Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

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STUDENT NAME: Wenrui Yin

STUDENT NUMBER: 2319170

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The Implementation Efficacy of Public English Policies in Chinese Universities: A Qualitative Analysis of Teachers' Perspectives

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

The implementation of public English policies in Chinese universities has gained prominence amid the nation's globalisation-driven educational reforms. While studies such as Hu & McKay (2012) emphasise the economic imperatives behind these policies, there remains a critical gap in understanding how teachers mediate policy mandates within classrooms. Existing research predominantly focuses on macro-level policy design or student outcomes, neglecting the role of teacher agency, that is, the capacity of educators to reinterpret, adapt, or resist policies, as theorised by Priestley et al. (2015). The present study addresses this gap by investigating: How do Chinese university English teachers navigate and adapt public English policies in their pedagogical practices?

China's public English education policies have undergone a fundamental transformation over recent decades. This represents a significant shift from efficiency rationality (standardisation and exam orientation) to public governance (holistic development). The historical trajectory of these reforms reveals a complex evolution that mirrors China's broader socio-economic development and international positioning. During the 1980s and 1990s, English education policies were characterised by efficiency rationality, emphasising standardised testing, basic proficiency achievements, and instrumental approaches primarily designed to meet immediate economic development needs. The focus was predominantly on building a workforce capable of engaging with international markets together with absorbing foreign technology and knowledge.

However, as China's economic power expanded and its global influence grew, particularly following the initiation of the Belt and Road Initiative, English education policies began reflecting a more sophisticated understanding of language education's role in national development. The transition toward public governance approaches, which became particularly pronounced after 2013, represented a paradigmatic shift toward comprehensive human development that balances international communication competence with cultural confidence and ideological education. Recent computational analysis confirms this evolution, with Li et al. (2024) demonstrating that China's English education policy has systematically shifted from testing-oriented approaches to cultivating intercultural communication skills to meet Belt and Road Initiative requirements.

This evolution culminated in the emergence of *Curriculum Ideological and Political Education* as a central policy objective, fundamentally altering the landscape of English education in Chinese universities. Originally piloted in Shanghai universities in 2014 and mandated nationwide through the 2020 Ministry of Education Guidelines on Curriculum Ideological and Political Construction in Higher Education, this initiative requires systematic integration of socialist core values into all courses, including English language instruction. Unlike traditional political education courses that operate as separate curriculum components, *Curriculum Ideological and Political Education* demands that ideological elements be "organically woven" into language teaching content, thereby creating dual objectives for English educators who must simultaneously develop students' linguistic competence and ideological consciousness.

The 2020 revision of the College English Teaching Guidelines represents the most comprehensive policy reform in Chinese university English education, establishing three fundamental shifts that have reshaped pedagogical approaches nationwide. First, the Guidelines transition from purely instrumental orientations toward humanistic values as "major value orientation" alongside practical communication skills. Second, they introduce three-level teaching requirements (basic, improving, and developing objectives) to accommodate diverse student proficiency levels across China's stratified higher education system. Third, they mandate an integrated approach combining English for General Purposes (EGP), English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and English for Intercultural Communication (EIC) as equally weighted curriculum components.

Contemporary research validates the complexity of these reforms while highlighting implementation challenges. Lei & Medwell (2022) found that despite the comprehensive nature of new curriculum standards, many English teachers expressed uncertainty about reform implications and confusion about new professional development demands. This could indicate significant gaps between policy design and teacher preparedness.

1.2 Problem Statement and Research Aims

The core problem addressed via this study lies in the persistent gap between top-level policy design and grassroots classroom practice in Chinese university English education. While national policies articulate ambitious objectives for holistic student development, intercultural competence, and ideological education, the translation of these mandates into classroom realities remains problematic. This implementation gap is particularly pronounced given the complexity of recent reforms that require teachers to balance multiple, sometimes competing objectives: linguistic skill development, test preparation pressures, intercultural communication competence, and ideological education integration.

Implementation barriers continue to compromise the effectiveness of English education reforms in Chinese higher education contexts. Luo's (2023) comprehensive analysis of China's curriculum reform landscape identifies multiple systemic constraints that impede effective policy implementation. The study reveals that structural factors, including China's high-stakes examination system (Gaokao), insufficient teacher professional development, and inadequate evaluation mechanisms, create significant obstacles to reform success. Additionally, Luo documents how ideological conflicts surrounding educational reform have fostered conservative attitudes among practitioners, with many teachers demonstrating reluctance to embrace curriculum innovations due to competing pressures and unclear implementation guidance. These findings highlight the critical need to understand how teachers negotiate competing demands while implementing national policies within their specific institutional contexts.

Additional empirical evidence strongly supports the existence of this implementation challenge. Wang (2022) conducted comprehensive research with 353 high school English teachers and found that while the majority exhibited positive attitudes toward reform implementation, teachers simultaneously displayed constrained agency in practice due to structural barriers including heavy workloads, examination pressures, and insufficient institutional support. That research revealed that reform-related experiences proved more influential than future goals in shaping teachers' agency, and emphasised the critical importance of understanding teachers' lived experiences in policy implementation processes.

The integration of Curriculum Ideological and Political Education into English teaching presents particularly complex challenges. Research confirms that teachers report a lack of ready-made materials, with Deng & Wang's (2023) mixed-methods study of English language teaching materials at a Chinese university revealing that only 37.62% of teachers found existing resources adequate for ideological education integration. Deng & Wang (2023) found that teachers report significant time and effort challenges in locating appropriate English materials that align with socialist core values and Chinese social culture for CIPE implementation. This material shortage requires teachers to develop original ideological content and assessment tools independently. Furthermore, a balancing act exists between maintaining course authenticity while incorporating political elements, creating pedagogical tensions, particularly given that most English materials reflect Western values and thus require careful counterbalancing. Additionally, research demonstrates that many teachers lack sufficient ideological and theoretical knowledge necessary for effective integration. Li & Guan (2020) found that nearly two-thirds of English teachers lacked adequate familiarity with ideological and political theory content and were unable to articulate socialist core values

comprehensively. These knowledge deficits create capacity building imperatives that institutions struggle to address systematically.

Furthermore, persistent institutional tier disparities in resource allocation continue to shape implementation outcomes differently across university contexts. Empirical research confirms that China's higher education system is characterised by significant stratification, with elite "985" and "211" universities receiving substantially more funding and resources compared to regular undergraduate institutions. Between 1995 and 2008, the 112 universities admitted to Project 211 received 70% of the national research funding and 80% of doctoral students, despite representing less than 5% of higher education institutions in China (Tang & Yang, 2008; Larivière et al., 2021). Contemporary analysis reveals that universities listed as 985 or 211 projects receive preferential policy treatment and substantial government research funding, enabling rapid development that has created significant quality gaps compared to other institutions over two decades (Yu, Dong & de Jong, 2022). These disparities influence how policies are interpreted and implemented, with resource-constrained institutions often prioritising basic competence development over comprehensive reform objectives, while elite universities can afford to pursue more ambitious pedagogical innovations. Furthermore, Law (2014) demonstrates that this institutional stratification creates systematic differences in curriculum reform implementation, with quality education initiatives achieving greater success in well-resourced institutions while facing significant barriers in less privileged educational contexts.

Given the above differences, this study aims to examine qualitatively the implementation efficacy of public English policies from teachers' perspectives, with particular attention on the role of *Curriculum Ideological and Political Education* and the complex negotiations teachers undertake in translating policy mandates into classroom practice. Specifically, this research investigates how university English teachers interpret, adapt, and implement national policies within their institutional contexts, examining the factors that facilitate or constrain effective policy translation while maintaining attention to the human dimensions of policy execution that are often overlooked in macro-level analyses.

1.3 Significance and Scope

The academic significance of this study lies in its contribution to filling a critical research gap on English policy implementation in higher education contexts. While extensive scholarship exists on policy formation and student outcomes, limited attention has been paid to teachers' lived experiences of policy implementation and their role as active agents in policy translation. This study provides qualitative, context-based insights that complement existing quantitative

studies and macro-level policy analyses, thereby offering a nuanced understanding of how national directives are negotiated within specific institutional and classroom contexts.

The research contributes to the theoretical understanding of teacher agency in policy implementation, particularly within the Chinese context where educational reforms often involve complex ideological components alongside pedagogical innovations. By employing Ball's (1994) policy cycle theory as an analytical framework, the study shows how teachers function as active policy actors rather than passive implementers. This is done to demonstrate how national policies are recontextualised through professional interpretation and adaptation processes.

Contemporary research strongly supports this theoretical approach. Tao & Gao (2017) demonstrate that teacher agency and identity commitment play crucial roles in curricular reform success, with teachers' professional experiences and beliefs serving as key mediating factors in policy implementation effectiveness. Their findings emphasise that successful policy translation depends heavily on recognising and supporting teachers' active role in policy interpretation, rather than assuming passive compliance with top-down directives.

The practical significance of this research extends to multiple stakeholder groups within China's educational system. For policymakers, the study provides crucial feedback on implementation challenges that can inform future policy design and support system development. Understanding teachers' experiences of policy implementation can help identify gaps between policy intentions and practical realities, thereby enabling more effective alignment between national objectives and implementation support mechanisms.

For university administrators, the research offers insights into institutional factors that facilitate or constrain effective policy implementation. The study's examination of how teachers navigate competing demands while implementing reforms can inform professional development strategies, resource allocation decisions, and institutional support system design. In particular, understanding the complexities of *Curriculum Ideological and Political Education* integration can help administrators develop more effective training programmes and evaluation frameworks.

For frontline English teachers, this research provides validation of their professional experiences while offering insights into how colleagues navigate similar challenges. The study's focus on teacher agency emphasises educators' critical role in policy success, potentially empowering teachers to recognise their professional expertise and develop more effective strategies for implementing complex reforms while maintaining pedagogical integrity. Murray (2025) supports this emphasis, finding that successful curriculum reform

implementation requires clear role definition for all stakeholders, with particular attention to supporting teachers as active change agents rather than passive policy recipients.

The scope of this study focuses specifically on Chinese university English teachers, acknowledging the unique characteristics of this professional context while recognising potential transferability to other educational settings facing similar challenges of balancing multiple policy objectives. Furthermore, the research adopts a qualitative, interview-based approach that prioritises depth of understanding over broad generalisation, aiming to provide rich, contextualised insights into teachers' lived experiences of policy implementation.

Geographically, the study focuses on Shandong Province, selected for its representation of China's diverse educational landscape, including both elite research universities and regional institutions across different institutional tiers. This geographic focus enables examination of how institutional context influences policy implementation while maintaining manageable research parameters for doctoral-level investigation. Selecting Shandong Province is particularly appropriate since existing research demonstrates significant variation in curriculum reform implementation across different institutional contexts within individual provinces (Kipnis, 2011).

The temporal focus on current policy implementation, particularly the recent introduction of *Curriculum Ideological and Political Education* requirements and the 2020 College English Teaching Guidelines, ensures contemporary relevance while examining policies with sufficient implementation history to reveal meaningful patterns and outcomes. This timing allows for investigation of both initial adaptation strategies and emerging long-term implementation patterns that characterise mature policy implementation processes.

1.4 Conclusion

This chapter has established the research context by outlining the historical shift in Chinese public English education policy and identifying the critical research gap regarding teacher agency at the implementation level. This foundational work sets the stage for a comprehensive literature review and the development of an integrated theoretical framework in the next chapter, which will provide the necessary analytical tools to address the research questions posed herein.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This chapter reviews the key literature that frames this study's investigation into policy implementation and teacher agency. It first examines the historical evolution of public English education policy in China, identifying the core concepts and policy shifts that have shaped the current teaching landscape. Building on this contextual understanding, the chapter then introduces the theoretical framework that will be used to analyse the interplay between policy intent and classroom practice.

2.1 Historical Evolution of Public English Education Policy in China

Understanding contemporary policy implementation requires examining the historical trajectory that shaped current educational landscapes. China's English education policies have evolved through three distinct phases, each reflecting broader socio-economic transformations and shifting conceptualisations of language education's role in national development.

Early Phase (1980s–1990s): Efficiency Rationality

The concept of "efficiency rationality" in Chinese educational policy refers to a utilitarian approach that prioritises measurable outcomes, standardised processes, and economic instrumentality in educational planning. In the context of English education, this manifested as policies designed to rapidly build linguistic capacity to support economic modernisation, with success measured primarily through examination scores and proficiency benchmarks.

Following China’s 1978 Reform and Opening-Up policy, English language learning was strategically repositioned as instrumental to accessing global knowledge, technology, and trade opportunities (Hu & McKay, 2012). The 1985 Decision on the Reform of the Education System institutionalised English as essential curriculum content, directly linking linguistic competence to national economic strategy. During this phase, policies emphasized standardised testing, basic proficiency development, and pedagogical approaches that prioritised measurable skill acquisition over holistic language development. This efficiency rationality approach created what Zhou (2020) characterizes as a narrow, test-driven culture where educational success was evaluated primarily through examination performance rather than communicative competence or intercultural understanding. The rapid expansion of college entrance examinations reinforced this instrumental orientation, establishing patterns of policy implementation that would prove resistant to later reform efforts.

Middle Phase (2000s–2010s): Diversification and Governance

The transition toward "public governance" represents a paradigmatic shift from top-down control mechanisms toward more flexible, responsive policy frameworks that acknowledge

institutional diversity and stakeholder participation. In English education policy, this concept encompasses recognition of varied institutional capacities, differentiated learning objectives, and greater autonomy in pedagogical approaches while maintaining national coherence.

The College English Curriculum Requirements (2007) exemplified this governance approach by introducing a dual-track model combining English for General Purposes (EGP) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP). This policy innovation reflected growing awareness that China's stratified higher education system required differentiated approaches to accommodate diverse institutional contexts and student populations. Furthermore, the governance framework stressed institutional flexibility and adaptive implementation rather than uniform compliance.

However, implementation remained uneven, particularly between elite "985/211" universities and regional institutions. As Yan & He (2012) document, resource disparities created systematic differences in policy enactment, with well-funded institutions successfully implementing comprehensive reforms while less-privileged institutions struggled to move beyond basic competence development. This implementation gap highlighted the limitations of governance approaches that assumed institutional capacity without addressing structural inequalities.

New Phase (2013–present): Public Governance and Ideological Integration

The current phase represents a sophisticated synthesis of public governance principles with explicit ideological objectives, creating unprecedented complexity in policy implementation. Following the Belt and Road Initiative's launch in 2013, English education acquired renewed political significance, requiring integration of linguistic competence with cultural confidence and socialist value transmission.

The College English Teaching Guidelines (2020 edition) epitomise this integrated approach through three fundamental innovations. First, they reposition English as both a practical skill and a carrier of humanistic values, explicitly balancing communicative competence with moral education. Second, they establish differentiated objectives (basic, improving, developing) that acknowledge institutional stratification while maintaining national standards. Third, they mandate integrated curricula combining EGP, ESP, and English for Intercultural Communication (EIC) as equally weighted components.

Simultaneously, the institutionalisation of *Curriculum Ideological and Political Education* fundamentally reshaped policy implementation requirements. Unlike traditional ideological education delivered through separate courses, this initiative requires organic integration of

socialist core values throughout disciplinary teaching. This has resulted in dual mandates that significantly complicate pedagogical practice.

Policy Evolution and Implementation Challenges

This historical analysis reveals a consistent pattern: increasingly ambitious policy objectives accompanied by persistent implementation gaps. Each phase introduced greater complexity while assuming enhanced institutional capacity and teacher expertise that often proved insufficient. Contemporary research confirms this trajectory, with Lei & Medwell (2022) finding that teachers expressed uncertainty about reform implications despite comprehensive policy documentation, thereby indicating ongoing challenges in translating policy intentions into classroom practice.

2.2 Core Concepts in New-Era Public English Policy

Contemporary Chinese English education policy operates through several interconnected concepts that reshape traditional understandings of language education. These concepts reflect the synthesis of global educational trends with distinctively Chinese political and cultural priorities. This leads to implementation challenges that require nuanced theoretical analysis.

2.2.1 College English Teaching Guidelines (2020 edition)

The 2020 Guidelines represent the most comprehensive attempt to reconcile competing demands in Chinese university English education. They establish three fundamental shifts that directly influence teacher practices and institutional arrangements:

From Instrumentalism to Humanistic Orientation

The Guidelines explicitly reject purely instrumental approaches to English education, instead positioning "humanistic values" as a "major orientation" alongside practical communication skills. This concept, translated as "人文价值导向," encompasses both universal humanistic principles and distinctively Chinese cultural values, requiring teachers to balance global communication competence with cultural confidence and national identity formation.

This shift creates immediate pedagogical tensions. Teachers must navigate between authentic English language materials that often reflect Western cultural assumptions and policy requirements for Chinese value integration. Contemporary research confirms that this balance requires sophisticated cultural mediation skills, which many teachers feel inadequately prepared to provide. Zhang, Wang & Jiang's (2025) mixed-methods study of 12 EFL teachers from four Chinese universities found teachers operating without systematic planning when implementing Curriculum Ideological and Political Education, with participants reporting difficulties due to insufficient theoretical knowledge. Additionally, Wang, Xu and Zhang's

(2023) research on primary school EFL teachers revealed that many reported insufficient training in intercultural competence implementation, while Hu and Gu (2024) revealed that although Chinese university EFL teachers perceived culture teaching as important, they lacked explicit knowledge of culture theory and pedagogical skills necessary for effective intercultural instruction.

Three-Tiered Objectives System

The Guidelines establish differentiated learning goals (basic, improving, and developing) that acknowledge China's stratified higher education landscape while maintaining national coherence. Theoretically, this system allows institutional adaptation while preserving policy consistency. However, implementation research reveals significant challenges. Jia and Ericson (2017), in their study examining equity and access to higher education in China's Hunan province, found that the tiered system requires institutions to accurately assess student populations, design differentiated curricula, and provide appropriate support systems. Capacities to do this can vary significantly across institutional tiers. The China Power Project (2021) confirms that five of the top ten universities are concentrated in Beijing and Shanghai, receiving preferential government funding, while less economically developed regions face challenges including teacher migration to developed areas and insufficient funding for hiring and training qualified instructors. For example, elite universities can leverage superior resources to implement sophisticated differentiation, while resource-constrained institutions often default to basic objective pursuit, potentially reinforcing educational inequalities.

Integrated Curriculum Structure

The third shift, the. requirement for equal emphasis on EGP, ESP, and EIC, represents ambitious curriculum integration that challenges traditional English teaching approaches. This integration demands teacher expertise across multiple specialisations and institutional capacity for coordinated curriculum development. Contemporary evidence suggests limited success in achieving genuine integration. Wang (2022) found that structural barriers, including heavy workloads and examination pressures, constrain teachers' ability to implement comprehensive curriculum reform, leading to superficial compliance rather than meaningful integration.

2.2.2 Curriculum Ideological and Political Education

The concept of *Curriculum Ideological and Political Education* represents a fundamental reconceptualisation of ideological education in Chinese higher education. Unlike traditional political education courses that operate as discrete curriculum components, this initiative requires the systematic integration of socialist core values throughout all disciplinary teaching.

Conceptual Development and Implementation

Curriculum Ideological and Political Education emerged from recognition that traditional separated approaches to political education proved insufficient for comprehensive value transmission. The concept requires teachers to identify ideological and political elements within their disciplinary content and integrate these elements organically into teaching processes. In English education contexts, this integration presents particular challenges.

Research confirms that English language teaching traditionally draws on global materials and cross-cultural communication principles that may conflict with national ideological priorities. Liu, Zhang & May (2022), in their corpus analysis of university EFL textbooks, found that Anglo-American cultural representations dominate to a considerable extent. This monocultural bias creates tensions with the Chinese requirement to integrate ideological and cultural education, highlighting the challenge of reconciling linguistic authenticity with national ideological objectives. Additionally, studies demonstrate that using international materials developed by native speakers can amplify students' immersion in foreign language learning while potentially undermining local cultural values (Deng & Wang, 2023). Consequently, English teachers in China must develop capabilities to critically evaluate Western cultural content while extracting appropriate ideological elements for integration.

Pedagogical Complexities

Implementation research reveals several persistent challenges in integrating Curriculum Ideological and Political Education into English teaching.

First, teachers often lack sufficient institutional support and pedagogical resources for effective implementation, a challenge exacerbated by systemic issues where policy ambitions exceed institutional capacity (Hu, Li and Luo, 2024). Zhang, Wang and Jiang (2025) demonstrate that EFL teachers frequently lack adequate scaffolding within their teaching contexts, constraining their capacity for policy enactment.

Second, the shortage of appropriate teaching materials creates substantial practical difficulties. Deng and Wang (2023) document that only 37.62% of surveyed students endorsed available digital learning resources as adequate for ideological education integration, requiring teachers to independently develop original ideological content and supplementary materials. This material shortage significantly increases workload pressures beyond regular teaching responsibilities, as teachers must invest considerable time identifying and adapting resources that align with both linguistic objectives and socialist core values.

Furthermore, the requirement for "organic integration" creates authenticity dilemmas. This is because teachers may struggle to balance maintaining course credibility while incorporating

political elements that students may perceive as artificial or intrusive. This tension highlights the sophisticated pedagogical skills required for effective implementation.

2.3 Teacher Agency and Policy Implementation: An Integrated Theoretical Framework

Understanding how teachers navigate complex policy demands requires theoretical frameworks that capture both structural constraints and individual agency. This study develops an integrated approach combining Ball's (1994) policy cycle theory with Priestley, Biesta & Robinson's (2015) ecological model of teacher agency. This integration creates a comprehensive lens for analysing policy implementation in Chinese university contexts.

2.3.1 Ball's Policy Cycle Theory: Structural Dynamics of Policy Transformation

Ball's (1994) policy cycle theory provides valuable insights into how policies transform as they move from initial conception to classroom practice. The theory identifies three interconnected contexts that shape policy meaning and implementation:

Context of Influence: This encompasses the global, national, and ideological discourses that shape policy formation. In Chinese English education, this includes globalisation pressures for communicative competence, economic modernisation imperatives, and political requirements for ideological integration. The Belt and Road Initiative exemplifies how geopolitical strategies directly influence educational policy priorities.

Context of Policy Text Production: Policies are articulated through formal documents that inevitably contain ambiguities, contradictions, and multiple interpretations. The College English Teaching Guidelines (2020) demonstrate this complexity by simultaneously emphasising global communication competence and national cultural confidence; such objectives may conflict in practice.

Context of Practice: At the grassroots level, teachers interpret and enact policies within specific institutional conditions. This context generates the greatest variation in implementation outcomes, as teachers must negotiate policy requirements with classroom realities, student needs, and institutional constraints.

Ball's framework highlights that policies are not simply transmitted from policymakers to practitioners but are continuously reinterpreted and reconstructed through implementation processes. This perspective challenges linear assumptions about policy effectiveness and emphasises the active role of teachers in shaping policy outcomes.

2.3.2 Priestley's Ecological Model: Understanding Teacher Agency

While Ball's theory explains structural dynamics of policy transformation, Priestley, Biesta & Robinson's (2015) ecological model provides crucial insights into how individual teachers exercise agency within these structures. Their model conceptualises agency as emergent capacity influenced by three interrelated dimensions discussed below.

Iterational Dimension (Past Experiences): Teachers' professional histories, training backgrounds, and established pedagogical habits significantly shape their responses to new policies. In Chinese contexts, teachers trained in exam-oriented methodologies may struggle to adapt to communicative and ideological integration requirements, not due to resistance but due to limited experience with alternative approaches.

Practical-Evaluative Dimension (Present Context): Agency is exercised in response to immediate institutional conditions, including workload pressures, resource availability, administrative support, and peer collaboration opportunities. The stark differences between elite "985/211" universities and regional institutions create dramatically different contexts for agency expression.

Projective Dimension (Future Orientations): Teachers' professional aspirations, beliefs about student needs, and visions of educational goals influence how they interpret and implement policies. Those with progressive orientations toward intercultural education may embrace policy reforms, while others focused on examination success may comply minimally.

This ecological approach emphasises that agency is neither entirely constrained by structures nor wholly determined by individual will. Instead, it emerges through dynamic interactions between personal capacities and contextual conditions.

2.3.3 Integration: A Comprehensive Framework for Policy Implementation Analysis

The integration of Ball's structural analysis with Priestley's agency-focused approach creates a sophisticated framework for understanding policy implementation in Chinese universities. This synthesis offers several analytical advantages.

Policy Recontextualisation as a Mediated Process: Ball's emphasis on policy transformation across contexts gains deeper meaning when viewed through Priestley's agency lens. Teachers do not simply receive and interpret policies. Rather, they actively reconstruct them based on their iterational experiences, practical constraints, and projective aspirations.

Contextual Specificity: The integrated framework acknowledges that implementation outcomes depend heavily on the specific intersection of policy requirements, institutional conditions, and teacher capabilities. This perspective explains why identical policies produce diverse outcomes across different universities and regions.

Dynamic Implementation Process: Rather than viewing implementation as static compliance or resistance, the integrated framework recognises it as ongoing negotiation between structural demands and individual agency. Teachers continuously adapt their practices as they gain experience with policy requirements and as institutional conditions evolve.

Multiple Forms of Agency: The integrated framework can accommodate various teacher responses to policy demands. Some teachers exercise what Priestley, Biesta & Robinson (2015) characterise as transformative agency by creatively integrating policy objectives with their pedagogical expertise. Others demonstrate constrained agency, due to structural limitations, while a few may achieve progressive agency by advocating for systemic changes that better support policy implementation.

Figure 2.1: Integrated Ball-Priestley Theoretical Framework

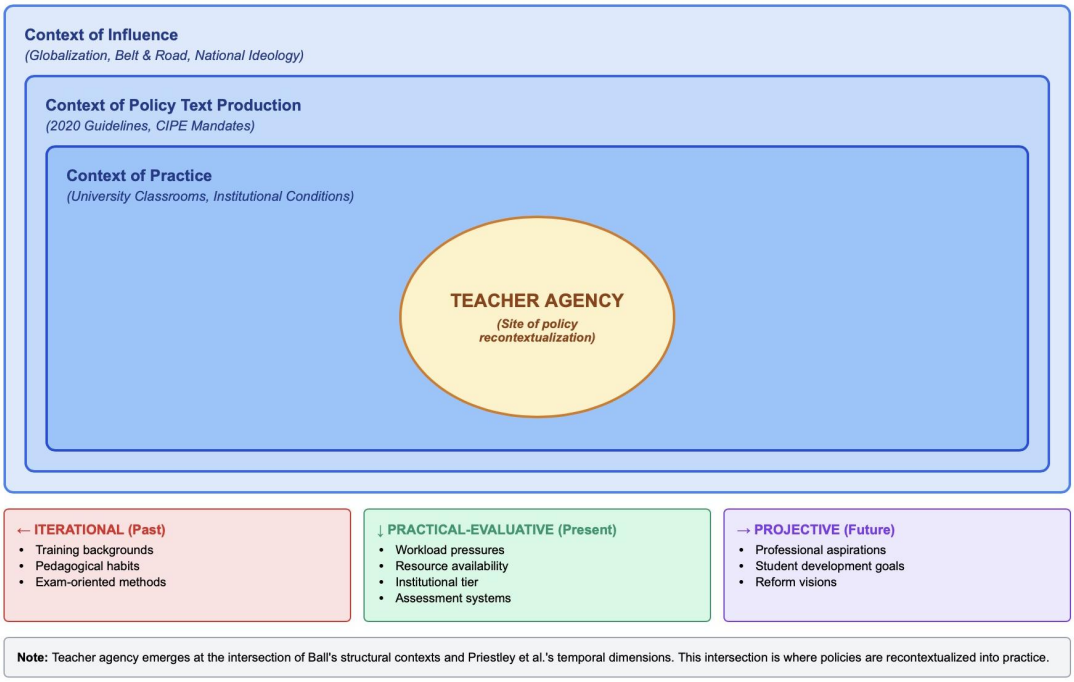

Figure 2.1 visualizes the integrated Ball-Priestley framework guiding this study. The diagram illustrates how Ball's nested policy contexts (Context of Influence, Policy Text Production, and Practice) intersect with Priestley et al.'s three temporal dimensions of teacher agency (iterational, practical-evaluative, and projective). Teacher agency emerges at the central intersection point, where past experiences, present institutional conditions, and future aspirations converge within specific policy contexts. This intersection becomes the critical site where national policies are recontextualized into diverse classroom practices.

2.3.4 Framework Application to Research Questions

This integrated theoretical framework directly addresses the study's central research question: "How do Chinese university English teachers navigate and adapt public English policies in their pedagogical practices?" The framework provides analytical tools for examining:

Policy Interpretation Processes: This is done using Ball's context of practice concept alongside Priestley's iterational dimension to understand how teachers' past experiences shape their reading of policy texts and identification of implementation priorities.

Adaptation Strategies: These are addressed by applying Priestley's practical-evaluative dimension to examine how teachers modify policy requirements based on institutional constraints, student needs, and available resources while operating within Ball's context of practice.

Agency Variations: Both frameworks are utilised to explain why teachers in similar institutional contexts may respond differently to identical policies, based on their individual agency configurations and interpretive processes.

Implementation Outcomes: To examine these it is important to understand how the interaction between structural policy dynamics and individual teacher agency produces diverse implementation patterns that may diverge significantly from policy intentions.

This theoretical integration enables the present study to move beyond simplistic binary categories of policy success or failure, toward nuanced understanding of implementation as a complex, context-dependent, and continuously evolving process.

2.4 Challenges in Policy Implementation: Structural Constraints and Agency Limitations

The implementation of ambitious English education policies in Chinese universities often encounters multiple layers of challenges that constrain teacher agency and limit policy effectiveness. These challenges seem to arise from systemic contradictions between policy aspirations and institutional realities, creating persistent gaps between policy texts and classroom practices. Understanding these challenges is essential for analysing how teachers exercise agency within constrained conditions and why policy outcomes often diverge from official intentions.

2.4.1 Workload and Resource Constraints

Contemporary research identifies heavy workloads as primary barriers to effective policy implementation. Liu et al. (2015) found that Chinese university teachers work an average of 52 hours per week, significantly exceeding legal working hours of 44 hours. Additionally, Gu and Wang (2017) demonstrate that an overwhelming majority of Chinese English teachers

(92.6%) hold negative attitudes toward teaching large classes, with pedagogical issues and management-related difficulties emerging as major obstacles. Class sizes in Chinese universities typically range between 30-50 students (Ministry of Education, 2020). Teachers face multiple competing demands including teaching responsibilities, research obligations, and administrative duties such as student advising, curriculum development, and institutional service (Zhang & Shin, 2015; Xu, 2017). The College English Teaching Guidelines (2020) requirements for differentiated instruction across three proficiency levels significantly increase preparation demands without corresponding institutional support.

Research suggests that when workload and time pressure exceed manageable limits, teachers' capacity for pedagogical innovation becomes severely constrained (Teaching and Teacher Education, 2025). Additionally, Zhang, Liu, and Peng (2023) provide empirical evidence for these constraints, documenting that EFL teachers in developing regions manage oversized classes while lacking adequate teaching materials and technological resources. These conditions create what Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2015, p. 31) term “constrained agency”, where teachers’ capacity for creative policy interpretation is limited by immediate practical demands.

2.4.2 Assessment System Contradictions

A fundamental tension exists between policy rhetoric emphasising holistic development and evaluation systems that prioritise measurable outcomes. Despite policy discourse promoting intercultural competence and ideological education, student performance is primarily judged through standardised tests like CET-4 and CET-6 that focus on linguistic proficiency rather than broader educational objectives.

This contradiction creates what Ball's framework would identify as conflict between the context of policy text production and the context of practice. Teachers face pressure to implement comprehensive reforms while knowing that student and institutional success is measured through narrow metrics that may not align with policy intentions. Wang (2022) provides empirical validation for these tensions, finding that examination pressures significantly constrain teachers' ability to implement holistic educational approaches.

2.4.3 Institutional Stratification Effects

China's higher education system stratification creates systematic differences in policy implementation capacity. Elite 985/211 universities benefit from superior funding, smaller class sizes, and enhanced professional development opportunities that enable sophisticated

policy implementation. However, regular undergraduate institutions face larger classes, heavier teaching loads, and limited institutional support that constrains teacher agency.

This stratification creates unequal implementation outcomes that may exacerbate educational inequalities. Elite institutions can afford innovative approaches to differentiated instruction and ideological integration, while resource-constrained institutions might often default to basic compliance approaches. Such patterns risk creating what Ball (1994) would describe as policy recontextualisation that reinforces rather than reduces systemic inequalities.

2.4.4 Cultural and Ideological Tensions

The mandate to integrate socialist core values into English language education creates cultural mediation challenges. Research shows that English curricula and teaching materials, often rooted in Western cultural contexts, can conflict with Chinese ideological priorities, requiring careful cultural adaptation (Liu, Zhang & May, 2022). Simply inserting Chinese elements into lessons is inadequate. This is because effective integration demands pedagogical approaches that meaningfully link language learning with value transmission.

A recurring barrier is insufficient teacher preparation. Research reveals that

inadequate theoretical depth and lack of exploratory practice in teacher training

have led to an 'isolation phenomenon' where CIPE implementation remains disconnected

from substantive pedagogical transformation (Wei & Xin, 2024). This tendency reflects uncertainty about implementation strategies rather than resistance to policy aims. This aligns with Priestley, Biesta and Robinson's (2015, p. 31) notion of constrained agency, where teachers' capacity for creative policy enactment is curtailed by contextual constraints. Yet meaningful integration arguably requires projective agency—a clear vision of how English teaching can serve broader ideological purposes (Priestley, Biesta and Robinson, 2015, p. 35). Consequently, the existing evidence suggests that enhanced professional development and institutional support, rather than new policy formulation, are critical to moving beyond minimalist compliance.

2.4.5 Implications for Theoretical Framework Application

These implementation challenges demonstrate the importance of this present work's integrated Ball-Priestley framework for understanding policy implementation complexity. The challenges arise not from simple policy design flaws or teacher resistance but from complex interactions between structural constraints and individual agency limitations.

Ball's policy cycle theory helps explain how ambitious policy objectives formulated in contexts of influence encounter practical constraints in practice contexts, leading to inevitable recontextualisation. Priestley's ecological model illuminates how teachers' capacity to exercise transformative agency depends heavily on supportive contextual conditions that are often absent in Chinese university settings.

The integrated Ball–Priestley framework suggests that effective policy implementation requires attention to both structural support systems and the development of teacher agency. As research shows, policies that assume uniform compliance but neglect institutional capacity building and professional development may result in superficial implementation rather than genuine pedagogical transformation (Lei and Medwell, 2022).

This analysis directly informs the study's approach to examining teacher experiences. Rather than judging implementation success through simple compliance measures, the present research investigates how teachers navigate competing demands and exercise available agency within constrained conditions. This perspective enables more nuanced understanding of implementation dynamics and more realistic assessment of policy effectiveness.

2.5 Synthesis: Toward an Integrated Understanding of Policy Implementation

This literature review has established the theoretical foundation for understanding how Chinese university English teachers navigate complex policy implementation demands. The historical analysis reveals persistent patterns of ambitious policy formulation followed by implementation gaps caused by insufficient attention to institutional capacity and teacher agency. Contemporary policies have introduced unprecedented complexity by requiring simultaneous achievement of linguistic, intercultural, and ideological objectives within resource-constrained institutional contexts.

The integrated theoretical framework, combining Ball's policy cycle theory with Priestley's ecological model of teacher agency, provides essential tools for analysing these implementation dynamics. Ball's framework explains the structural transformation of policies as they move from formulation to practice, while Priestley's model illuminates how individual teachers exercise agency within these structural constraints. Together, they facilitate understanding of implementation as a complex negotiation between policy requirements and contextual realities rather than a simple compliance process.

This theoretical synthesis directly supports the study's research design by providing analytical tools for examining teacher experiences, interpretation strategies, and adaptation approaches. The integrated framework enables investigation of how teachers' past experiences (iterational dimension) shape their policy interpretations, how institutional constraints (practical-

evaluative dimension) influence their implementation strategies, and how their professional aspirations (projective dimension) guide their pedagogical choices within Ball's context of practice.

Thus, the literature review has established both the empirical need for teacher-focused policy implementation research and the theoretical foundation for conducting such an investigation. Additionally, it has demonstrated that understanding policy effectiveness requires examining not only policy texts and institutional arrangements but also the human dimensions of implementation, whereby teachers actively reconstruct policies through their professional practice. This perspective challenges top-down assumptions about policy implementation and emphasises the crucial role of teacher agency in determining policy outcomes.

Bridging Theory and Method: From Literature to Research Design

This literature review and theoretical framework chapter has established the foundation for empirical investigation by demonstrating both the need for teacher-centred policy implementation research and the analytical tools for conducting such an inquiry. The historical analysis reveals persistent implementation gaps between ambitious policy objectives and classroom realities, while the integrated Ball-Priestley framework provides the theoretical lens for understanding these dynamics as complex negotiations between structural constraints and individual agency rather than simple compliance failures.

The theoretical synthesis directly informs the research design in several ways. First, Ball's policy cycle theory guides the investigation's focus on how teachers recontextualise policies within their specific institutional contexts, moving beyond simple assessment of compliance toward understanding of interpretive processes. Second, Priestley et al’s ecological model directs attention to how teachers' past experiences, present constraints, and future aspirations shape their agency expressions, offering research methods that can capture these temporal dimensions. Third, the integrated framework's emphasis on contextual specificity supports the qualitative approach outlined in Chapter 3, which prioritises depth and contextual understanding over broad generalisation.

Together, Chapters 1 and 2 have provided both empirical justification and theoretical foundation for the qualitative research design that follows. The historical analysis has established the practical significance of understanding teacher experiences in policy implementation, while the theoretical framework provides the analytical tools for making sense of these experiences in ways that can inform more effective policy development and institutional support systems.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

3.1 Methodological and Philosophical Stance

This study adopts a qualitative research design, consistent with its aim of exploring how Chinese university English teachers interpret and implement national English education policies, particularly the Curriculum Ideological and Political Education (CIPE) mandate. A qualitative approach is appropriate because it prioritises depth of understanding over breadth and highlights teachers' voices in contexts where top-down reforms are frequently studied only from the policy design perspective.

3.1.1 Ontological Position

The research is grounded in a constructivist ontology, which views social reality as co-constructed through human interaction and interpretation rather than fixed and objective (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Creswell, 2014). In the context of China's English education policy, this means policies are not received in a linear fashion but are constantly recontextualised as teachers negotiate between official directives and local realities. This ontological stance aligns with the study's interest in examining how macro-level reforms are lived and reshaped within classrooms.

3.1.2 Epistemological Position

The study takes an interpretivist epistemology, which emphasises understanding participants' subjective meanings (Bryman, 2016). Interpretivism is especially relevant to policy implementation research because teachers are not passive transmitters of state mandates but active agents who interpret, adapt, and sometimes resist policies. This stance enables examination of how teachers perceive CIPE not only as pedagogical content but also as an ideological requirement. Recent methodological scholarship has highlighted the importance of interpretivism in unpacking complex policy enactment processes in education (Levitt, 2021; Braun and Clarke, 2021).

3.2 Integrated Theoretical Framework

The analysis is guided by an integrated Ball–Priestley framework, combining Ball's (1994) policy cycle theory and Priestley, Biesta and Robinson's (2015) ecological model of teacher agency.

Ball's framework distinguishes between contexts of influence (where policy is designed), contexts of text production (where policy documents are produced), and contexts of practice (where policies are enacted). This highlights the non-linear translation of policy intentions

into practice. Meanwhile, Priestley et al.'s model conceptualises teacher agency as ecological, shaped by three dimensions: iterational (past experiences), practical-evaluative (present situational judgments), and projective (future orientations).

By combining these perspectives, the study seeks to explain both what teachers do in response to CIPE, and why they act in particular ways given their professional histories, institutional constraints, and future visions. Thus, this framework provides both structural and agentic lenses for analysing teachers' perspectives.

3.3 Research Design

A qualitative design was operationalised through semi-structured interviews, chosen for their flexibility in eliciting in-depth accounts while maintaining comparability across participants. Interviews were designed around the integrated theoretical framework, with questions mapped to:

teachers' past experiences with policy reform (iterational),

current challenges in implementing CIPE (practical-evaluative), and

aspirations for English education in the future (projective).

Utilising interviews is further justified by the sensitivity of the research topic. Classroom observation was excluded because of potential political sensitivities associated with monitoring CIPE implementation, whereas interviews allow participants to reflect more safely on their practices and dilemmas.

3.4 Sampling Strategy

A stratified purposive sampling strategy was employed to capture institutional and professional diversity. Participants were drawn from both elite universities (985/211) and provincial non-elite institutions in Shandong Province, reflecting the stratified nature of Chinese higher education and its influence on resources and policy enactment (Lei and Medwell, 2022). Additional criteria included teaching experience (early-career vs. senior staff) and professional responsibilities (frontline teachers vs. curriculum coordinators).

While the sample size (n=6) is modest, it follows the principle of information power (Malterud et al., 2016), whereby a smaller, information-rich sample can yield valid insights when the study has a focused aim, dense data collection, and strong theoretical framing. Sampling continued until thematic saturation was observed, meaning no new significant themes were emerging from the data (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

3.5 Data Collection Procedures

Interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese which allowed participants to articulate nuanced views without language barriers. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face or via secure video conferencing platforms depending on participants' availability. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

The interview guide was aligned with the integrated framework and piloted with two teachers for clarity. Following the pilot, one key amendment was made: questions specifically targeting Curriculum Ideological and Political Education (CIPE/课程思政) were added to ensure comprehensive data collection on teachers' responses to this core policy mandate. Key areas included:

teachers' understanding of public English policy and CIPE,

challenges in translating policy into practice,

strategies for balancing linguistic and ideological goals,

reflections on institutional support and constraints.

3.6 Data Analysis

The data were analysed through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021), supported by NVivo 12 software. The analytic process followed six phases:

Familiarisation – repeated reading of transcripts and memo writing.

Generating initial codes – open coding of meaningful units of text.

Searching for themes – grouping codes into broader categories.

Reviewing themes – refining categories through iterative comparison.

Defining and naming themes – linking categories to the Ball–Priestley framework.

Producing the report – synthesising findings with illustrative extracts.

Themes were both inductive (emerging from data) and deductive (guided by the theoretical framework), thereby ensuring a balance between grounded insights and conceptual alignment. Cross-case comparisons were conducted to identify patterns across institutional contexts.

3.7 Trustworthiness and Rigour

Several strategies were adopted to enhance the study's rigour (Nowell et al., 2017; Levitt, 2021):

Triangulation: comparing interview data with national policy documents (e.g., College English Teaching Guidelines, MOE CIPE guidelines).

Audit trail: maintaining detailed notes of coding decisions and analytic memos.

These measures were undertaken to ensure that findings would be credible, transferable, and dependable within the qualitative paradigm.

Data Authenticity and Translation Procedures: The interview excerpts presented in Chapters 4 and 5 are translations into English by the researcher. Additionally, participants were invited to review selected translated excerpts used in the findings chapter to confirm that the meaning of their statements had been faithfully conveyed. The extracts included in the findings are not isolated quotations but are representative of broader thematic patterns that emerged across the dataset. This approach ensures that the reported findings are both authentic to the participants' voices and analytically robust.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was secured prior to data collection. Participants received detailed information sheets and signed consent forms. Given the political sensitivity of CIPE, anonymity was carefully protected by assigning pseudonyms and removing identifiable details (e.g., institutional names).

Data were stored securely in compliance with both the Personal Information Protection Law (PIPL) of China and the UK's GDPR standards. Interview questions were framed to avoid politically sensitive wording, focusing on pedagogical rather than ideological judgments. Gatekeeping by administrators was negotiated to ensure teachers' voluntary participation without coercion, following recommendations for research in authoritarian contexts (Qi, 2022).

3.9 Researcher Reflexivity

As the researcher is both a doctoral candidate and a former English teacher in China, reflexivity was central. A reflexive journal was maintained throughout the study to record assumptions, emotional responses, and emerging interpretations. This practice helped distinguish participants' voices from the researcher's pre-understandings, thereby strengthening analytic transparency.

3.10 Limitations

The study's reliance on interviews limits observation of actual classroom practice, and participants' accounts may be influenced by social desirability biases. The small sample size

also restricts transferability. Nevertheless, the integrated Ball–Priestley framework and use of multiple rigour strategies mitigate these limitations by providing a robust interpretive lens. Future studies may expand the scope through mixed methods or longitudinal designs to capture evolving practices.

Chapter 4: Findings - Teacher Agency in Policy Implementation

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the qualitative analysis of six in-depth interviews with university English teachers regarding their interpretation and implementation of public English policies, particularly the Curriculum Ideological and Political Education (CIPE) mandate. The analysis reveals complex patterns of teacher agency that challenge simplistic compliance/resistance binaries. Instead, the patterns demonstrate how institutional contexts and individual agency dimensions interact to produce varied implementation strategies.

The findings are structured around the integrated Ball-Priestley framework while acknowledging the messiness and contradictions inherent in policy implementation. Rather than presenting neat categorical distinctions, this analysis explores how teachers navigate competing demands and institutional constraints in ways that reveal both individual agency and structural influences.

Table 4.1: Participant Overview

Participant	**Institution Type**	**Experience**	**Role Focus**
Dr. An	Elite (985)	15 years	Senior faculty, curriculum design
Dr. Bai	Elite (985)	12 years	Associate professor, research-focused
Dr. Chen	Elite (211)	8 years	Teaching-research balanced
Ms. Ding	Regional	10 years	Frontline teaching, large classes
Mr. Fan	Regional	14 years	Mid-career, administrative duties
Ms. Gao	Regional	7 years	Junior faculty, CET-focused

4.2 Professional Identities and Policy Interpretation

4.2.1 The Complexity of Professional Identity Formation

Teachers' responses to CIPE reveal how professional identities shape policy interpretation, though these identities prove more complex and contradictory than initial institutional categories might suggest. While institutional context influences identity formation, individual teachers construct professional meaning in varied ways that do not always align with institutional expectations.

Academic Identity and Policy Reception

Teachers with strong academic identities, regardless of institutional affiliation, tended to view CIPE as a professional challenge rather than an external imposition. Dr. An (Elite) exemplified this perspective:

> *CIPE represents a curriculum design challenge. My scholarly training taught me to find intellectual connections between seemingly disparate content areas. The question isn't whether to implement CIPE, but how to do it in pedagogically sound ways.*

However, this academic framing was not exclusive to elite institution teachers. Dr. Chen (Elite, but more teaching-focused) expressed similar professional engagement, while Mr. Fan (Regional) demonstrated unexpected scholarly interest:

> *I've actually found CIPE intellectually stimulating. It's forced me to research connections between language pedagogy and cultural transmission that I hadn't considered before. My students are responding positively to the more substantive content. (Mr. Fan, Regional)*

Pragmatic Identity and Survival Strategies

Teachers operating from pragmatic professional identities focused on managing competing demands while protecting core instructional goals. This pragmatic orientation appeared across institutional boundaries, albeit manifesting differently based on contextual constraints.

Ms. Ding (Regional) articulated the pragmatic approach clearly:

> *My primary responsibility is ensuring students develop functional English competence. CIPE is a requirement I need to address, but I won't compromise student learning outcomes. The challenge is finding integration strategies that serve both purposes.*

Interestingly, Dr. Bai (Elite) expressed similar pragmatic concerns despite working in a well-resourced environment:

> *Even with institutional support, time is finite. I need to balance CIPE requirements with research expectations and advanced coursework demands. It's about strategic curriculum management, not philosophical alignment.*

4.2.2 Identity Tensions and Contradictions

The data reveals significant tensions within individual teachers' professional identities, suggesting that policy implementation occurs through ongoing negotiation rather than clear identity-based responses. Several participants expressed contradictory feelings about CIPE that defied simple categorization.

Ms. Gao (Regional) demonstrated this internal conflict:

> *Intellectually, I appreciate CIPE's goals of connecting language learning with cultural understanding. But practically, I feel overwhelmed by the additional preparation required when I'm already managing large classes with diverse proficiency levels. Some days I embrace it; other days I resent it.*

This complexity suggests that teacher agency operates through continuous identity negotiation rather than fixed professional orientations.

4.3 Institutional Contexts and Structural Constraints

4.3.1 Resource Disparities and Implementation Capacity

While institutional tier influences available resources, the relationship between resources and implementation strategies proves more nuanced than anticipated. Resource availability creates possibilities for certain implementation approaches while constraining others. Nevertheless, teachers exercise agency within these structural parameters in unexpected ways.

Elite Institution Affordances

Teachers in elite institutions consistently reported greater structural support for policy implementation, although they utilized these resources differently based on individual priorities and constraints.

Dr. Chen described institutional facilitation:

> *Our university established CIPE working groups and provided seed funding for curriculum development. We had release time to attend training sessions and collaborate on materials development. The institutional message was clear: this is academic work deserving of scholarly attention.*

However, elite institution teachers also faced unique pressures that constrained their agency in different ways. Dr. Bai noted:

> *The expectation is that we'll produce innovative, nationally recognized CIPE models. There's pressure to publish about our implementation strategies and present at conferences. Success isn't just local compliance—it's academic contribution.*

Regional Institution Constraints

Teachers in regional institutions operated under significant resource constraints that shaped, but did not determine, their implementation strategies. While these constraints were real and substantial, teachers developed creative responses that demonstrated agency within limitations.

Ms. Ding described her institutional context:

> *We received the CIPE directive with minimal guidance and no additional resources. Class sizes remain large, workloads heavy, and professional development opportunities scarce. Implementation becomes an individual teacher responsibility rather than institutional priority.*

Mr. Fan elaborated on workload pressures:

> *Teaching 18 hours per week across multiple courses leaves little time for curriculum innovation. When CIPE requirements arrived, my first thought was 'where will I find time to develop new materials?' The institutional expectation seemed to be that we'd figure it out ourselves.*

4.3.2 Assessment Pressures and Competing Priorities

The dominance of standardized testing created implementation tensions across institutional contexts, although these manifested differently based on institutional positioning and student populations.

CET-4 Dominance in Regional Institutions

Regional institution teachers consistently identified CET-4 pass rates as primary accountability measures that constrained CIPE implementation. This created professional dilemmas about time allocation and curricular priorities.

Ms. Gao explained the assessment bind:

> *Department evaluations focus heavily on CET-4 pass rates. Students and parents measure our effectiveness by these scores. CIPE isn't tested, so time spent on*

ideological content appears to detract from measurable learning outcomes. I feel caught between policy compliance and professional effectiveness.

Diversified Assessment in Elite Institutions

Elite institution teachers reported more diverse assessment expectations that created space for CIPE integration, although this did not eliminate tension between competing priorities.

Dr. An described assessment flexibility:

> *Our students aren't primarily focused on CET-4—they're pursuing academic English competence for graduate studies or international opportunities. This allows more curricular flexibility and makes CIPE integration pedagogically coherent rather than externally imposed.*

4.4 Implementation Strategies and Teacher Agency

4.4.1 Strategic Integration Approaches

Teachers developed varied implementation strategies that reflect complex interactions between institutional contexts, professional identities, and individual agency. Rather than simple institutional determinism, the data reveals creative adaptation within structural constraints.

Embedded Integration Strategy

Several teachers, across institutional contexts, developed strategies for organically integrating CIPE content with language learning objectives. This approach required significant preparation time but produced pedagogically coherent outcomes.

Dr. An provided a detailed example:

> *I redesigned our argumentative writing unit around contemporary Chinese social issues—environmental protection, technological innovation, poverty alleviation. Students practice academic discourse while engaging with content that fulfills CIPE requirements. The integration feels natural rather than forced because both language and ideological objectives are served simultaneously.*

Mr. Fan (Regional) developed a similar approach despite resource constraints:

> *I created thematic units that combine language skills with cultural content. For example, our business English unit explores Chinese entrepreneurship models and innovation strategies. Students develop professional communication skills while*

learning about Chinese economic achievements. It takes more preparation, but the coherence makes it worthwhile.

Compartmentalized Compliance Strategy

Other teachers, facing time pressures or philosophical concerns, developed strategies that separated CIPE content from language instruction while maintaining administrative compliance.

Ms. Gao described her approach:

> *I dedicate fifteen minutes per week to cultural reflection activities that address CIPE requirements. We might discuss Chinese festivals, historical achievements, or philosophical concepts. It's separate from grammar or vocabulary instruction, but it creates space for cultural content without compromising language learning time.*

Dr. Bai (Elite) employed similar compartmentalization despite institutional support:

> *Given my research commitments and advanced course demands, I address CIPE through weekly cultural discussion sessions. Students present on Chinese cultural topics in English, which serves both language practice and ideological education purposes while keeping core curriculum intact.*

4.4.2 Adaptive Responses to Constraints

Teachers demonstrated creativity in adapting to implementation challenges, developing strategies that reflected both structural constraints and individual agency.

Collaborative Adaptation

Several teachers developed informal collaboration networks to share resources and strategies, demonstrating agency through collective action.

Dr. Chen described departmental collaboration:

> *Three of us formed an informal CIPE working group. We share materials, discuss integration challenges, and divide curriculum development responsibilities. This collective approach makes implementation more manageable while improving quality through peer review.*

Ms. Ding developed cross-institutional connections:

> *I've connected with teachers from other regional institutions through social media groups. We share successful activities, discuss challenges, and support each other's*

implementation efforts. These informal networks provide the professional development our institutions can't offer.

Gradual Implementation Strategy

Recognizing implementation as an ongoing process rather than immediate compliance, several teachers adopted gradual approaches that allowed for experimentation and refinement.

Mr. Fan explained his iterative approach:

> *I'm implementing CIPE gradually, testing different integration strategies each semester. Some approaches work better than others, and I'm learning what resonates with my students. This experimental mindset makes implementation feel like professional development rather than burden.*

4.5 Student Responses and Implementation Feedback

4.5.1 Student Reception Patterns

Teacher implementation strategies were significantly influenced by student responses, which varied based on institutional contexts, student backgrounds, and implementation approaches.

Engagement with Meaningful Integration

Teachers reported positive student responses when CIPE content was meaningfully integrated with language learning objectives, regardless of institutional context.

Dr. An observed student engagement:

> *When CIPE content connects to their academic or professional interests, students respond enthusiastically. They appreciate opportunities to discuss Chinese achievements in English and develop vocabulary for describing cultural concepts to international audiences.*

Ms. Ding noted similar patterns:

> *Students initially were skeptical about cultural content, but they've come to appreciate discussions that help them articulate Chinese perspectives in English. It gives them confidence in cross-cultural communication situations.*

Resistance to Superficial Implementation

Students across contexts demonstrated resistance to CIPE implementation that felt disconnected from language learning goals or overly simplistic in content.

Ms. Gao acknowledged student feedback:

> *When I first tried adding brief cultural segments, students questioned the relevance to their English learning goals. They could sense when content felt obligatory rather than integrated. Their feedback pushed me to develop more coherent approaches.*

4.5.2 Learning Outcomes and Implementation Success

Teachers evaluated implementation success through multiple measures, including language learning outcomes, student engagement, and cultural understanding development.

Integrated Assessment Approaches

Teachers who successfully embedded CIPE content developed assessment strategies that evaluated both language competence and cultural understanding.

Dr. Chen described integrated evaluation:

> *Our final projects require students to research Chinese innovation cases and present findings to international audiences. Assessment criteria include language accuracy, cultural content knowledge, and cross-cultural communication effectiveness. Students demonstrate growth in all areas.*

Ongoing Implementation Challenges

Despite creative adaptations, teachers continued facing implementation challenges that constrained their agency and limited implementation effectiveness.

Mr. Fan identified persistent constraints:

> *Time remains the primary challenge. Even with gradual implementation, developing quality CIPE materials requires preparation time I don't have. Administrative expectations for immediate compliance conflict with pedagogical needs for thoughtful integration.*

4.6 Future Orientations and Professional Development

4.6.1 Evolving Implementation Visions

Teachers' future orientations regarding CIPE implementation revealed both hopes for systemic improvements and realistic assessments of ongoing challenges.

Institutional Support Aspirations

Teachers across contexts expressed desires for enhanced institutional support that would facilitate more effective implementation.

Ms. Ding articulated professional development needs:

> *I hope our institution will provide specific training for CIPE integration rather than general political education. We need pedagogical strategies, not ideological instruction. Professional development should address how to teach culture through language, not why culture matters.*

Collaborative Development Goals

Several teachers envisioned expanded collaboration opportunities that would improve implementation quality while reducing the individual burden.

Dr. Bai described collaborative aspirations:

> *I'd like to see formal cross-institutional networks for CIPE curriculum development. Universities could share successful models, collaborate on materials development, and create assessment tools. This would improve implementation quality while recognizing that effective integration requires professional expertise.*

4.6.2 Sustainable Implementation Strategies

Teachers demonstrated awareness that effective CIPE implementation requires sustainable approaches that balance policy requirements with pedagogical integrity and professional well-being.

Realistic Expectation Management

Experienced teachers emphasized the importance of gradual implementation that allows for professional growth and student adaptation.

Mr. Fan reflected on sustainable approaches:

> *CIPE implementation is a multi-year professional development process, not a semester-long compliance task. I'm developing competence gradually, learning from successes and failures, and building implementation strategies that I can sustain over time.*

Professional Agency Preservation

Teachers across contexts emphasized the importance of maintaining professional autonomy within policy compliance frameworks.

Dr. An articulated professional boundary setting:

> *Effective CIPE implementation requires teacher expertise in both language pedagogy and cultural content. Policy compliance can't supersede professional judgment about*

student needs, curricular coherence, and pedagogical effectiveness. Sustainable implementation preserves teacher agency while addressing policy requirements.

4.7 Discussion: Teacher Agency in Complex Policy Environments

The findings reveal that teacher agency in policy implementation operates through complex interactions between individual professional identities, institutional contexts, and structural constraints. Rather than simple compliance or resistance, teachers engage in ongoing negotiation processes that produce varied implementation strategies, reflecting both possibilities and limitations within their specific contexts.

Figure 4.1: Empirical Findings Mapped to Integrated Framework

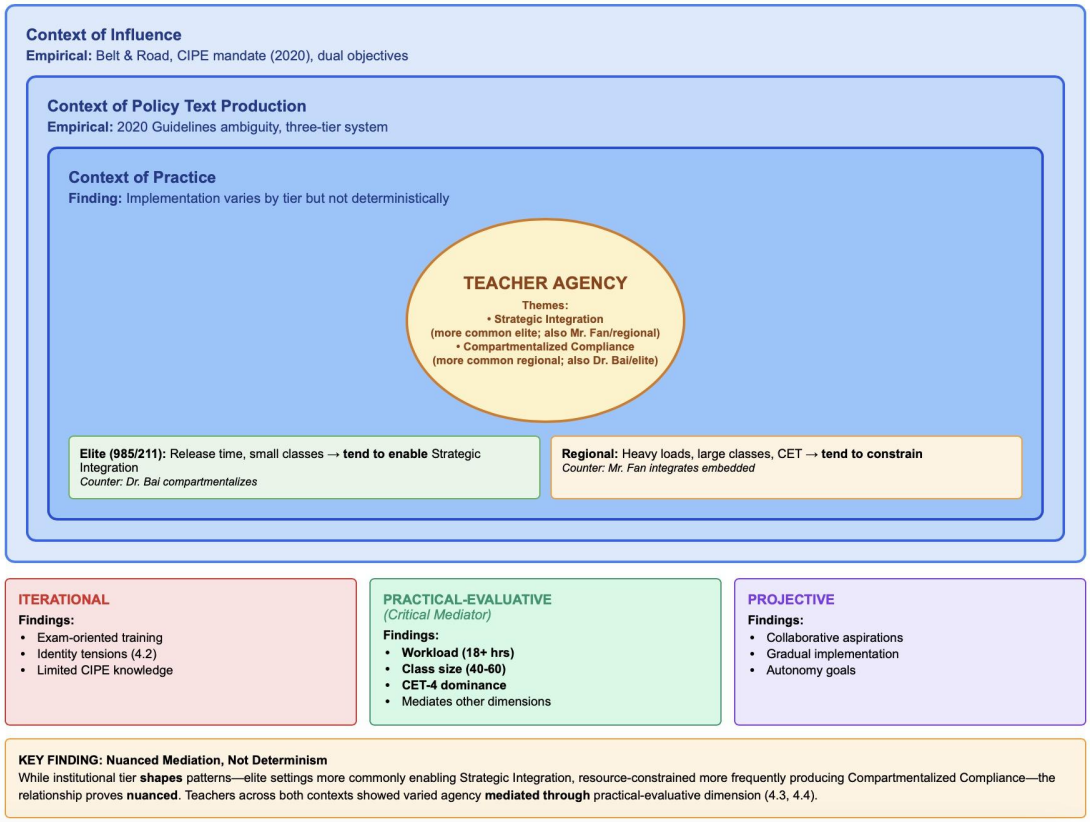

Figure 4.1 maps empirical findings onto the integrated Ball-Priestley framework. While institutional tier shapes implementation patterns—with elite settings more commonly enabling Strategic Integration and resource-constrained settings more frequently producing Compartmentalized Compliance—the relationship proves nuanced rather than deterministic. Teachers across both contexts demonstrated varied agency expressions mediated through the practical-evaluative dimension, where workload pressures, assessment demands, and resource availability interact with individual iterational experiences and projective aspirations to produce diverse implementation strategies.

4.7.1 Agency as Contextual Negotiation

Teachers demonstrate agency not through unfettered choice, but through creative responses to contextual constraints that balance multiple competing demands. This negotiated agency manifests differently across institutional contexts while maintaining common characteristics of professional adaptation and strategic implementation.

The findings support Priestley et al.'s (2015) conceptualization of agency as emerging through interactions between past experiences, present contexts, and future orientations. Furthermore, this understanding is extended to highlight the ongoing, negotiated nature of agency expression in complex policy environments.

4.7.2 Implementation as Professional Learning

Teachers' implementation strategies evolved through experimentation, reflection, and adaptation, suggesting that policy implementation functions as a form of professional learning which develops over time rather than occurring through immediate compliance. This perspective has important implications for policy design and institutional support, highlighting the need for implementation approaches that recognize teacher expertise while providing resources for professional development and collaborative adaptation.

4.8 Conclusion

This analysis demonstrates that CIPE implementation occurs through complex teacher agency processes that defy simple institutional categorization or binary compliance/resistance frameworks. Teachers across institutional contexts demonstrate creativity, professionalism, and strategic thinking in developing implementation approaches that balance policy requirements with pedagogical integrity and contextual constraints.

The findings provide empirical support for theoretical frameworks that emphasize the active role of teachers in policy implementation while highlighting the importance of institutional contexts in shaping possibilities for agency expression. These insights have significant implications for policy design, institutional support, and professional development approaches, which will be explored in the subsequent discussion chapter.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Introduction: Research Purpose and Key Findings

5.1.1 Research Question and Theoretical Framework

This study has examined how Chinese university English teachers interpret and enact national public English policies in everyday teaching, particularly Curriculum Ideological and Political Education (CIPE). The central concern was the implementation gap between macro-level policy intentions and micro-level classroom realities. To address this, the chapter integrates Ball's policy cycle theory with Priestley et al.'s ecological model of teacher agency. Read together, the former explains the structural placement of teachers within policy processes, while the latter explains how teachers act within those structures over time. Therefore, policy enactment can be conceptualised as recontextualisation through negotiated agency. This means teachers interpret policy texts and translate them into practice, drawing on prior experiences, present conditions and judgments, and future-oriented goals.

5.1.2 Summary of Empirical Findings

Across six interviews, teachers pursued two dominant enactment strategies: Strategic Integration (where CIPE is aligned with advanced language and intercultural aims) and Compartmentalised Compliance (brief, isolated coverage to satisfy formal requirements). These strategies showed clear patterns for institutional tiers. Teachers in elite (985/211) universities tended toward Strategic Integration, while teachers in provincial non-elite institutions tended toward Compartmentalised Compliance. The practical-evaluative dimension (workload, class size, accountability regimes) emerged as the critical constraint on transformative agency. Teachers in less-resourced settings cited limited time, large classes, and assessment pressure as reasons to minimise CIPE's substantive presence. Moreover, capacity gaps, especially the lack of pedagogical content knowledge for blending ideological/cultural content with language teaching, further amplified this pattern.

5.1.3 Implementation Gap: Policy Text versus Practice

The findings confirm a persistent policy–practice gap but specify its mechanism in that teachers mediate policy under bounded conditions. CIPE and the 2020 College English Teaching Guidelines set dual targets (proficiency + ideological/cultural formation) yet do not consistently provide commensurate time, materials, or training. In practice, this functions as an unfunded mandate in many settings. Where institutions supply release time, material support, and diversified assessment (more common in elite universities), teachers recontextualise CIPE in substantive ways. Where such supports are absent (typical in provincial institutions), teachers adopt low-risk, low-cost compliance, protecting core exam-focused instruction. Thus, the policy's stated national consistency risks stratified implementation.

5.2 Theoretical Discussion: Policy Recontextualisation through the Ball–Priestley Framework

5.2.1 Structural Constraints and the Practical-Evaluative Dimension

Ball's context of practice helps illuminate how institutional rules, workloads, and accountability structures condition what is feasible. In Priestley et al's terms, these factors constitute the practical-evaluative dimension, namely the space of "what can be done now" under real constraints. Furthermore, participants described heavy teaching loads and classes of roughly 40–60 students, leaving little slack for design-intensive integration. Even teachers who endorsed CIPE's aims reported that they prioritise CET-linked content to safeguard student outcomes and personal evaluations. In effect, exam accountability exerts a structural veto on more ambitious reform, in that when CET-4 pass rates dominate evaluation, teachers rationally protect instructional time for tested skills. Under such conditions, agency narrows to pragmatic risk management. This means teachers comply with CIPE formally (e.g., a short ideological segment at the end of class) while strategically insulating the syllabus required for high-stakes assessment.

This analysis clarifies that the limiting factor is not teacher disposition per se, but a bounded action space. The dominance of CET in the accountability ecology compresses teachers' projective aspirations (Priestley et al's projective dimension) and pushes the practical-evaluative dimension to favour low-variance choices. Consequently, innovative recontextualisation becomes a rational opportunity cost that teachers cannot afford in constrained settings.

5.2.2 Institutional Stratification and Agency Ecosystems

Institutional tiering shapes distinct agency ecosystems. In elite settings, teachers described release time, internal grants, peer working groups, and diversified assessments (e.g., presentations, portfolios) that gave CIPE institutional legitimacy and time. Here, iterational resources (academic identity, confidence with curriculum design) and enabling practical-evaluative conditions converged to support Strategic Integration. Teachers reframed CIPE topics as vehicles for higher-order language work (e.g., critical reading, academic writing, policy discourse analysis), aligning ideological content with disciplinary aims. Their projective dimension, visions for scaling, co-authoring materials, and sharing practice, was credible because conditions supported incremental innovation.

In provincial non-elite settings, teachers reported different forms of scarcity. These included heavier teaching loads, limited development time, generic top-down exhortations with little pedagogical guidance, and CET-dominated evaluation. Under these conditions, Compartmentalised Compliance became the dominant enactment logic, for example a short, scripted segment ("tick-box" CIPE) contained to avoid cannibalising exam preparation. This is not passive resistance but agency under constraint, whereby teachers actively choose a

least-disruption path that preserves core responsibilities. The contrast illustrates that policy uniformity at the text level readily fractures into differentiated enactment at the practice level, patterned by institutional ecology.

The analysis also reveals a Tiered Objective Paradox. The 2020 Guidelines' three levels (basic, improving, developing) intend to accommodate varied contexts. However, in practice these risk institutionalising inequality if objective levels reflect capacity rather than student need. Moreover, resource-constrained institutions may be locked into "basic" targets due to structural limitations, thus entrenching stratified outcomes and contradicting the policy's holistic development aim.

5.2.3 Iterational Dimension and CIPE Capacity Gaps

Priestley et al's iterational dimension (teachers' histories, training, and habits) shaped CIPE uptake. Participants trained in efficiency-rational paradigms (test-oriented methodologies, discrete-point language instruction) reported uncertainty about how to integrate ideological and cultural content without eroding language outcomes. This is best interpreted as a capacity gap rather than ideological resistance. Teachers generally endorsed the value of cultural/ideological discussion but lacked models, materials, and design time to achieve "organic" integration. The result, particularly under pressure, was surface-level insertion (quotes, slogans, cultural vignettes) that could satisfy audit trails but would rarely advance language learning.

Iterational resources mattered in elite settings, where teachers' academic identities (e.g., curriculum designers, disciplinary innovators) aligned with supportive ecologies to produce transformative or incremental integration. In constrained settings, iterational deficits combined with practical-evaluative pressures to favour pragmatic minimalism. Overall, iterational histories served as either springboards (when matched with support) or anchors (when coupled with constraint).

Synthesis: The findings map cleanly onto the integrated lens. Ball (1994) explains why the same policy text enters different contexts of practice and is recontextualised through local logics (resources, accountability). Priestley et al (2015) explain how teachers exercise negotiated agency, by drawing on past repertoires (iterational), present judgments (practical-evaluative), and future projects (projective) Where support and legitimacy exist, agency takes integrative forms. However, where pressure dominates, agency takes compartmentalised forms.

5.3 Policy Implications and Implementation Challenges

5.3.1 Authenticity and Ideological Integration Tensions

A recurring challenge is achieving authentic integration since CIPE elements should enhance rather than displace language learning. Teachers reported tension between linguistic authenticity (materials grounded in English-speaking contexts) and ideological mandates (embedding Chinese values). Superficial insertion risks lowering student engagement and perceived relevance. Effective practice requires cultural mediation, such as juxtaposing texts and tasks that enable critical comparison (e.g., pairing a Western editorial with a Chinese policy speech; designing argumentation tasks where language functions and value reasoning co-develop). In constrained contexts, teachers defaulted to non-controversial, historical content to reduce risk, which would appear to be a rational, but pedagogically thin, approach. The implication seems clear: material support and design time are prerequisites for authentic integration, especially outside elite institutions.

5.3.2 Assessment System Reform Imperatives

The assessment ecology is the pivotal structural lever. If high-stakes metrics continue to prioritise CET-linked proficiency exclusively, CIPE will remain symbolic in many classrooms. Aligning incentives requires broadening what counts: e.g., credit-bearing project work, oral assessments, and writing portfolios evidencing intercultural reasoning and values-informed argumentation in English. Equally, institutional performance frameworks should recognise CIPE-relevant outcomes (e.g., student participation in English debates on Chinese social themes; capstone projects integrating culture and language). Without such recalibration, teachers are likely to persist in practical-evaluative triage toward tested content.

5.3.3 Professional Development and Resource Allocation

Professional development should pivot from abstract ideological messaging to pedagogical method. This could mean designing tasks that integrate language objectives with CIPE themes, adapting texts, facilitating discussion of sensitive topics in English and assessment rubrics that reward both linguistic accuracy and intercultural/ideological reasoning. Furthermore, cross-functional design teams (ideological/political education specialists + applied linguists + experienced EAP/EFL teachers) could co-produce ready-to-use modules adaptable across tiers.

Resource policy should be equity-oriented. Provincial/non-elite institutions need targeted release time, micro-grants for material development, and class-size caps in CIPE-flagged courses. Institutionalising peer collaboration (credit-bearing working groups; shared repositories; cross-campus communities of practice) could transform informal coping into collective capacity-building.

5.4 Stakeholder-Specific Recommendations for Sustainable Implementation

Table 5.4. Stakeholder Recommendations and Rationale

Stakeholder	**Focus**	**Actionable Recommendations**	**Rationale (from findings)**
National policymakers	Assessment & equity	(1) Introduce CIPE/ICC-sensitive assessments (oral/presentation/portfolio) with institutional weight; (2) Create targeted funding lines for non-elite institutions (release time, materials, TA support)	CET-driven accountability is a structural veto; without new metrics, teachers rationally prioritise tested content. Resource disparities drive stratified enactment
University administrators	Capacity & workload	(1) Reduce contact hours or provide release time for CIPE design; (2) Institutionalise pedagogical training focused on integration methods; (3) Formalise collaborative design groups with workload credit	Teachers cite time scarcity and method uncertainty; collaboration and time allocations turn individual coping into organisational capacity
Frontline educators	Collaborative innovation	(1) Build peer networks (within/ across institutions) to co-develop tasks/materials; (2) Adopt reflective, iterative integration (small pilots → evaluate → scale)	Shared artefacts lower design costs; iterative cycles align with practical-evaluative realities and grow iterational repertoires

5.4.1 National Policymakers

A need exists to prioritise assessment diversification and equity mechanisms. Where the system signals that intercultural/ideological outcomes matter (and are measured), teachers can justify time investments. Earmarked funds and policy guidance should support the development–dissemination cycle of CIPE-integrated English materials accessible to non-elite institutions.

5.4.2 University Administrators

The recommendation would be to address the time problem directly. This may entail setting explicit release-time policies tied to curriculum innovation outputs, capping class sizes in CIPE-designated courses, and recognising collaboration time as workload-bearing. Furthermore, partner teaching centres with departments could run discipline-specific workshops that would produce concrete resources (lesson sequences, assessment rubrics).

5.4.3 Frontline Educators

Pursuing low-risk, high-coherence pilots is required. This could involve reframing existing skills tasks around culturally salient topics, integrating short comparative readings and adding value-oriented criteria to existing writing rubrics. Furthermore, document outcomes could be shared with peers with the aim of iterative improvement. This could build iterational capital and legitimise integration through demonstrated learning value.

5.5 Theoretical and Practical Contributions

5.5.1 Theoretical Contributions

First, the chapter operationalises negotiated agency under a combined Ball–Priestley lens. Rather than a compliance/resistance binary, teachers enact graded, strategic positions shaped by structural conditions and temporal agency dimensions. This enriches Ball's focus on contexts with Priestley et al's account of how teachers act within them over time, thus showing that the practical-evaluative often dominates where accountability pressure is high.

Second, the analysis advances a stratified enactment diagnosis. Identical policy texts yield tiered enactment trajectories because contexts-of-practice and agency ecologies differ by institutional tier. This helps explain why national reforms frequently manifest unevenly without imputing teacher motives; the issue is capacity and ecology rather than willingness.

Third, the study distinguishes capacity gaps (especially in pedagogical content knowledge for ideological integration) from ideological opposition. This reframing directs improvement efforts toward design knowledge and structural support, not attitudinal correction.

5.5.2 Practical Contributions

Practically, the study translates findings into system-aligned levers. This involves assessment redesign to remove structural vetoes, in addition to workload and collaboration policies that create time-to-design, and practice-focused professional development that yields portable artefacts. For teachers, it models incremental integration strategies compatible with

accountability demands, thereby fostering credible pathways from symbolic to substantive CIPE.

5.6 Limitations and Future Research Directions

5.6.1 Study Limitations

This qualitative study is based on six interviews, without classroom observation. Self-reporting introduces potential social desirability and limits direct verification of enacted practices. The small, purposive sample constrains transferability. Consequently, the patterns observed here should be interpreted as illustrative rather than representative of all Chinese universities.

5.6.2 Future Research Directions

- Longitudinal designs to track whether Compartmentalised Compliance persists or evolves toward integration as materials/training improve.
- Mixed-methods studies combining interviews, classroom observations, and student artefacts/assessments to triangulate the learning effects of different enactment strategies.
- Comparative institutional studies to isolate which administrative levers (assessment policies, workload models) most reliably shift practice from symbolic to substantive integration.
- Design-based research partnerships producing and iteratively testing CIPE-integrated English modules across tiers, to evaluate scalability and teacher workload implications.

5.7 Conclusion

The chapter has shown that policy enactment in Chinese university English teaching is best understood as contextually mediated, negotiated agency. Under the combined Ball–Priestley lens, the same policy text is refracted through different contexts-of-practice, and teachers, drawing on their pasts, present judgments, and future aims, choose strategy sets that make sense under local constraints. In elite settings, Strategic Integration flourishes because institutional conditions align with academic identities and future-oriented projects. In provincial settings, Compartmentalised Compliance is a rational protective move due to workload and accountability pressure.

Accordingly, systemic change requires aligning assessment, workload, and capacity-building with the policy's dual ambitions. If CIPE-aligned outcomes gain institutional weight, and if teachers are provided time and method-focused support, agency should expand. In this situation the practical-evaluative space would become less constraining, the projective more

actionable, and iterational repertoires richer. In short, the path from symbolic to substantive enactment is not primarily attitudinal, it is ecological.

Moreover, recognising teachers as partners in policy, and resourcing them accordingly, would offer the most credible route to realising China's public English policy's vision, namely graduates who can combine strong linguistic proficiency with reflective cultural/ideological understanding. Without such alignment, enactment will likely continue to bifurcate by institutional tier, and the policy's holistic goals will probably remain unevenly realised. With it, teachers' negotiated agency could become a driver rather than a workaround of reform, and the classroom should become the site where policy intent and educational value converge.

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