

Original Paper

Research on the Implementation Path of English Curriculum Policy for Compulsory Education in the New Era

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the implementation path of English curriculum policy for compulsory education, with primary and secondary English education in northwest China as a case study for an in-depth analysis. The paper first reviews the evolution of educational policies over the past decade. Starting from the definition, nature, and carriers of curriculum policy, this paper introduces the research output of domestic and foreign scholars on the implementation of English curriculum policy. This paper proposes three characteristics and five practical pathways to implement English curriculum policy in compulsory education. Based on the above analysis, the paper proposes future research orientations, including regional decision-making strategies, comprehensive methodological frameworks, the synergy between English curriculum policy and other educational policies, and the localization and practical orientation of curriculum policy.

Keywords

English curriculum policy, compulsory education, implementation path

1. Introduction

In the new era of education modernization, education faces unprecedented challenges and opportunities, which have revealed some in-depth problems that need to be addressed urgently. For instance, the imbalance in the distribution of educational resources has become increasingly prominent. How to maintain the harmonious coexistence between promoting Chinese excellent traditional culture and fostering diverse values has emerged as a pressing issue. In addition, the gap between the urgent demand for high-quality and diversified educational resources from the people and the current

education supply remains significant.

To tackle these challenges, China has successively introduced several major education policies in the past decade. In 2010, the First National Education Work Conference was held in Beijing, and “the Outline of Medium and Long Term Planning of National Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)” was officially released. This programmatic document outlined a grand blueprint and clarified directions and goals for educational reform and development in the next decade. Subsequently, to further deepen educational reform and strengthen the fundamental task of fostering virtue through education, the Ministry of Education issued the “Opinions of the Ministry of Education on Comprehensively Deepening Curriculum Reform and Implementing the Fundamental Task of Fostering Virtue through Education” in 2014. In 2019, China’s education welcomed two significant policy documents: “China’s Education Modernization 2035” and the “Implementation Plan for Accelerating Education Modernization (2018-2022),” marking a new stage in China’s education modernization process. In today’s era of globalization and informatization, foreign language proficiency, as a bridge for international communication and cooperation, has become increasingly crucial. Therefore, enhancing the quality and effectiveness of foreign language education has become a broad consensus and urgent need of the nation and society. Foreign language curricula are the core component of the foreign language education system, playing a fundamental and strategic role in achieving talent cultivation objectives aligned with national and social development needs. Driven by the dual forces of globalization and educational reform, foreign language curricula face unprecedented challenges and opportunities, making foreign language curriculum research particularly important and urgent (Xu, 2023).

Curriculum serves as the core aspect of talent cultivation, and its quality directly affects the effectiveness and quality of talent development (He, 2023). From this perspective, curriculum policy becomes an action guideline and criterion formulated by national educational administrative departments within a certain social order and educational scope to adjust the diverse needs of curriculum power and regulate the goals and methods of curriculum operation. Specifically, curriculum policy is manifested through diverse carriers, including but not limited to curriculum plans (or teaching plans), curriculum standards (or syllabuses), and textbooks (Hu, 2001; Meng, 2012). In China, the formulation of compulsory education curriculum policies has always adhered to the core concept of “virtue first, comprehensive development.” Thus, fostering virtue through education has become the core value orientation of compulsory education curriculum policies. It can be seen that foreign language curriculum policy serves as a guiding document for planning the direction, goals, and practices of foreign language education, closely related to the improvement of national foreign language education quality, the cultivation of international competitiveness, and the development of cultural exchanges.

Since its entry into the 21st century, China’s compulsory English education has undergone remarkable transformations, marked by the successive issuance of the “English Curriculum Standards” (Ministry of

Education of the People's Republic of China, 2003, 2011). However, despite these significant achievements, China's compulsory English curricula still face numerous challenges, with the excessive academic burden on students being particularly prominent. From 2018 to 2021, the National Education Supervision and Inspection Group conducted an inspection tour on the balanced development of compulsory education in the five northwestern provinces and autonomous regions, and issued the "Feedback Opinions on the Supervision and Inspection of Balanced Development of Compulsory Education" (hereinafter referred to as the "Feedback Opinions") (Pei, 2023). The "Feedback Opinions" indicate that the balanced development of compulsory education in northwest China has basically met the evaluation standards, but there is a prominent structural shortage of full-time English teachers in these five provinces and autonomous regions, as well as deficiencies in teacher training, academic exchange ratios, and funding investment. The development of compulsory education in northwest China represents a weakness and an essential breakthrough in the balanced development of national compulsory education (Qi et al., 2017). These issues also indicate practical difficulties in implementing English curriculum policies in primary and secondary schools in northwest China. In the new era, compulsory education English curricula closely focus on enhancing the educational function of the curriculum, centering on the core competencies of English subjects. The effective implementation of English curriculum policies is crucial to achieving the goal of cultivating core competencies (Zhang & Qu, 2023) and is inherent in the implementation of the fundamental task of fostering virtue through education.

In light of this, grounded in the broader context of China's compulsory education curriculum reform in the new era, this study explores the implementation of English curriculum policies in primary and secondary compulsory education in northwest China from three dimensions: investigating the status quo of the implementation of curriculum policies and reform, analyzing the characteristics of curriculum policies, and constructing implementation paths.

2. Literature Review

The core of curriculum research focuses on the gap between theory and practice, namely the significant discrepancy between our educational vision and its actual implementation (Stenhouse, 1975). To bridge this gap, deepening curriculum policy research has become an indispensable path (Meng, 2012). Since the initiation of China's eighth basic education curriculum reform in 2001, curriculum policy research has welcomed a vigorous development opportunity, with significant enhancements in both depth and breadth (Wang, 2017). Hu (2001) was the first to discuss the definition, essence, and carriers of curriculum policy, defining it as "the action guidelines and norms formulated by national education administrative departments within a certain social order and educational scope, in order to adjust the different needs of curriculum power and regulate the goals and methods of curriculum operation," and emphasizing the importance of conducting curriculum policy research. Correspondingly, domestic research on curriculum policy in the early 21st century mostly concentrated on defining core concepts

(e.g., Zhou, 2004), comparing domestic and foreign curriculum policies (Lou & Sun, 2006), curriculum policy subjects (Zhang & Jin, 2004), curriculum policy formulation (Lv, 2007), and curriculum policy implementation (Zhao, 2005).

With the promulgation of the “The Outline of Medium and Long Term Planning of National Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)” and the revision of a new round of basic education “curriculum standards”, scholars have gradually become aware of the problems in the implementation of curriculum policies. For instance, Wang (2011) proposed that the process of formulating curriculum policies involves steps such as problem identification and decision-making, implementation, evaluation, and correction, which correspond to curriculum issues and decisions, policy execution, policy evaluation, and policy revision, respectively. Meng (2012) integrated the general political attributes of curriculum policy as a public policy and the specific professional attributes of the curriculum field by constructing a two-dimensional conceptual framework of “curriculum power allocation and curriculum knowledge decision-making.” Li and Jin (2014) believed that the formulation of curriculum policies should focus on the strength of social participation to reflect legitimacy, ensure the scientific nature, and demonstrate the operability of curriculum policies. However, Tu (2009) pointed out that current research on curriculum policies in China mainly suffers from a lack of holistic studies on the curriculum policy process and descriptive analysis in most studies.

Currently, foreign scholars have achieved abundant results in research on the implementation of English curriculum policies. For example, Kaplan and Baldauf (1997) proposed seven core research areas of language education policy: access policy, teacher policy, curriculum policy, teaching material and methodology policy, resource allocation policy, community policy, and assessment policy, which is considered a classic theoretical framework for language education policy in the field of language planning. Kirkpatrick (2010) noted that the lack of well-trained teachers or teacher training would limit the implementation of English curriculum policies in local communities. Baldauf (2010) believed that the duration of instruction is a crucial factor affecting the success of English curriculum policy implementation. Ng (2016) examined Japan’s primary school English curriculum policy issued in 2011, specifically analyzing policy-related books, journal articles, news reports, and interview data with stakeholders (teachers, students and parents). The results showed that the implementation of this policy was hindered by various factors, including the lack of standardized English textbooks and a social language environment conducive to English learning. Chua and Baldauf (2011) found that the implementation of English curriculum policies is often constrained by micro-level environmental factors such as local governments, schools, classroom practices, teachers, and individuals. Liang et al. (2020) compared the similarities and differences between English curriculum policies and their implementation in early childhood education in China and Australia, discovering that both countries’ education departments adopted a similar “ostrich policy,” lacking enthusiasm in guiding and supervising English curriculum in early childhood education and failing to fully recognize the importance of early English education.

Large-scale systematic research on the implementation of English curriculum policies in China is still relatively rare (Yang, 2021). For instance, Wang (2011) reviewed the motivations, the positioning of the curriculum, and implementation strategies for formulating English curriculum policies for primary schools in China from 2000 to 2011, analyzing the achievements and challenges faced by primary school English education at both the macro level of policy formulation and the micro level of curriculum and teaching reform. Luo (2013) used the framework of foreign language education policy, employing empirical surveys and interviews, to explore the connections between the goal orientation of high school English curriculum standards, textbook compilation, and the English college entrance examination, and proposed optimization suggestions from the perspective of language education planning. Zou (2015) conducted text analysis and interviews with insiders using “sociocultural surveys” to analyze the compulsory English education curriculum systems of six countries. Li (2020) pointed out that curriculum policies can only be ultimately implemented through teaching. The transformation of curriculum policies into teaching involves two stages: perception and operation, and then through three paths—transforming into teachers’ beliefs, teaching thinking, and teaching methods—completing the reconstruction of curriculum policies. Yang (2021) investigated the implementation of English curriculum policies in the compulsory education stage in Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Shanghai, focusing on frontline English teachers and curriculum policy implementers including school principals and teaching researchers, and proposed to enhance the implementation of English curriculum policies from three dimensions: promoting teachers’ understanding of curriculum policies, improving the policy implementation environment, and optimizing English curriculum implementation. Zhang (2023) took Shanghai as the targeted research spot, explored the compilation strategies of school curriculum planning that fully reflects national curriculum policies, and constructed an implementation system for school curriculum planning to ensure the execution of national curriculum policies. Zhang’s study also provided a set of solutions integrating values, methodology, and operating systems to promote the high-quality implementation of national curriculum policies in schools. This indicates that school curriculum planning is a practical concept connecting national curriculum policies and school curriculum actions, crucial in transforming the national ideal curriculum into students’ experienced curriculum and ensuring the realization of national educational goals.

In summary, few scholars in China have conducted large-scale, systematic research on the implementation of English curriculum policies in the compulsory education stage in northwest China. Therefore, this study explores the implementation of English curriculum policies in compulsory education in five provinces in northwest China, analyzes the characteristics of these policies, and proposes corresponding practical paths. It complements and improves previous research on English curriculum policies, and the present study is expected to promote the balanced development of the English curriculum in compulsory education in China and further enhance the fairness of compulsory education.

3. Characteristics of English Curriculum Policy in China's Compulsory Education in the New Era

3.1 Integration of Language Knowledge and Practical Language Use

China's English curriculum standards actively advocate for closely combining the teaching of language knowledge with practical language use, constructing a teaching framework centered on language skills. This framework emphasizes the importance of students' comprehensive development, specifically covering five dimensions: the cultivation of emotional attitudes, the optimization of learning strategies, the refinement of language skills, the accumulation of language knowledge, and the enhancement of cultural awareness. In the teaching process, teachers rely heavily on textbooks. For the vocabulary lists and grammatical points stipulated in the curriculum standards, teachers should adopt more flexible and diverse teaching strategies rather than merely limiting students to memorization and recitation. Encouraging students to engage in meaningful skill training through the practical application of learned language chunks and grammatical knowledge is an effective way to improve language ability.

3.2 Uneven Teacher Competence and Significant Urban-Rural Disparities

The competence of English teachers in China's compulsory education is uneven, specifically reflected in significant differences in English language ability and teaching skills. Currently, there is a general lack of clear and unified professional entry standards (such as English proficiency levels) and development levels (such as career ladders for English teachers) for the compulsory English teacher population in China, which to some extent restricts the overall improvement of the teachers' quality. Furthermore, the extensive geography of Chinese society and significant urban-rural and regional disparities have led to great inequalities in English learning conditions between eastern and western regions and between urban and rural schools. This inequality is not only reflected in the allocation of teaching resources but also involves students' family backgrounds, language environments, and other aspects. To narrow this gap, the government, schools, and all sectors of society need to work together to increase investment and support for English education in rural and remote areas, optimize the allocation of educational resources, and promote the realization of educational equity.

3.3 Proliferation of Exam-Oriented Education and Emphasis on Students' Core Competencies

From the perspective of curriculum objectives, on the basis of previously cultivating composite talents, more emphasis is placed on the cultivation of core competencies of students in compulsory education. A practical problem facing China's compulsory education is examinations. China's education belongs to a competitive culture, where access to higher-level educational opportunities is obtained through competitive examinations. Since current language tests have the nature of both intelligence tests and personal trait detection (Cui, 2013), classroom teaching is difficult to reflect on tests, resulting in the proliferation of exam-oriented education.

4. Implementation Path for Curriculum Policies for China's compulsory Education

Curriculum policy, as the core driving force of curriculum reform, plays an important role in guiding

the selection and management of curriculum knowledge in the field of education (Jiang, 2004). Its formulation must comply with national conditions and the goals and needs of talent cultivation. “Borrowing” (copying) curriculum policies from Western countries often fails to effectively address local educational challenges due to cultural and social background differences (Li & Wang, 2016). Therefore, the formulation and adjustment of compulsory education curriculum policies need to be rooted in China’s unique national conditions and talent development needs. Through timely changes and innovations, they should promote the continuous evolution of the compulsory education curriculum and teaching system, thereby nurturing educational experiences, governance models, and discourse systems with Chinese characteristics (Yin, 2020). Curriculum policies have injected strong impetus and solid support into compulsory education reform in five aspects: humanistic value orientation, competency enhancement, content selection, implementation methods, and evaluation systems.

4.1 Humanistic Value Orientation

Documents such as the “Compulsory Education Curriculum Plan and Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition)” issued by the Ministry of Education all emphasize a student-centered approach to promoting students’ comprehensive development. It can be seen that the value orientation of “student-oriented” is gradually occupying a dominant position, and human values are increasingly being paid attention to. The core concept of “student development-oriented” is rooted in profound changes in the political and economic fields and is an inevitable requirement of social progress for the education field. With the deepening of political system reforms, especially the acceleration of political democratization, significant changes have also taken place in compulsory education curriculum policies. During this process, the implementation of the “three-level curriculum management” model, the popularization of the educational concept of “facing all students”, and the emphasis on the principle of “teaching democracy” are closely linked to the development of political democratization, jointly pushing the curriculum policy towards a more open, inclusive, and student-centered direction.

4.2 Curriculum Policies Aiming at Enhancing Human Competencies

The core focus of curriculum policies lies in talent cultivation objectives, and their formulation process is deeply rooted in social development and human development needs, constantly evolving and adjusting with these two factors. In recent years, the formal establishment of the overall framework for the development of key competencies of Chinese students (2016) has set a new benchmark for compulsory education curriculum policies, leading to the in-depth development of educational reform. In 2017, high school curriculum standards based on subject key competencies were successively issued, marking those key competencies have become key elements of compulsory education curriculum policies, occupying a practical position in educational practice in the new era. Currently, China’s compulsory education and teaching field has constructed a modern theoretical system and practical paradigm with distinct Chinese characteristics. These achievements not only enrich the knowledge base of global educational development but also showcase China’s unique experiences and innovative paths in educational governance to the world (Sun, 2018).

4.3 Flexible and Diverse Content Selection

Since the 21st century, policy documents such as the “Outline of Basic Education Curriculum Reform (Trial Implementation)”, the “Experimental Plan for Compulsory Education Curriculum Settings”, and the “English Curriculum Criteria for Regular High School” have all emphasized the implementation of hierarchical management, leveraging various forces, enhancing the flexibility and adaptability of curriculum content, and constructing a curriculum system that meets the needs of social development and adapts to the personalized development of students. In addition, to further optimize compulsory education curriculum system, China has taken multiple measures such as adding comprehensive courses, activity courses, and elective courses. These changes have not only greatly enriched the curriculum content but also effectively broken the monotony and closedness of the traditional curriculum system by adjusting the proportion of elective and compulsory courses. This has promoted the curriculum content structure towards a more reasonable and standardized direction, injecting new vitality into the in-depth development of compulsory education curriculum reform.

4.4 Practice-Oriented Implementation Methods

Curriculum implementation, as a critical link in curriculum reform, plays a role that cannot be ignored. The “Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition)” (hereinafter referred to as the “New Curriculum Standards”) issued by the Ministry of Education on April 21, 2022, states in its curriculum nature that “the compulsory education English curriculum embodies the unity of instrumentality and humanity, featuring basicness, practicality, and comprehensiveness”. In terms of its practicality, the “New Curriculum Standards”, as the national curriculum guidelines for the integration of “teaching-learning-assessment” in compulsory education English courses, provide comprehensive, detailed, and highly operational guidance suggestions for five dimensions: teaching, assessment, textbook compilation, curriculum resource development and utilization, teaching research and training. It also includes corresponding reference cases, which can systematically, scientifically, and effectively guide the implementation of English courses, demonstrating a distinct practical orientation (Wang & Jiang, 2023).

4.5 Comprehensive and Diverse Evaluation Systems

The “Curriculum Standards” issued in 2022 emphasized the need to fully implement the requirements of educational evaluation in the new era, improve outcome evaluation, strengthen process evaluation, explore value-added evaluation, perfect comprehensive evaluation, vigorously promote reforms in evaluation concepts, methods, and approaches, and enhance the quality of examination and evaluation. In summary, China’s compulsory education curriculum has gradually constructed a diverse evaluation system with multiple evaluation subjects, fully leveraging the evaluation function to promote teaching and learning through evaluation, conducting curriculum evaluation at multiple levels and dimensions, and promoting students’ comprehensive development. The optimization of the curriculum evaluation system is notably reflected in the diversification and breadth of evaluation subjects, which are no longer limited to a single perspective but actively incorporate multiple subjects such as teachers,

students themselves, school administrators, and parents, who participate together and promote each other, forming a more comprehensive and three-dimensional evaluation system. The innovation of the evaluation model is also noteworthy, cleverly integrating the essence of outcome evaluation and process evaluation, paying attention to both quantitative assessments of learning outcomes and qualitative analyses of ability development and attitude changes during the learning process. At the same time, the parallel use of absolute evaluation and relative evaluation not only sets unified standards to measure learning outcomes but also accommodates individual differences, encouraging each student to make progress on their basis.

5. Conclusion

This study has constructed a practical pathway that aligns with the actual needs of implementing English curriculum policies in compulsory education, presenting a comprehensive picture of the implementation of English curriculum policies in primary and secondary schools in northwest China. It provides the most authentic educational reference data for stakeholders such as governments, schools, students, and parents. The research findings can also promote the balanced development of the English curriculum in compulsory education in China to a certain extent, further enhancing the fairness of compulsory education. Future research on English curriculum policies for compulsory education in China can proceed in the following directions:

Firstly, future regional strategic decision-making will become an important issue in the research on English curriculum policies in China's compulsory education. We should face up to numerous contradictions in complex environments and achieve diversified and differentiated development within regions. The current school education system and requirements cannot be uniformly applied. In the face of China's extremely uneven regional development characteristics, we must consider the differences in economic, cultural, and educational development across different regions. In-depth research should be conducted on the implementation of English curriculum policies in different regions and educational stages, as well as their impact on foreign language education practice and student development. Comparative studies between countries can also be conducted to analyze successful cases and challenges faced in the formulation and implementation of foreign language curriculum policies in different countries, providing new perspectives and ideas for the reform of English curricula in China.

Secondly, given that existing research is mostly speculative in nature, quantitative and qualitative research methods can be reasonably utilized in the future to investigate teachers' and students' perceptions and attitudes towards English curriculum policies. Special attention should be paid to teachers' experiences and opinions regarding role transformation, teaching method adjustments, and textbook selection during policy implementation, in order to understand teachers' and students' acceptance of foreign language curriculum policies and their feedback on policy implementation, providing a basis for policy adjustment and optimization.

Furthermore, the synergistic relationship between English curriculum policies and other educational

policies deserves attention as well, studying how to integrate English curricula into the overall framework of comprehensive educational reform to achieve the goal of collaborative education more effectively. Scholars in the field of English education should work together to strengthen research on English curricula, providing stronger theoretical and practical support for the innovation and development of foreign language education and making greater contributions to cultivating talents with patriotism and international vision.

Finally, when formulating new English curriculum policies for compulsory education, we should thoroughly summarize valuable experiences, systematically review the practice of compulsory education curriculum reform, summarize and inherit successful practices, and ensure the continuity of curriculum reform. This is also a practical action that China must take to participate in global education governance and contribute Chinese wisdom, experience, and solutions to the development of world education. Some researchers believe that emphasizing top-down design, shifting teaching and learning methods to a student-centered approach, and reforming the evaluation system are typical experiences of compulsory education curriculum reform. Other scholars argue that the golden mean, local stance, practical attitude, and contemporary flavor are the internal logic that determines the path and characteristics of China's compulsory education curriculum reform and development. It is the combined effect of these factors at different levels that makes China's compulsory education curriculum reform both continuous and diverse. Future curriculum policies should guide schools to aim at forming a higher-level talent training system, strive to transform development patterns, make breakthroughs in concept enhancement and management level improvement, adhere to problem-oriented and practice-oriented approaches, activate the internal mechanisms and vitality of school reform, enhance school principals' leadership and teachers' curriculum creativity, and build platforms and open up space for the construction of discipline curricula and the cultivation of discipline characteristics in schools at different levels, enabling the autonomous development of various schools.

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