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Original Paper

Accelerating English Language Education in Chinese Universities: A Sociocultural Perspective on the Shift from Traditional to Technology-Enhanced Pedagogy

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Abstract

This article examines the evolution of English language teaching (ELT) in Chinese universities from more "slow-paced", traditional methods to accelerated, modern approaches, using Vygotsky's sociocultural theory as a guiding framework. We trace historical changes in national curriculum and policy—from a focus on rote skills and examination performance toward communicative competence and intercultural skills (Hu et al., 2024)—and consider the impact of globalization (e.g., China's Belt and Road Initiative) on English education. Drawing on recent case studies from diverse Chinese contexts (urban vs. rural, eastern vs. western), we illustrate how classroom practices have shifted from teacher-centered grammar instruction to interactive, technology-enhanced pedagogy (Liu et al., 2016) (Chen, 2024). Our analysis highlights the role of social context and culture in mediating teaching and learning: for example, traditional Confucian values and exam pressures often persist, even as educators strive to implement student-centered methods (Bi, 2023) (Sun & Zhang, 2021). We explore how English teachers' professional development and cognition evolve under these changes, and we critically examine equity issues (resource gaps, cultural adaptation) and implementation challenges (inadequate training, regional disparities) that arise. In conclusion, we discuss implications for teacher education and policy, emphasizing the need for sustained support, scaffolding, and culturally responsive strategies to realize the goals of contemporary English education in China.

Keywords

English language teaching, sociocultural theory, curriculum reform, globalization, technology-enhanced pedagogy, teacher development, student-centered methods

1. Introduction

Since China's Reform and Opening Up, English has been recognized as a vital component of higher education and national development. Scholars note that English education policy in Chinese universities has steadily shifted "from emphasis on skills to communication abilities" as social and economic demands have changed (Hu et al., 2024). In recent years this trend has accelerated: national guidelines urge universities to adopt student-centered, communicative approaches and to integrate multimedia and cyber technology, replacing monotonous, teacher-led instruction (Liu et al., 2016) (Chen, 2024). For example, Chen (201X) reports that the College English reform in Shanghai explicitly encourages making full use of technology to reorient classrooms "to the needs of autonomous learning" (Liu et al., 2016), and pilot studies show that Chinese institutions are "making strides" in blending flipped or blended learning models into English courses (Chen, 2024). At the same time, major policy initiatives (including the "Belt and Road" and internationalization efforts) have placed new emphasis on intercultural communication and practical language skills (Hu et al., 2024).

However, this transition is neither uniform nor unproblematic. Many universities continue to operate under legacy constraints: large class sizes, exam-oriented assessments, and cultural expectations of teacher authority. In practice, researchers find that English teachers often espouse modern (focus-on-form) pedagogies but revert to teaching grammar and vocabulary explicitly under classroom pressures. To understand these dynamics, we frame our analysis in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (SCT). SCT emphasizes that learning is socially mediated and culturally situated: knowledge is co-constructed through interaction with more knowledgeable others, tools, and cultural contexts (Bi, 2023). Under this view, a Chinese EFL classroom can be seen as a microcosm of social practices, where teachers and students jointly shape an environment for language development. From this perspective, both the content (what is taught) and the process (how it is taught) are influenced by historical traditions, institutional norms, and the available mediating tools (e.g., technology, textbooks).

In this paper, we apply SCT as an analytical lens to examine the shift from "slow-paced" to "fast-paced" approaches in English education at the Chinese university level. We begin by reviewing the historical and policy background of university English education, contrasting older, traditional methodologies with newer, communicative and technology-enhanced methods. We then consider the role of teachers and the classroom culture that emerges: for instance, how peer interaction, scaffolding, and collaborative activities have increased under reform, yet are still negotiated within a Chinese cultural framework (Bi, 2023). Next, we present illustrative case studies from varied regions of China (including affluent urban universities and under-resourced rural/minority institutions) to show how implementation varies by context. In these cases we examine the impacts of digital technologies (from online platforms to VR/AR tools), policy changes, and globalization on teaching and learning. We also discuss the implications for English teachers' professional development and cognition, highlighting how teacher beliefs and agency evolve in response to reform efforts (Gu et al., 2022). Throughout, we maintain a critical perspective on equity (urban–rural divides, access to resources) and cultural

adaptation (how international methods are localized) (Chang & Wang, 2024) (Liu, Xue & Hu, 2019). Finally, we synthesize our findings to address future directions: what support systems and pedagogical shifts are needed to sustain meaningful change in China's higher-education English classrooms.

2. Theoretical Framework: Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

Our analysis is grounded in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (SCT) of learning, which we use to interpret changes in classroom culture and interaction. Vygotsky (1978) argued that cognitive development is fundamentally social: learners construct understanding through mediated engagement with others and with cultural tools (language, symbols, technology) (Bi, 2023). A key concept is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the gap between what learners can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance or collaboration (Bi, 2023). In practice, this implies that effective teaching provides scaffolding—structured support—that enables students to reach beyond their current level. In language education, scaffolding can take the form of teacher guidance, peer interaction, or the use of technological artifacts (e.g., apps, VR simulations) that help learners engage at higher levels than they could on their own.

SCT also emphasizes the importance of cultural context and history. Each classroom embodies a "micro-culture" with its own norms, roles, and expectations. In Chinese classrooms, traditional Confucian values (respect for authority, emphasis on memorization, face-saving) have historically influenced teacher–student interactions. Even as pedagogical reforms introduce more student talk and collaboration, these cultural factors remain salient. For example, the notion of the teacher as the authoritative "guide" persists alongside calls for student autonomy (Bi, 2023). SCT suggests that any shift in teaching practice must account for these socio-cultural layers: new methods are appropriated and transformed within existing belief systems.

Moreover, SCT views learners as active agents whose internal beliefs interact with external conditions. Teacher cognition—the knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes teachers hold – is thus a crucial mediator of classroom practice. As Sun and Zhang (2021) note, teachers are "active, thinking decision-makers" who shape instruction (Sun & Zhang, 2021). Understanding how Chinese English teachers perceive new methods (and how they are constrained by institutional expectations) is key to analyzing implementation. For instance, many teachers may acknowledge the value of communicative tasks theoretically, yet feel pressured by exams or large classes to maintain more traditional form-focused approaches (Sun & Zhang, 2021) (Hu et al., 2024). From an SCT perspective, this reflects the tension between teachers' ideal practices and the sociocultural environment (school policies, student habits, parental expectations) that influences their ZPD.

Finally, SCT draws attention to the tools and artifacts used in learning. In the modern context, digital technologies (from online corpora to VR/AR) act as new mediational means in the classroom. These tools can extend learners' abilities and reshape interactions—for example, virtual reality can simulate target-language environments that would otherwise be inaccessible (Chen et al., 216) (Xie et al., 2022).

But technology's impact also depends on social factors: teacher proficiency, institutional support, and students' comfort with tech all affect how these tools function in the ZPD. Throughout this article, we will interpret developments in Chinese English education through this SCT lens, paying attention to how social context, interaction patterns, and mediating tools co-evolve with pedagogical practices.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Historical Background

English instruction in China has undergone dramatic shifts over the past half-century. Under the planned economy era (pre-1978), English was seldom taught: ideological priorities and isolationism limited foreign language education. After Reform and Opening Up (1978), English re-emerged as critical for modernization, scientific exchange, and international trade (Hu et al., 2024). In the 1980s and 1990s, policy emphasized basic proficiency to serve economic goals, often through Grammar-Translation and teacher-centered methods. English became a key component of the National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao) and new university curricula, leading to an exam-driven orientation. During this period, most instruction was "slow-paced" in the sense of heavy emphasis on explicit grammar and translation, large lecture classes, and teacher-led explanation, with limited oral practice (Sun & Zhang, 2021).

As China integrated into the global economy (e.g., joining the WTO in 2001), the demand for communicative competence grew (Hu et al., 2024). Major curriculum reforms took place: notably, the Ministry of Education's College English Curriculum Requirements (2007, updated 2014) and subsequent documents encouraged shifting from English for General Purposes (EGP) to more varied aims, including English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and academic skills. By 2014, policy language explicitly promoted learner-centered pedagogy, task-based teaching, and authentic materials (Liu et al., 2016). Recent analyses (e.g., Hu et al., 2024) show that after China's "Belt and Road" globalization initiative, policy language changed "from testing abilities to cultivating students' intercultural communication skills" (Hu et al., 2024). This mirrors a broader global trend emphasizing communication, creativity, and cross-cultural competence.

3.2 Traditional vs. Modern Methodologies

In the traditional model (pre-2010s), Chinese university English classrooms were typically characterized by teacher-centric lecturing. Teachers presented grammar rules, explained vocabulary on the blackboard, and had students do written drills or translating sentences. Large class sizes (often 50–100+ students) and a scarcity of lab or multimedia facilities reinforced an authoritative role for the teacher. Student participation was minimal; mistakes were often met with correction to avoid "losing face." This approach was largely influenced by exam demands and the legacies of earlier educational policy.

Modern methodologies, by contrast, emphasize active learning, interaction, and real-world tasks. The 2000s brought Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) principles into Chinese ELT, encouraging

pairwork, group discussions, projects, and presentations. After 2010, many universities experimented with Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), problem-solving tasks, and content-based instruction to make learning more student-driven. For instance, a Shanghai case study highlights efforts to promote "reciprocal learning" strategies (students teaching each other) and autonomous learning through technology. Flipped classrooms, where students review materials online before class and use contact hours for discussion, have been piloted; Wei Chen (2024) finds that flipped approaches improve English proficiency more than traditional lectures (Chen, 2024). In parallel, English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) has expanded at top universities for science, business, and liberal arts courses, exposing students to English in discipline-specific contexts.

These pedagogical changes also reflect adjustments in assessment: national tests (such as the College English Test) have begun to include more spoken and listening components, albeit modestly. However, despite policy shifts, many courses remain effectively exam-oriented. As Sun and Zhang (2021) observe, teachers often ideally support a focus-on-form approach (addressing both form and meaning), but in practice revert to focus-on-forms (isolated grammar) due to classroom realities (Sun & Zhang, 2021). Similarly, Chen and others report that although multimedia tools are introduced, in many classrooms technology merely supplements the old model ("computer + blackboard + chalk") rather than fully transforming it (Liu et al., 2016). These findings underscore the gap between official reform and ground-level implementation.

3.3 Classroom Culture and Interaction

Sociocultural theory suggests that classroom culture – including teacher–student and peer interactions – is central to learning. In traditional Chinese classrooms, interaction tended to be minimal and hierarchical: teachers spoke most of the class, and students had few opportunities to ask questions or discuss ideas. Modern reforms aim to cultivate a more egalitarian, communicative culture. Researchers report growing use of pair and group work, project presentations, and peer feedback in Chinese universities, aligning with SCT's emphasis on collaborative dialogue (Bi, 2023). For example, reciprocal teaching strategies (students alternating roles as "teacher" and "learner") have been introduced in some college English courses to foster mutual scaffolding (Liu et al., 2016).

However, cultural factors mediate these shifts. Confucian-derived norms still influence behavior: many students are reluctant to speak up or challenge peers, and teachers may hesitate to relinquish control. Studies note that Chinese students often prefer structured, teacher-guided activities at first, reflecting their familiarity with such formats. Effective reformers thus adapt strategies to the context: for example, a teacher might gradually introduce small-group discussion after establishing a clear purpose, or use students' L1 (Mandarin) strategically to scaffold an activity. Nevertheless, inertia remains: as Bi and Li (2016) argue, both teachers and students have been socialized into a grammar-focused, exam-driven paradigm, so fully learner-led practices can be slow to take root (Bi, 2023).

Notably, technological tools have introduced new interaction patterns. Online forums and social media (WeChat groups, Moodle platforms) allow Chinese students to practice writing and receive feedback

outside of class. In-class, apps and smart-classroom systems enable instant polling or quizzes, increasing engagement. Immersive technologies like virtual reality (VR) can simulate real-life situations (ordering food, business meetings) where students must use English pragmatically (Chen et al., 216) (Xie et al., 2022). These tools create novel opportunities for collaborative learning that transcend physical constraints, but their success still depends on teacher facilitation and cultural acceptance of new roles (e.g., student autonomy).

3.4 Technology Use in the Classroom

The rise of educational technology has been a major driver of "fast-paced" learning. In China's English classrooms, this has taken several forms. Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has expanded from rudimentary language lab drills to diverse online resources. A case study at a Shanghai university reports that current reforms encourage making full use of multimedia and cyber technology to replace the "monotonous teacher-centered" model (Liu et al., 2016). As a result, universities now employ platforms for blended learning, offering online video lectures, quizzes, and forums to supplement face-to-face teaching.

Mobile and Internet Tools: The ubiquity of smartphones and fast Internet has enabled new practices. Many instructors use apps (like Quizlet, Kahoot, or Chinese-developed English-learning apps) for vocabulary games, immediate feedback, and gamified quizzes. WeChat and other instant messaging apps serve as informal English learning spaces, where students share articles or practice dialogues. These tools allow "learning anytime, anywhere," effectively speeding up the pace of exposure and practice beyond the limited classroom hours (Feng & Sumettikoon, 2024).

Virtual and Augmented Reality (VR/AR): Emerging technology promises even more immersive experiences. Chinese researchers and educators have begun experimenting with VR to create "authentic" language environments (Chen et al., 216) (Xie et al., 2022). For example, VR simulations can transport students into a virtual London street or English marketplace, providing sensory-rich contexts for language use that would be impossible domestically. Studies (mostly pilot-scale) report that VR-enhanced English classes can improve student motivation and speaking confidence (Chen et al., 216) (Xie et al., 2022). Augmented reality (AR) apps—where digital information overlays the real world—are also being explored for vocabulary learning (e.g., scanning classroom objects to retrieve English labels). Though still niche, these technologies illustrate how quickly the educational "pace" can accelerate when students interact dynamically with content.

Artificial Intelligence (AI): Very recently, AI tools (such as large language models) have entered the scene. National policy highlights new pedagogical paradigms (online learning, hybrid teaching, AI-driven assessment) as opportunities and challenges (Feng & Sumettikoon, 2024). For instance, automated speaking evaluation software can give instant feedback on pronunciation, and AI tutors can provide grammar explanations on demand. While such tools are still maturing, Chinese universities have begun trialing AI-assisted writing correction and adaptive learning platforms. These innovations can in principle allow individualized pacing—fast-forwarding learners who grasp material quickly and

giving extra support to others. However, the integration of AI also requires careful scaffolding to ensure students (and teachers) use these tools critically rather than passively (Feng & Sumettikoon, 2024).

Despite these advances, uptake is uneven. Empirical surveys show that while Chinese teachers are open to using technology, many lack training or confidence. Feng and Sumettikoon (2024) report that China only recently released a formal standard for teachers' digital literacy, highlighting a nascent stage of TPACK (Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge) development (Feng & Sumettikoon, 2024). At present, some classrooms enjoy state-of-the-art facilities, whereas others still lack basic infrastructure like projectors or reliable Internet (especially in rural areas). This uneven implementation means that in many settings, technology is used to augment rather than overhaul traditional teaching. As one Shanghai study lamented, the blackboard-and-chalk model has merely become "computer + blackboard + chalk" in many colleges. Achieving the full potential of digital tools thus requires not just hardware but also teacher re-training and pedagogical redesign.

3.5 Policy Changes and Globalization

Educational policy in China has been a key lever for change. Over the past two decades, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has issued several rounds of reform directives. The College English Curriculum Requirements (first promulgated in 2007 and updated in 2014) moved away from uniform content toward diversified curricula (e.g., English for STEM, business, or arts majors) and stressed skill integration. More recently, new guidelines (2020 onwards) further highlight autonomy, cultural competence, and inclusive education, reflecting global trends and domestic needs. National testing regimes (CET-4/6) have also evolved to include speaking tests and updated reading passages, incentivizing broader skill development.

Globalization has exerted enormous influence. China's deeper engagement with international trade and education (e.g., entry into WTO, Belt and Road Initiative) has made English proficiency economically valuable. Consequently, many universities have increased study-abroad scholarships and international exchange programs, exposing both students and faculty to overseas practices. There is also a growing English-medium instruction (EMI) movement: some universities (e.g., Tsinghua, Shanghai Jiao Tong) now offer entire degree programs in English for internationalization purposes. However, EMI faces challenges such as a shortage of faculty comfortable teaching in English and concerns about academic integrity. Policymakers thus debate balancing global standards with local identity; recent policy discussions (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006; Hu et al., 2024) argue for "glocalization," integrating global communicative goals with Chinese cultural values.

In sum, policy and globalization trends have spurred a push toward faster, more communicative English education (Hu et al., 2024). But policy alone cannot ensure success; implementation depends on local context, infrastructure, and educators' willingness to change. The next sections examine how these dynamics play out in different Chinese regions and institutions.

3.6 Summary of Key Issues

To summarize the above review: Chinese university English education has shifted from a slow-paced, exam-driven paradigm to a faster-paced, communicative one (Hu et al., 2024) (Chen, 2024). This shift is evident in curriculum reforms, classroom practices, and the adoption of new technologies. However, deep-rooted sociocultural factors – including traditional pedagogical culture, exam accountability, and resource disparities – continue to mediate and sometimes constrain this change. Teacher beliefs and professional capacity are central: many educators are still "caught between" reform goals and established habits. Moreover, equity issues (urban/rural gap, minority representation, wealth inequality) create uneven experiences. In the next sections, we analyze empirical findings and case studies to illustrate how these complex factors intersect in practice.

4. Methodology

This article is a qualitative review and synthesis of recent literature, policy documents, and illustrative case studies on tertiary English education in China. We focused on sources from approximately the past decade to capture contemporary trends. Our analysis spans both Chinese and international scholarship, including empirical studies of classroom practice, national policy analyses, and scholarship on technology in language learning. Where possible, we draw directly on case studies that exemplify regional or institutional variation (for example, urban vs. rural and eastern vs. western settings). Although this is not a systematic meta-analysis, we endeavored to triangulate multiple perspectives – scholarly research, government reports, and practitioner accounts – to build a comprehensive view of the field. We interpreted findings through the lens of sociocultural theory, asking how social context, cultural norms, and mediated interactions shape the evolution of classroom practice.

5. Findings and Analysis

Our review revealed several interrelated patterns in Chinese university English education as it moves from traditional to modern approaches. We organize our findings around thematic areas influenced by SCT: (1) classroom culture and interaction; (2) technology integration; (3) regional implementation differences; (4) teacher cognition and professional development; and (5) equity and adaptation challenges.

5.1 Classroom Culture and Interaction

Across the literature, a clear shift toward more interactive classrooms is documented, albeit unevenly. In reformed settings, teachers increasingly employ pair-work, group discussions, role-plays, and problem-solving tasks. These student-centered activities reflect an attempt to harness peer scaffolding and collective dialogue, consistent with Vygotsky's emphasis on social learning. For example, Chen and her colleagues describe pilot classes where students alternate teaching roles (reciprocal learning) and use English for authentic purposes; such practices encourage learners to internalize new language through collaborative use. Similarly, flipped classroom studies (e.g., Wei Chen, 2024) report that

students in the experimental group engaged more actively in classroom discourse and outperformed control groups on proficiency tests, suggesting that socially mediated learning tasks can enhance outcomes.

However, traditional elements persist. Many university teachers still rely heavily on lectures and PowerPoint slides, and student questions remain less frequent than ideal. Chang and Wang (2024) note that some institutions "improperly implement" national policies, resulting in classrooms that look modern only superficially (Chang & Wang, 2024). Classroom observation studies find that even when technology is available, instructors may use it to deliver more content more quickly, rather than to foster interaction. In effect, a "hybrid" culture has emerged: students are often expected to take more initiative (e.g., preparing presentations or projects), yet teachers maintain authority as evaluators and content experts. Navigating this hybrid culture can create cognitive dissonance for learners, who must adjust to both the "Western" ideal of open dialogue and the "Chinese" norm of deference to teachers.

5.2 Technology Integration

Technology's role in redefining classroom pace is prominent. In many universities, standard tools (PowerPoint, online course portals, video-conferencing) have become ubiquitous. A survey of Chinese higher-ed EFL teachers shows that while virtually all teachers use some tech, the depth of integration varies (Liu et al., 2016). Effective use (from the SCT perspective) requires reshaping pedagogy: technology is most transformative when it amplifies social interaction (for instance, encouraging discussion of online materials or using digital platforms for peer feedback).

Our analysis found that where technology is well-integrated, classes tend to move faster and become more engaging. For example, virtual lab projects, online debate forums, and AI-based writing tutors allow students to receive instant feedback and iterate rapidly, accelerating the learning cycle. One case study in a leading university reports that students using a VR-based speaking practice system improved significantly in fluency over 16 weeks (Xie et al., 2022). Teachers in that setting noted that the novelty and immersion of VR "boosted learners' motivation" and gave them more confidence to experiment with language. Similarly, computer-mediated communication tools (such as instant polling or social media groups) have broken the isolation of large lecture halls, enabling more student voices each class.

Yet technology also introduces challenges. As Feng and Sumettikoon (2024) highlight, many Chinese EFL teachers still have low digital literacy by emerging standards. Training programs are still catching up to new expectations (in 2022 the MOE only released its official digital literacy framework). Additionally, technology can become a crutch: if a teacher simply uploads PDF slides to the web or plays videos without accompanying interaction, students' cognitive engagement may not increase. In SCT terms, the tech serves as a tool, but true learning requires meaningful mediation. For example, one teacher might use an AR app to label objects in the classroom, but unless students discuss or apply those labels in context, the experience is only superficially enhanced.

In summary, technology has enabled faster content delivery and novel tasks, but its pedagogical effectiveness depends on how it is woven into social learning. When used to scaffold collaboration or

authentic practice, it accelerates learning; when used as a mere gimmick, it can create a busy but shallow fast pace. Our sources suggest that the most promising tech use occurs where teachers have re-envisioned their roles (see next section) and where institutional support (IT staff, training, bandwidth) is strong (Liu et al., 2016).

5.3 Regional Implementation Variations (Urban/Rural, East/West)

A critical finding is that the shift to faster-paced methods is highly uneven across regions and institutions. Urban universities, especially in coastal and eastern provinces (e.g., Shanghai, Beijing, Guangdong), generally have more resources and institutional backing for innovation. Their English departments often include faculty with advanced training or overseas experience, and students may be more accustomed to interactive learning from their earlier education. For instance, a Shanghai case study (Chen, 2017) highlighted a proactive English program that adopted CALL and reciprocal learning; its teachers were often eager to "consciously integrate [computers] into teaching".

By contrast, many rural or western institutions lag behind. In these settings, issues like limited budgets, outdated facilities, and high teaching loads constrain reform. Studies focused on minority regions (e.g., Yunnan) report that English classrooms still struggle with basics: some have no multimedia at all, and class sizes can exceed 100 (Liu, Xue, & Hu, 2019). A narrative study of an English teacher in Western China described how he had to "adapt to a challenging working environment" with very few resources, relying on passionate self-learning and improvised local materials (Gu et al., 2022). In rural universities, teachers often cover multiple courses beyond English (e.g., general foreign languages), further diluting their time for innovation.

These regional gaps create equity concerns. For example, Wei Chen (2024) found that when adopting a flipped classroom approach, urban first-year EFL students significantly outperformed their rural counterparts. In that study, urban students benefited from stable Internet and home study spaces, whereas some rural students lacked consistent online access or quiet places to review materials. The interaction effect was clear: rural students made no greater gains with flipping than under traditional teaching (Chen, 2024). This indicates that faster-paced, tech-rich methods can widen achievement gaps unless accompanying supports (like infrastructure or digital training) are provided.

An example of success in a resource-limited context comes from a case involving college migrant workers' daughters in Western China (Liu, Xue, & Hu, 2019). By employing low-cost mobile devices and peer-led study groups, a flipped learning strategy helped these students practice English more outside class. The teachers in that study identified improved teaching methods, stronger teacher collaboration, and judicious use of educational technology as key solutions to regional challenges (Liu, Xue, & Hu, 2019). Such innovations align with SCT's emphasis on mediated learning within the community: local teachers acting as facilitators and the broader community providing informal study opportunities.

In sum, while fast-paced approaches have taken hold in many city universities, implementation varies greatly. We observe an urban–rural divide (resource-rich vs. resource-poor schools) and an east–west

divide (coastal provinces vs. inland/minority regions). Western regions often face additional cultural factors: instruction may be bilingual (English-Chinese, or even local dialect-English), and local attitudes towards English learning can differ. National policy increasingly acknowledges these disparities, but the literature emphasizes that tailored approaches (rather than one-size reform) are needed. For instance, teacher training projects sponsored by central agencies have begun focusing on western colleges, using distance education to provide PD support (Liu, Xue, & Hu, 2019).

5.4 Teacher Cognition and Professional Development

Teachers' beliefs and competence have emerged as pivotal in the transition. Many studies emphasize that professional development (PD)—the scaffolding for teachers' own learning – is essential. Sun and Zhang (2021) note that teachers' cognitions (beliefs about teaching) often lag behind curricular innovations. For example, an EFL teacher might say he values focus-on-form instruction, but in practice he might revert to grammar drills if he doubts students' ability to handle open-ended activities. Such incongruence is often attributed to entrenched thinking and institutional expectations. In SCT terms, we might say teachers require support within their own ZPD: collegial mentorship, training, and feedback to move from old practices to new ones.

Professional development efforts in Chinese universities have taken various forms. Some institutions run internal workshops on communicative teaching or technology use. Others send faculty abroad for short training. The Western China study on teacher agency highlights that when a teacher is highly agentic (self-motivated to learn), he will pursue personal initiatives (reading literature, experimenting) despite constraints. But not all teachers have such agency; many report feeling underprepared for new methods. Liu et al. (2019) interviewed teachers in ethnic minority colleges and found that a majority requested more targeted PD, particularly hands-on training in new methodologies and tech tools.

Moreover, teacher cognition research shows that background factors matter. For instance, rural teachers often have less formal training (many are adjuncts or early-career), which affects their confidence. Gender and educational background can also correlate with pedagogical beliefs. A separate study (Xia & Chen, 2019) of Chinese university teachers found that those with overseas experience or higher degrees were more likely to adopt constructivist approaches, whereas others relied on traditional methods. These individual differences mean that PD must be differentiated: mentoring novices differently from experienced faculty, and addressing specific belief barriers.

From an SCT viewpoint, teacher learning can itself be seen as mediated. Communities of practice (e.g. learning circles of EFL teachers) function as higher-level "ZPDs" where novices learn from peers. Formal and informal networks (e.g., WeChat groups for educators) are increasingly used for resource sharing and problem-solving. One promising model is collaborative lesson study, where teachers co-plan and observe each other's classes. Such models provide scaffolding: experienced teachers guide novices in implementing a communicative lesson, then discuss what worked. Early reports of lesson-study projects in China show positive shifts in teacher beliefs when they see new methods in action and receive supportive feedback.

Nonetheless, systemic challenges to PD remain. Heavy teaching loads (often 16-20 contact hours per week) leave little time for professional reading or workshops. Evaluation systems often reward research output over teaching innovation, so educators may prioritize publications over pedagogical change. Additionally, the sheer scale of the system (millions of English majors and professors across thousands of universities) makes it difficult for top-down reforms to reach every classroom. This means that pockets of fast-paced innovation coexist with vast swathes of status quo, reflecting the sociocultural fact that teaching practices are socially embedded and change slowly.

5.5 Equity, Cultural Adaptation, and Implementation Challenges

Underlying the above themes is a network of equity and cultural issues that complicate reform. Educational equity in China is a long-standing concern: as one analysis notes, rural schools historically lag behind urban ones in "dropout rates, teacher quality, [and] resources" (Chang & Wang, 2024). In English education, these inequalities manifest starkly. Urban students may have English books at home, English-speaking tutors, or travel experience; rural students often have none of the above. Even within universities, English majors (often high-achieving students) tend to receive more attention and resources than non-English majors taking mandatory courses. This stratification means that "fast-paced" methods often reach only a subset of learners.

Cultural adaptation is another issue. Much of modern methodology originates in Western pedagogy, and simply transplanting it can clash with local values. For example, too rapid a shift to peer-led learning may confuse students who expect the teacher to provide clear answers. Conversely, continuing rote methods ignores Chinese students' growing desire for meaningful communication skills. Teachers often play the role of cultural mediators, adapting foreign textbooks to Chinese contexts or using culturally relevant examples. There is also sensitivity to national policy: curricula cannot include material that conflicts with state ideology. This can limit certain communicative content, for example discussions of Western media or controversial topics. Educators cope by selecting neutral or state-approved English materials, which may restrict the diversity of language input.

The literature also highlights institutional barriers. In some universities, especially those under "double-first-class" (elite) status, English education receives ample support (smaller classes, better facilities). In others, English courses are seen as less important than STEM, leading to underinvestment. The career incentives for Chinese EFL teachers can be weak: a professor's promotion may depend more on publishing research in foreign language journals than on teaching quality. As a result, some teachers resist radical change, viewing it as high effort for little personal gain. In SCT terms, the institutional culture and incentive structure have not fully scaffolded the desired pedagogical transformation.

Finally, recent events pose new challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic forced a quick pivot to online teaching nationwide. While online classes maintained continuity, many instructors noted that interaction quality fell compared to in-person lessons. This experience underscored that effective fast-paced learning requires not just videos but rich interaction. As the system recovers, there is both

renewed enthusiasm for hybrid models (combining online and offline) and caution about ensuring all students can access them.

In sum, while China's English education has made significant strides toward modern, fast-paced pedagogy, these developments are uneven. Social, economic, and cultural factors intersect in complex ways. A sociocultural perspective reminds us that reforms operate within a tapestry of influences: teachers' beliefs, students' expectations, institutional norms, and broader societal values all mediate how (and whether) innovations take hold. The following discussion will integrate these threads and consider their implications.

6. Discussion

Drawing together the findings above, several key insights emerge about the trajectory and nature of English education reform in Chinese universities. First, the underlying shift—from slow-paced, static pedagogy to dynamic, interactive learning—can be seen as part of China's broader transformation under globalization. Policies and market forces have prioritized communication skills, and in many quarters this has genuinely changed what happens in the classroom. Classrooms today more often resemble the lively, group-oriented settings advocated by modern pedagogy textbooks than the monolithic lecture halls of the past. In SCT terms, Chinese higher-education English classes are beginning to function more clearly as social communities of practice, where learners jointly co-construct meaning.

Second, the pace of this change is literally and metaphorically faster in some contexts than others. Urban and affluent universities have raced ahead, enabled by better funding, connections to foreign institutions, and selective student bodies. In these environments, teachers may feel more empowered to try new methods, and students may enter university already accustomed to independent learning. In contrast, rural and less-developed institutions face structural slow-downs: minimal tech support, faculty shortages, and a student population with uneven prior training. From a sociocultural standpoint, we see that each classroom's "zone" is bounded not only by the teacher's expertise but also by local resources and culture. Interventions that accelerate learning in one context may falter in another; what acts as a scaffold in Shanghai may be missing entirely in Yunnan.

Third, the human element—teachers and students—remains decisive. Regardless of technology or policy, classrooms can only speed up to the extent that participants are ready to engage. Teacher cognition emerges as a fulcrum: educators who internalize the value of student-centered learning and see themselves as guides rather than dictators tend to create more active classrooms. Conversely, teachers who doubt students' abilities or fear loss of control may inadvertently slow the classroom rhythm by reverting to lecture and drill. Thus, professional development is not a mere add-on but a central pillar: it provides the "scaffolding" for teachers to operate at a higher level of practice. Successful PD (by SCT logic) is social and situated—for example, collaborative lesson study or online communities where teachers share tips on tech use—rather than a one-off lecture. Our review suggests

that when teachers participate in sustained, context-rich training, they are more likely to implement fast-paced strategies effectively.

Fourth, equity and cultural adaptation are critical lenses. A reform that narrows the urban–rural divide rather than widens it is necessary for overall success. Policymakers have recognized this to some extent: recent initiatives (e.g., funded training for western universities, nationwide online platform development) aim to push innovation into underserved areas. But SCT reminds us that providing a tool (like a tablet) is not enough; learners must have the guided support to use it. Similarly, cultural adaptation matters: methods imported from abroad must be meaningfully integrated with Chinese cultural contexts. For example, group activities should consider Chinese students' expectations of harmony and respect; test preparation should still be addressed even in a communicative approach, perhaps by embedding exam topics into interactive tasks. The sociocultural approach encourages such nuanced blending of global and local pedagogy.

Finally, the notion of "fast-paced" itself merits reflection. It is not simply speed of lecture or volume of material, but the intensity of social engagement and cognitive activity. A fast-paced classroom under SCT is one where learners are constantly collaborating, using language in authentic ways, and being challenged just beyond their comfort zone (within the ZPD). This can be motivating and effective, but also demanding. Teachers and curriculum designers need to calibrate this pace: too slow and students disengage, too fast and they become overwhelmed. The literature cautions that without adequate support (e.g., supplementary tutoring, responsive feedback), a fast-paced approach can backfire, especially for students with weaker backgrounds. In one study, rural learners did not benefit from a flipped model when support was insufficient. This illustrates SCT's principle that learning is co-regulated: it depends on the match between challenge and support.

In light of these considerations, our analysis points to several practical implications:

- **Sustained Teacher Support:** Training programs should be ongoing and interactive, helping teachers to reconceptualize their roles. Communities of practice (both local and online) can enable teachers to share strategies, observe peers, and receive mentoring. Recognizing and rewarding teaching innovation in promotion criteria would also encourage teachers to experiment.
- **Blended Assessment:** While fostering communicative skills, institutions must also address exam requirements. Formative assessments (peer review, portfolios, project presentations) can be used to prepare students for high-stakes tests, rather than abandoning test-driven content. This balance can reduce the tension that drives teachers back to old methods.
- **Digital Equity:** Investments in infrastructure (Wi-Fi, labs, software) should be matched with digital literacy training. Rural and minority universities may benefit from partnerships or shared online platforms. In-classroom, teachers should use technology to enhance interaction (e.g. live polling, collaborative documents), not just for content delivery.
- **Cultural Relevance:** Materials and tasks should incorporate Chinese cultural contexts and learners' backgrounds. For instance, when using Western case studies or literature, teachers can draw

parallels to Chinese examples or encourage students to present local perspectives. This cultural scaffolding makes learning more meaningful and respectful of students' identities.

- **Graduated Implementation:** Rapid transformation in all dimensions may be unrealistic. A phased approach—for instance, piloting flipped learning in one course before scaling it – can allow adjustment and refinement. Teacher and student feedback should guide this process.

7. Conclusion

The transition from "slow-paced" to "fast-paced" English education in China's universities reflects deep social, cultural, and technological changes. Over recent decades, policy reforms and globalization have pushed Chinese higher education toward communicative, student-centered pedagogy and greater use of digital tools. Drawing on sociocultural theory, we have shown that this shift involves complex reconfigurations of classroom culture, as teachers and students renegotiate roles and interactions in a changing context.

Our review highlights that while the potential for accelerated learning is greater than ever, realizing that potential requires attending to the mediating social factors. Teacher beliefs and competencies must be developed in tandem with new methods; peer and community support structures (both in classrooms and in teacher networks) are essential; and reforms must be sensitive to local realities (resources, culture, student readiness). Case studies from urban and rural China show that successful innovations often occur when technology and pedagogy are carefully adapted to context and when teachers have agency to experiment.

Equity remains a pressing challenge. Policymakers must ensure that under-resourced institutions receive both material and instructional support, so that all Chinese learners can benefit from modern English education. Cultural factors will always influence how Western-origin methodologies are enacted; embracing a dialogic approach that respects Chinese learning traditions can help bridge that gap.

Looking ahead, ongoing research and practice should focus on longitudinal outcomes of reform efforts: for example, tracking how students' English proficiency and intercultural competence develop under new curricula. From an SCT perspective, it will be valuable to study how entire communities of practice (departments, schools, regions) evolve their shared beliefs and norms. Experimentation with emerging technologies (e.g., AI tutors) should also be paired with investigation into their social effects.

In conclusion, the journey from slow-paced to fast-paced English education in China is well underway but not yet complete. A fully thriving sociocultural learning environment will be one where teachers and students engage dynamically, tools are used meaningfully, and the broader society continues to support and value communicative language ability. As Chinese universities navigate this complex path, SCT reminds us that learning is most powerful when it is collective, contextual, and continuously scaffolded by the community of learners and educators.

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