachers in the past. (103–104)

As the questions indicate, in addition to the teacher shortage problem, no plan for training primary school English teachers had been drawn up by the time the policy was released.

Teaching materials

Another concern was that when the policy was released, teaching materials aligning with new requirements for primary school ELT were not yet available. The policy document says,

> Given that currently there are a considerable number of primary English teaching materials in the country, [the Ministry of Education] will arrange a review of currently available teaching materials according to *Basic Requirements for Primary School English Language Teaching (Tentative)* to satisfy the demand for primary English teaching materials … .[11]

Moreover, it states that those materials passing the review would be listed in the Primary and Secondary School Teaching Materials Catalog and the use of teaching materials outside the catalog should be discontinued beginning in fall 2002. According to Lianning Li (2001), the review would be conducted after the fall 2001 semester began. Also, as mentioned earlier, Liu (2001) pointed out that ''[new] teaching materials are under compilation.''

Problems in policy formulation

While the analysis of the purpose of the policy indicates that it is well-intended, a reexamination of the discourses of the policy document and of the officials, together with the reality check, reveals six problems in policy formulation.

Lack of a needs analysis

It seems that the policy was based on a rough estimate of supply and demand for English rather than on a broad-based needs analysis. Lambert (2001: 175) suggests that national needs for a foreign language can be estimated by analyzing the adult

[11] *Basic Requirements for Primary School English Language Teaching (Tentative)* was released along with the policy document.

use of the language in a wide range of contexts and that the estimation should go ''beyond current adult use.'' Neither the policy document nor the officials mention that a systematic analysis has been conducted to assess the future extent of users and uses of English in China. The reasoning behind the decision to incorporate English into the primary school curriculum seems to be as follows: given that the demand for English will increase while China is accelerating its opening up, English should be taught at the primary school level so that the English competence of Chinese citizens can be improved to meet the ever-increasing demand. Although it is undeniable that the demand for English is likely to increase, and understandable that conducting a broad-based needs analysis is a logistical challenge in the Chinese context, a rough estimate may not suffice to justify the policy, considering the large population of primary school students—130 million—affected by it.

Top-down policymaking

China has basically adopted a top-down approach in formulating foreign language policies: a policy is formulated by the government or a specialist committee without involving stakeholders from various other sectors of Chinese society, particularly enterprises and institutions that need employees proficient in a foreign language (Lu 2003). With regard to the policy under study, although the policymaking process remains largely unknown, there is evidence that the process was top-down overall. As the reality check demonstrates, the 2001 release of the policy document aroused strong reactions, including some from leading scholars in the field of basic English education, who questioned the feasibility of the policy. It could be inferred that the policy was unknown to most people before the actual document was released. In other words, the policy might have been imposed on local educational agencies, primary schools, and students without careful consideration of its impact on them. It is understandable that the top-down approach was adopted in formulating the policy considering China's centralized educational system, yet it is questionable whether such a policy could even be successfully implemented in view of the lack of stakeholder involvement in the policymaking process and the complications involved in the initial implementation of the policy.

Assumptions about benefits of an earlier start

The policy was grounded in assumptions about benefits of an earlier start. The following were mentioned as justification for the decision of teaching English in primary schools: ''Experience shows that the optimal age to learn a foreign language is around eight,'' at which students ''can learn it more efficiently, without getting confused between the target language and their native language'' (Li 2001a); both empirical studies and ''experience of other countries'' have proved that cognitively speaking, ''it is appropriate to lower the starting age for foreign or second language learning''—specifically, to introduce a foreign language in the third grade (Lianning Li 2001: 1). Yet a brief review of relevant literature shows that these are deeply flawed assumptions. The optimal age to learn a foreign language remains debated (Nunan 2003), not to mention empirical evidence proving that it is around eight years

of age. Some empirical studies (e.g., Cenoz 2003) have shown that with the same amount of foreign language instruction, young learners generally progress slower; in other words, they learn less efficiently than older learners. In addition, empirical evidence is lacking on whether earlier starters in a formal foreign language learning context can have an advantage over their later counterparts in the long run (Johnstone 2000). In view of the ongoing controversies, scholars (e.g., Scovel 2000) have cautioned against introducing a foreign language at an earlier age solely on the grounds of the adage ''the earlier the better.'' As a matter of fact, whether potential benefits of an earlier start can be accrued or not is in part determined by ''the optimization of a number of factors,'' including the availability of qualified teachers (Tucker 2001: 597). Thus, it could be inferred that the policy was formulated without a critical examination of studies or of experience of other countries in relation to the teaching of foreign languages in primary schools.

Insufficient preparation for policy implementation

The reality check on the policy indicates that it was issued without sufficient preparation for implementation. In fact, the country was largely unprepared for a large-scale promotion of primary English education when the policy document was released. Specifically, there was a severe shortage of qualified primary school English teachers; experience and programs in relation to training primary school English teachers were scarce; no plan for teacher training had been drawn up; and teaching materials aligning with new requirements for primary school ELT were not yet available. Given that policymakers were aware of these reality issues, it can be concluded that policymakers put the cart before the horse and expected the horse to catch up. However, released regardless of the reality, the policy is likely to be proven impractical, unrealistic, and to bring un-intended consequences.

Disparity in policy implementation

The policy implementation schedule creates disparity among urban and rural schools. As stipulated in the policy document, beginning in fall 2001, primary schools located in cities and county seats are to ''gradually'' teach English; beginning in fall 2002, primary schools located in towns and townships are to ''gradually'' teach English. It is apparent that there is a one-year gap between the former group consisting of urban schools and the latter group consisting of rural schools with regard to policy implementation.[12] And the word ''gradually'' implies that schools are allowed to postpone implementing the policy depending on local constraints. That schedule might have been a compromise decision of policymakers, who felt the urgency of officially incorporating English into the primary school curriculum but meanwhile were aware that a large proportion of primary schools were not ready, in turn indicating that the country was not ready for a large-scale promotion of primary English education. Urban schools were scheduled to

[12] In this paper, schools located in cities and county seats are categorized as urban schools and schools located in towns and townships are categorized as rural schools.

implement the policy one year earlier, likely because they generally have advantages over rural schools in terms of funding, facilities, resources, and community support.

The disparity in policy implementation among different types of schools and between urban and rural settings may lead to unintended consequences. From a sociopolitical perspective, it creates unequal access to primary English education, or in other words, educational inequality among students at the beginning of schooling. In view of the fact that approximately 60% of China's population resides in rural areas, it is certain that a proportion of students have been and will be disadvantaged by the policy. Given that English is of overriding importance in China's educational system (see Adamson 2002; Hu 2005; Lam 2002; Zhao and Campbell 1995) and thus is crucial to an individual's educational advancement, which is in turn inextricably linked to their social and economic mobility, the disparity in policy implementation may exacerbate the existing urban-rural divide. And from a pedagogical perspective, the disparity can present challenges for school administration and barriers to the success of ELT at the junior secondary school level. For example, a junior secondary school may face the challenge of how to place students who enter the school with various levels of competence in English due to unequal access to English education at the primary school level—assigning them into classes either regardless of their English background or dependent on their prior English instruction. If the school chooses the former option, English teachers would face teaching mixed-ability groups, which is undoubtedly challenging.

Hu (2005) points out that since the early 1980s, a utilitarian approach to policy issues—one that prioritizes efficiency—has been dominant in education as well as other areas in China. It can be argued that the 2001 policy was also formulated with a utilitarian approach in that priority was given to educational efficiency—upgrading citizens' competence in English—but little if any attention was given to educational equity.

Underestimation of teaching challenges

The suggestions for solving the teacher shortage problem may reflect a lack of understanding of the challenges in teaching English to young learners. Teachers can be considered qualified if they are not only competent in the target language, but also know how to teach young learners. Teachers' language proficiency is important in that it is largely determinant of what students can achieve in a foreign language learning context, given that teachers are the major source of students' language input. And since young learners have age-specific characteristics with regard to cognitive development, learning style, and attention span (Brown 2001), teachers should also know how to tailor their instruction to the needs of young learners. In the absence of qualified teachers, low quality instruction may de-motivate young learners (Cameron 2003) and even interfere with their future learning.

Yet, the policy document suggests that college graduates holding a non-education degree in English can be encouraged to teach primary English. It seems that policymakers assume that a degree in an English-related field qualifies a person to be a primary school English teacher. A more worrisome suggestion is that teachers of other subjects with some English background can be assigned to teach English

full-time or part-time after being trained and certified as qualified. This suggestion is highly problematic in that the quality of these teachers can hardly be guaranteed. Another possible interpretation of these suggestions could be that policymakers had no alternative but ''to resort to a makeshift staffing measure'' (Hu 2005: 20) facing the dilemma of promoting primary English education on a large scale without a sufficient supply of qualified teachers.

In view of the correlation between the quality of teachers and the quality of early foreign language instruction, the adoption of such recommendations would likely result in unsatisfactory implementation of the policy and thus not contribute to upgrading Chinese citizens' competence in English. If that were to happen, it would mean a waste of resources badly needed for the development of education in China, where inadequate funding for compulsory education in rural areas has been a long-term concern (Yuan 2005).

To summarize, the problems identified in policy formulation indicate that the policy was the outcome of top-down, assumption-based, and hasty policymaking. These findings also imply that policy implementation was doomed from the outset to be difficult and problematic.

Concluding remarks

The global spread of English has become a major force affecting language policymaking around the world (Bamgbose 2003; Spolsky 2004). This study, examining the formulation of China's foreign language policy on primary English education, exemplifies the impact of the global spread of English on foreign language policy in Expanding Circle countries.[13] As this paper indicates, far-reaching and generalizable implications can be drawn from the Chinese case.

Theoretical implications

As Lambert (2001) notes, most language policy studies in the available literature center around domestic language policy issues in multilingual contexts whereas theoretical inquiry into foreign language policy is limited. The present study shows that foreign language policy not only involves issues peculiar to foreign language learning and teaching—such as at which age students begin learning a foreign language—but also issues common to educational policy, such as efficiency and equity in education. The foregoing discussion also suggests that the development of a theoretical framework for foreign language policy can draw on work in education as well as in other disciplines, for example, foreign language learning teaching and policy studies. In addition, the findings about factors contributing to the policy affirm the necessity of contextualizing the analysis of any language policy, as some policy scholars argue (e.g., Kaplan 1994; Ricento 2000; Tollefson 2002). It also

[13] According to Kachru (1985), countries in the world can be grouped into three concentric circles, that is, ''the Inner Circle,'' where English is a native language; ''the Outer Circle,'' where English is institutionalized as a second language; and ''the Expanding Circle,'' where English is a foreign language largely for international rather than intranational communication.

verifies the robustness of Spolsky's (2004) ecological approach to interpreting a language policy—specifically, to the identification of factors contributing to the formulation of a language policy in a certain context.

Practical implications

As many countries have recently started teaching English as a foreign language to young learners (for examples, see Butler and Iino 2005; Esch 2003; Ho and Wong 2004; Jung and Norton 2002; Nunan 2003), the findings of this study may have implications beyond China, particularly for policymaking in other Expanding Circle countries that are planning to incorporate English into the primary school curriculum. As the Chinese case shows, an Expanding Circle country should be cautious and prudent when formulating a foreign language policy intended to promote the teaching of English in its primary schools. Jumping on the bandwagon without examining the necessity and feasibility of introducing English to primary school students in its local context may have unintended unforeseeable and undesirable consequences.

With regard to future policymaking in China, the problems identified in relation to policy formulation suggest the following:

1. Sound foreign language policy is not only grounded in solid research and empirical evidence but is also realistic and feasible in the context of China.
2. In the process of policy formulation, consultations with stakeholders can prevent imposition of a policy on students and policy implementers.
3. Advance adequate preparation for the implementation of a policy is a necessity. Adequate preparation includes designing a curriculum, training a contingent of qualified teachers, developing appropriate teaching materials, and increasing awareness about the policy among relevant administrators as well as the general public beforehand.
4. Future language education policies can contribute to narrowing China's urban-rural divide rather than widening the divide.

Future research

This study of China's foreign language policy on primary English education has examined what is behind the policy by identifying factors contributing to and problems in its formulation. However, the extent to which the policy can be implemented across the country remains to be explored (Hu 2005). Given China's immense regional economic, social, and educational disparities, studies still need to be conducted on policy implementation in different provinces and regions. Future studies can also examine the policy in classroom settings—investigating how policy rhetoric is being translated into classroom reality. In addition, the pedagogical and sociopolitical impact of the policy—how it has affected ELT at the junior secondary school level and beyond and how it has affected students, primary schools, and Chinese society—is worth further exploration. Findings of such studies, along with those of the present study, can contribute to a comprehensive evaluation of the

policy and further insights into policy formulation and implementation that can best serve Chinese needs for proficiency in English.

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