



MODULE CODE: ECDE7021

ASSESSMENT COMPONENT: 3

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

WORD COUNT: 10445

Doctorate in Education (EdD)

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Contemporary Chinese curriculum models emphasise local flexibility and position teachers as change agents (Priestley and Drew, 2019), a shift that has led to adoption of learner-centered models (Priestley and Biesta, 2013), and an advocacy for teachers to play an active role in curriculum changes and implementation (Sinnema and Aitken, 2013). Therefore, teacher agency has become vital in the implementation of education reforms (Tao and Gao, 2017) with the success of educational reforms heavily influenced by teachers' participation (Priestley et al., 2015). The level to which teachers may enact their agency may have significant effects on effectiveness of reforms in education (Leander and Osborne, 2008), teachers' well-being, professional development, and academic gains (Back, 2019).

This study adopts Priestley et al.'s (2015) definition of teacher agency as the capacity of teachers to purposefully act in their professional settings that emerge from a dynamic interplay between environmental contexts in which teachers operate and personal factors like knowledge, goals, experiences, and beliefs. As such, teacher agency is not an innate attribute in teachers. Rather, it develops as the teachers interact with their environment (Jenkins, 2020).

The role of teacher agency in curriculum reforms has gained significant research interest, yet most of the existing studies have been conducted in Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) contexts. For instance, Miller and Gkonou (2018) investigated teacher agency, emotional labour, and emotional rewards of language teachers in the UK and the U.S while Vähäsantanen (2015) investigated Finnish vocational teachers' professional agency during professional educational reforms. While some like Hu and McKay (2012) have explored the implementation of public English policies in Chinese universities and cite economic imperatives as core motivators for the enactment of these policies, there is still a large research gap on how teachers in China enact these policies at the classroom level. According to Gil (2016), public English curriculum in China has been significantly transformed over time. Gao (2018) underscores that there has been a change from a focus on exam and standardisation to holistic learner development including ideological shifts that include cultivating learner's moral awareness,

cultural values, national identity, and critical thinking alongside language proficiency.

Xu (2021) argues that the changes in public English education in China tend to reflect the broader role of China in the global development, and her positioning as a global economic powerhouse, as evident by the development of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Recent studies suggest that China's College English policy has shifted away from a narrow emphasis on test-oriented language learning towards broader goals including communicative competence, intercultural awareness and humanistic education (Hu, Li and Luo, 2024; Ministry of Education, China, 2020). This policy shift provides the context for the Curriculum Ideological and Political Education (henceforth CIPE), which requires teachers to integrate ideological and value-oriented elements into subject teaching rather than treating them as separate curriculum content. The change has led to the implementation of the CIPE as a central policy focus that has fundamentally transformed English education in China (Xin et al., 2024).

According to the Ministry of Education, China (2020), the most fundamental change in English education curriculum is the 2020 revision of College English Teaching Guidelines. The guidelines introduced three core changes. The first change was a shift from instrumental to humanistic orientation and an emphasis on practical communication. The second change is the introduction of the three-level requirements that include the basic, improving, and developing goals that accommodate the proficiency of various learners across China. The final change integrated English for general, specific, and intercultural communication as core curriculum components (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Recent studies, for instance Lei and Medwell (2022), confirm the complex nature of these reforms and the challenges faced during curriculum reforms. Lei and 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 Structure of the Dissertation

The research study is divided into six major chapters. This introductory chapter is followed by a literature review chapter that reviews the existing relevant literature while the third chapter presents and discusses the research methods and methodologies used in this research study. Chapter four and five respectively present and discuss the research findings. Finally, chapter six presents research recommendations.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The chapter reviews core literature on implementation efficacy of public English policies in Chinese universities with a focus on the implementation efficacy of CIPE, a higher education reform specifically in China that directly integrates moral guidance and political values into subject specific courses (Ministry of Education, China, 2020). The interest and focus on China is informed by extant research focussed on the developed Western countries (Miller and Gkonou, 2018; Vähäsantanen, 2015) leaving a research gap in the context of China. The chapter offers a brief evolution of public English education in China to the recent development and implementation of the CIPE (Ministry of Education, China, 2020). Based on the contextual understanding, challenges to efficient CIPE implementation in China are discussed.

2.2 Historical Evolution of Public English Education Policy in China

Public English education policy in China can be understood as having developed through several broad phases that reflect changing socio-economic and educational priorities. The early phase that started in early 1980s to 1990s focused on utilitarianism (prioritisation of collective interests over personal interests) and efficient rationality (value-based behaviour) and positioned English language as a tool for economic modernisation of China since it was believed that English would open China for technology transfer, trade, and knowledge transfer (Hu and McKay, 2012). Wu (2021) also stated that this period was characterised by efficiency benchmarks and emphasis on learners' test scores.

The early phase was followed by the middle phase between early 2000s and 2010s and integrated public governance into public English curriculum (Yan and He, 2012a). The College English Curriculum requirements (2007) were one of the hallmarks of this phase and encompassed a dual tracking system that included English for general and specific purpose (Yan and He, 2012b). This means that under this change, students were not just expected to acquire English language skills for academic and everyday communications but to also acquire English language proficiency relevant to their future professions. During this phase, there was advocacy for autonomy in China's universities (Yu et al. 2022), yet the

implementation of this phase was derailed by institutional disparities between the well-funded elite universities and the poorly funded regional universities (Larivière et al. 2021). Well-funded elite universities were able to effectively implement reforms during this phase unlike the regional universities (Lei and Medwell, 2022). This means that institutional context, and precisely resource availability directly influences the implementation efficacy of public English curriculum reforms in China.

The start of the new phase of public English education in China commenced around 2013 and has been ongoing. This phase has been strongly influenced by the Belt and Road Initiative, which has brought new challenges to China's English education policy and shifted policy attention from test-oriented language learning towards intercultural communication, teaching methods, feedback and curriculum design (Hu, Li and Luo, 2024). In this context, English education in Chinese higher education has increasingly been expected to serve both communicative and broader cultural purposes. The College English Teaching Guidelines (2020) further repositioned College English as a curriculum area concerned not only with language proficiency, but also with intercultural communication and humanistic education (Ministry of Education, China, 2020).

At the same time, CIPE requires the integration of socialist core values into English language education, including through English teaching materials and classroom content (Zhou and Wang, 2025). However, this may complicate teachers' efforts to balance ideological content with learners' communicative development, especially where resources and professional support are limited (Deng and Wang, 2023; Zhang et al., 2025). The dual mandates of CIPE reforms have highly influenced English pedagogical practices in China, creating challenges and opportunities in curriculum enactment (Wu, 2021). Zhang et al. (2025) show that although Chinese universities have responded to CIP through training and institutional promotion, some EFL teachers still experience insufficient guidance and theoretical support when integrating CIP into classroom teaching.

2.3 Curriculum Ideological and Political Education

The concept of CIPE represents a fundamental reconceptualisation of ideological education in Chinese higher education (Liu and He, 2022). 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 (Sun and Wang, 2023).

2.3.1 Conceptual development and implementation

CIPE emerged from recognition that traditional separated approaches to political education proved insufficient for comprehensive value transmission (Liu and He, 2022). According to Sun and Wang (2023), CIPE requires teachers to integrate ideological and political content into their subject teaching. In the context of English education, however, it has been argued that this integration may present certain challenges since traditional English teaching drew from global materials that may conflict with local cultural values (Xin et al., 2024).

Liu et al. (2022) analysed university textbooks and concluded that Chinese English textbooks are dominated by Anglo-American cultural concepts. The monocultural bias in the existing curriculum may conflict with the demands of the Chinese government to integrate local cultural values and ideologies (Liu et al., 2022). Similarly, Deng and Wang (2023) and Kearney (2010) also reported that using English language learning materials that are developed by non-native speakers may immerse learners into the language, yet this may also undermine the local cultural values. In view of this, Chinese teachers must develop the capacity to extract and share only the relevant ideological and cultural values and concepts to the learners.

2.3.2 Pedagogical complexities

Resource constraints appear to be an important challenge in CIPE implementation. Deng and Wang (2023) report the challenge of inadequate teaching materials, with only 37.62% of surveyed learners noting that their institutions have adequate learning materials to implement CIPE. According to Zhang et al. (2025), limited resources negatively influence teachers' capacity to implement the policy. Secondly, the demand for organic CIPE integration led to authenticity dilemmas (Wang, 2021) since teachers face the challenge of ensuring the course remains authentic while also integrating ideological and political concepts (Li, 2021). The tensions reveal that integrating CIPE into the public English teaching demands skilled teachers and teacher agency.

2.4 Challenges in CIPE Policy Implementation

China has a different context from Western countries due to the need to integrate political and cultural ideologies in the English curriculum, and these cause challenges in CIPE integration (Feng and Bai, 2021). It has been reported that teachers in universities in China work an average of 51.64 hours per week, with over half categorised as heavy overworkers (Yang et al., 2024 cited in Sha and Chang, 2025). Teachers in Chinese universities often have to balance teaching and research responsibilities, and this may create tensions in their professional work (Zhang and Shin, 2015). The new CIPE guidelines and integration of ideological and political concepts further complicate teachers' work. Sha and Chang (2025) report that this may lead to health and mental challenges for teachers as teachers are overworked. Moreover, Zhang et al. (2023) reported that limited resources in developing EFL teaching contexts may constrain teachers' agency.

A second challenge facing CIPE implementation is the contradictions in assessments. While CIPE emphasises ideological and political competence (Ministry of Education, China, 2020), CET-4 and CET-6 assessments still focus on linguistic proficiency and not the broadened CIPE goals. This contradiction can be understood through Ball's (1994) distinction between policy text and policy practice, as teachers are expected to respond to broader CIPE goals while still working within assessment systems that prioritise linguistic proficiency. Accordingly, it can be argued that while teachers face the pressure to implement the comprehensive CIPE policy, they are aware that their success is determined by learners' language proficiency metrics. Wang (2022) reported that CET-4 and CET-6 test pressures limit teachers' ability to focus on the innovative ideological and political aspects of the new curriculum. However, the studies did not explore the limitations and challenges in the context of CIPE implementation and teacher agency in China.

Thirdly, the stratified nature of China's higher education in regards to funding mechanisms influences implementation capacity (Larivière et al., 2021; Gruijters, 2022), and this may impact CIPE implementation. China has elite 985/211 universities (universities that received government support to become more competitive nationally and internationally through project 985 launched in 1998 to provide additional funding to smaller group of top universities to gain world class

status and project 211 launched in 1995 to strengthen 100 universities for the 21st century). China's higher education system is hierarchically stratified, with elite 985/211 universities generally occupying a more advantaged position in terms of national policy support, institutional prestige and resource allocation (Wang and Cheng, 2014). This broader pattern of educational stratification is relevant to this study because universities with different levels of resources may provide different conditions for policy implementation (Du, 2016; Yeung, 2013). In the context of CIPE, such institutional differences may shape the extent to which teachers can access professional support, develop teaching materials and experiment with pedagogical strategies.

Finally, CIPE integration creates cultural mediation challenges (Chen and Ping Gu, 2024). According to Liu et al. (2022), English teaching materials are rooted in the Western cultures that oftentimes conflict the Chinese culture that put emphasis on collectivism, respect, social harmony, authority, and preservation of national cultural identity. Therefore, inserting Chinese ideologies and politics into the content may be inadequate since a meaningful integration requires pedagogical approaches that create a link between value transmission and language learning (Wei and Xin, 2024). Currently, CIPE implementation is disconnected from substantive pedagogical changes due to inadequate depth and a lack of exploratory practice, which creates uncertainty in CIPE implementation rather than resistance to the aims of the policy (Wei and Xin, 2024). The phenomenon aligns with constrained agency (Priestley et al., 2015) where institutional contexts limit teacher agency, yet effective CIPE integration demands a progressive agency, a clear strategy on how English may serve and meet ideological needs.

2.5 Problem Statement, Research Aim and Research Questions

Reforms of the English education curriculum in China set ambitious targets that encompass ideological education, intercultural competence, and holistic development, yet face a persistent implementation gap (Yan and He, 2012a; Yan, 2012). Teachers are faced with the challenges of juggling ideological goals, intercultural communication, exam preparation, and language proficiency that are in the current reforms (Ministry of Education, 2020). A number of systemic constraints that impede curriculum changes including poor evaluation, limited

teacher development, and the Gaokao exam system that limit teachers to focus on exam performance and limit their flexibility to make independent pedagogical decisions and implement curriculum innovations have been identified (Yan, 2015; Yu, 2023). At the same time, work pressures and heavy workloads negatively impact teacher agency even when teachers have positive attitudes towards curriculum changes (Wang, 2022).

The integration of ideological concepts into CIPE is highly challenging, as research shows that CIPE-related resources are scarce and that teachers are often required to develop ideological content themselves (Deng and Wang, 2023). A research by Li and Guan (2020) cite a lack of ideological knowledge by the teachers. Similarly, Law (2014) shows that curriculum reform in China is strongly shaped by state priorities and may be constrained when national curriculum expectations are translated into classroom practice. This is relevant to CIPE because it suggests that policy implementation cannot be understood only through official policy aims, but must also be examined through teachers' classroom-level interpretations and institutional conditions.

In view of this, the overarching aim of this research is to develop a contextually grounded understanding of why the implementation of public English policies, and CIPE in particular, varies in its effectiveness across institutional contexts in Chinese universities, and thereby to generate practical insights that could inform how institutions and policymakers support teachers in achieving more coherent and sustainable policy implementation in future. To achieve this aim, the study pursues the following objectives:

- i) To explore how university teachers in China interpret, adapt, and implement public English policies within their institutional contexts.
- ii) To identify the factors that facilitate or limit effective implementation of CIPE reforms in universities in China.
- iii) To examine how teachers in regional and elite universities negotiate the competing demands of CIPE implementation in their institutions.

In order to address these objectives empirically, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- i) How do university English teachers in China describe their understanding of, and responses to, public English policies in their everyday teaching practice?
- ii) What institutional, professional and assessment-related factors do teachers identify as enabling or constraining their implementation of CIPE?
- iii) In what ways, if any, do teachers' implementation strategies differ between elite and regional university contexts, and how do teachers account for these differences?

2.6 Research Significance and Scope

2.6.1 Theoretical and practical significance

This research study has both theoretical and practical significance. From a theoretical point of view, while existing studies have examined English education policy change and ideological content in textbooks, fewer studies have explored teachers' lived experiences of CIPE implementation (Hu, Li and Luo, 2024; Zhou and Wang, 2025).

The research offers vital insights into the role of teachers and teacher agency in public English curriculum reforms especially in universities in China where recent changes in the English curriculum integrate pedagogical and ideological concepts (Ministry of Education, China, 2020). The study adopts Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological model and Ball's (1994) policy cycle theory to demonstrate that teachers act as active agents rather than passive players in public English curriculum reforms in China. The research therefore demonstrates a recontextualisation of national policies via adaptive processes and professional interpretation.

Research on language teacher agency suggests that teachers play an active role in interpreting and responding to curriculum reform, rather than simply implementing policy as passive recipients (Tao and Gao, 2021). In the Chinese university context, Tao and Gao (2017) show that teachers' agency and identity commitment shape how they engage with curricular reform and professional development. These insights are relevant to this study because CIPE implementation depends not only on policy design, but also on how teachers understand, negotiate and enact reform expectations within different institutional conditions.

2.6.2 Research Scope

The scope of the study is universities in China and precisely elite and regional universities in China. Firstly, China has been selected because it falls within the scope of the under-studied contexts - most studies have focussed on WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic) contexts (Miller and Gkonou, 2018; Vähäsantanen, 2015). Secondly, China's public English curriculum reforms from 2013 are unique since they integrate ideological components, which depart from the experiences of other countries from the West (Ministry of Education, China, 2020). Finally, the study covers elite vs regional universities in China because of the differential university funding in the country (Yu et al., 2022) and the established influence of resource endowment on curriculum reform implementation. A comparison of well-resourced elite universities versus poorly funded regional universities gives an insight into how resources and teacher support influence efficacy of implementation of CIPE in China.

Chapter Three: Research Design and Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the choices of the research methods and methodologies used for data collection and analysis to meet the research aim and objectives. The chapter has two major sections. The first section is the research design that includes ontology and epistemology of the research, research approach, research strategy, reflexivity, and theoretical framework. The second section of the research is the research methods section that includes sampling, data collection methods, data analysis, and ethical considerations.

The research methods and methodologies seek to answer the following three research questions:

- i) How do university English teachers in China describe their understanding of, and responses to, public English policies in their everyday teaching practice?
- ii) What institutional, professional and assessment-related factors do teachers identify as enabling or constraining their implementation of CIPE?
- iii) In what ways, if any, do teachers' implementation strategies differ between elite and regional university contexts, and how do teachers account for these differences?

3.2 Research Design

3.2.1 Ontology

In regards to ontological perspective, this study is grounded on a constructivist ontology. Constructivists argue that social realities like teacher agency in implementation efficacy of CIPE in China are socially constructed through human interactions and should not be perceived as a fixed reality and is objective and quantifiable (Creswell, 2014). In the context of this research, this implies that the implementation efficacy of public English policy implementation in China is not a linear process. Rather, it is recontextualised as teachers negotiate between the directives given by the government and the ministry of education in China and the

realities in schools where teachers implement these policies (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

3.2.2 Epistemology and research method

The research used an interpretivist-qualitative stance. Interpretivism recognises that social reality is context-specific and multiple (O'Donoghue, 2018), and emphasises teachers' own understanding of experiences and meanings of public English policy and curriculum implementation in China (Pervin and Mokhtar, 2022), which aligns to Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological model that frames teachers as active agents and Ball's (1994) policy theory that puts emphasis on context and practice. Both Ball's (1994) and Priestley et al.'s (2015) models view teachers' actions and interpretations as shaped by their policy, institutional, and social contexts, which interpretivism seeks to understand through the subjective experiences of research participants.

Interpretivism enabled the researcher to seek depth through dialogue with the university teachers and allowed the teachers to share their adaptive strategies and interpretations (Thanh and Thanh, 2015). This aligns with the first research objective that explores teachers' policy interpretation and the third research objective on how teachers negotiate curriculum demands thereby foregrounding teachers' voices (Pham, 2018). The method helped the researcher to capture the complex socio-cultural factors (since education is predominantly psycho-socio-cultural that makes qualitative research essential) (Gichuru, 2017), is flexible, and helped to explore emergent issues (Pham, 2018). It also generated context-specific insights rather than surface-level patterns (Gichuru, 2017).

However, a limitation of the interpretative-qualitative research is that the findings are not statistically generalisable and may be subjective thereby reflecting researcher bias (Pham, 2018). While an alternative positivist-quantitative-survey was initially considered, the option was dropped due to its inability to explore an in-depth teachers' experiences and knowledge in regards to teachers' agency in English curriculum implementation (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020).

3.2.3 Research approach

In line with interpretivist-qualitative research, an inductive approach was adopted to allow theoretical insights to emerge from the data rather than imposing pre-existing hypotheses (Creswell, 2014). Due to the limited research on CIPE implementation in China as established in chapter one, induction was appropriate to capture un-anticipated meanings, practices, and tensions in public English policy enactment (Creswell, 2014). An alternative deductive approach was initially considered due to its ability to draw conclusions from larger samples and address the limitation of induction (Creswell, 2014) but was rejected due to its rigidity and the ability to test existing theories (Kumar and Ujire, 2024).

3.2.4 Research strategy

The research used a qualitative case study. Case studies are appropriate when research aims to explore a phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2009). The case is the implementation of CIPE within public English teaching in Chinese universities. Elite and regional university contexts are embedded units of analysis. The focus on Chinese universities is justified because English curriculum reform is state-led, CIPE has a distinctive ideological role in Chinese higher education (Ministry of Education, 2020), and institutional stratification shapes policy implementation (Yu et al., 2022). The merit of a case study strategy is the ability to capture context-specific policy implementation across Chinese institutions (Yin, 2009), yet the strategy may limit generalisation since the collected data may only be relevant to the research context (Yin, 2009). While the research could have used a survey, surveys put emphasis on breadth over depth, and may overlook the contextual experiences, meanings, and factors that shape teacher agency (Bryman, 2016).

3.2.5 Theoretical framework: an integrated theory of teacher agency and policy implementation

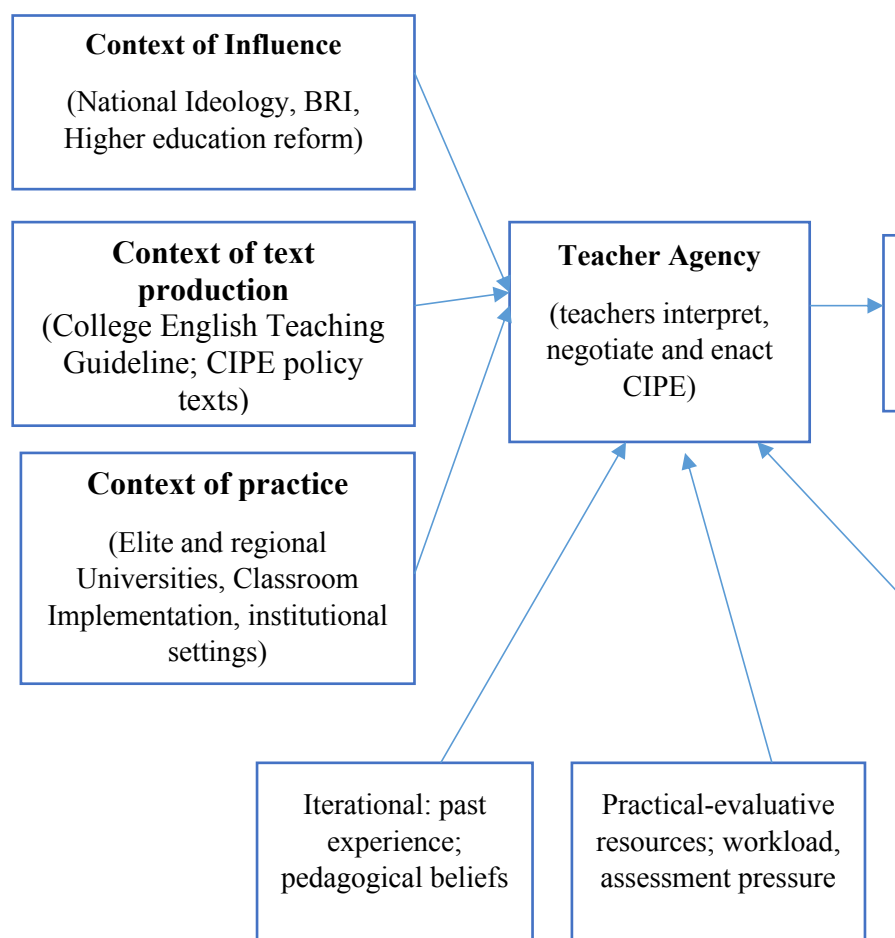
In this study, Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological model and Ball's (1994) policy cycle models are integrated to provide a comprehensive framework to explore and understand the efficacy of implementation of public English policy in China from the perspective of teachers.

According to Ball's (1994) theory, policy implementation is influenced by three different contexts. The first context is the national and global discussions that directly influence implementation of a policy (the context of influence). The second context refers to emergence of policy ambiguity and contradictions (what Ball called the context of text production). The final context is the influence of teachers' own interpretation and how they implement policies (the context of practice) (Ball, 1994). Ball's (1994) policy cycle is useful for this study as it draws attention to the movement of policy between official formulation and situated practice. In the context of CIPE, this means that teachers should not be treated as passive recipients of national policy, but as actors who interpret policy texts within the constraints and opportunities of their institutional settings. This focus on context provides a basis for combining Ball's policy analysis with Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological model of teacher agency, which helps to explain how teachers exercise agency within these policy conditions.

Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological model conceptualises teacher agency as an emergent achievement rather than as a fixed individual attribute. Agency is understood as something teachers achieve through the interaction between their prior professional experiences, their present cultural, structural and material conditions, and their future-oriented aspirations. This model can thus help to examine how Chinese university English teachers interpret and enact CIPE policy within different institutional contexts. In particular, it allows the study to consider how institutional resources, assessment pressures, professional development opportunities and teachers' own professional values shape the ways in which CIPE is implemented in practice.

An integrated model of Ball (1994) and Priestley et al. (2015) presented in figure 3-1 below is used in the study to explore the implementation efficacy of public English policy in universities in China. This model integrates Priestley et al.'s ecological dimensions and Ball's policy context by viewing teacher agency as the link between policy and practice. Teachers leverage their past experiences (iterational), navigate the present conditions in their teaching institutions (practical-evaluative), and pursue future goals (projective) when they interpret and implement CIPE policies in universities.

Ball's Policy Cycle



Priestley et al.'s Ecological Model

Figure 3-1: Theoretical Framework that combines Ball's Policy Cycle and Priestley et al.'s Ecological Model of Teacher Agency

Source: Adapted from Ball (1994) and Priestley et al. (2015).

This integrated framework is particularly relevant to this research because CIPE implementation is shaped not only by national policy expectations, but also by institutional resources, assessment pressures, professional development opportunities and teachers' understandings of their professional roles. These factors can be analysed as part of the cultural, structural and material conditions through which teacher agency is achieved. Therefore, the framework enables this study to examine both the policy context of CIPE and the ways in which teachers interpret, negotiate and enact this policy in different university settings.

Despite its usefulness, the integrated framework has some limitations. Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological model focuses on how teachers exercise agency through their own experiences and judgements, but pays less attention to structural factors such as funding gaps or staffing levels that can restrict what teachers are actually able to do (Zhang and Wright, 2017). Ball's (1994) policy cycle is also useful for tracing how CIPE is reinterpreted at different stages, but was not developed with an ideologically-driven policy in mind, so it does not fully capture the cultural and political pressures shaping CIPE implementation in Chinese universities (Wang and Cheng, 2014). The framework adopted here is therefore a useful lens for this study, though its limitations should be kept in mind when interpreting the findings.

3.2.6 Reflexivity

As a researcher, my past as a teacher of English in a local institution in China could have influenced the research process. With this awareness, I constantly reflected on how my own personal experiences during my teaching practice could influence my interpretation of the data. I used reflexive memo writing during the coding process to enhance analytical transparency and bracket my assumptions. While my knowledge as an insider influenced sensitivity to the research context, my reflexive practice mitigated confirmation bias and boosted research credibility.

3.3 Research Methods

3.3.1 Sampling strategy

Participants in the research were purposively sampled. Therefore, the research participants were selected based on their knowledge of the research topic, which allowed the researcher to gain access to information-rich participants rather than statistical representation, the sampling process was simple, and less time-consuming (Rai and Thapa, 2015). However, purposive sampling lacks sample randomness and could introduce sample bias (Obilor, 2023). While simple random sampling could have been used to increase representativeness, a simple random sampling would risk engaging teachers with limited policy implementation experiences and weaken the study's analytical depth (Rai and Thapa, 2015).

A sample of six teachers, three each from elite and regional institutions, was selected to enable comparison across institutional tiers. Braun and Clarke (2013)

suggest that small interview-based thematic analysis projects may include around 6–10 participants. While the sample size ($n=6$) is modest, it follows the principle of information power (Malterud et al., 2016, p. 2), whereby a smaller, information-rich sample can yield valid insights when the study has a focused aim, dense data collection, and strong theoretical framing. Thus, six teachers were selected due to the constraints of time, finances and access, as well as the depth of participants' knowledge of CIPE implementation.

The inclusion criteria for the sample included: (i) aged 18 years and above to ensure express consent from the participants and avoid sampling vulnerable groups (see consent form in appendix B), (ii) sound mind, (iii) at least five years of experience to ensure in-depth knowledge of the research area, (iv) either from elite or regional university in China for variability, and (v) express willingness to take part in the research to avoid coercion in line with research ethics. Table 3-1 summarises the characteristics of the research sample.

Table 3-1: Participant Overview

Participant	Institution Type	Experience	Role Focus
X1	Elite (985)	15 years	Senior faculty, curriculum design
X2	Elite (985)	12 years	Associate professor, research-focused
X3	Elite (211)	8 years	Teaching-research balanced
X4	Regional	10 years	Frontline teaching, large classes
X5	Regional	14 years	Mid-career, administrative duties
X6	Regional	7 years	Junior faculty, CET-focused

3.3.2 Data collection instrument and data collection process

Semi-structured interviews conducted online and lasted between 30 and 40 minutes each were used to collect data. Firstly, during semi-structured interviews, the researcher was able to ask supplementary questions and gain in-depth data (Bryman, 2016). Secondly, semi-structured interviews are effective in exploring subjective issues like the implementation efficacy of public English policies in Chinese universities. Finally, the method is aligned with an interpretivist study by foregrounding teachers' voices and meanings (Bryman, 2016). However, interviews

relied on self-reported data and could only be used to collect data from a small sample of teachers since it is time consuming that limited the generalisability of the findings of the study (Brown and Danaher, 2019). While an alternative survey method could have been used to collect data from larger samples, surveys were rejected due to their inflexibility and inability to collect deep-seated and detailed contextual data on the implementation efficacy of public English policies in Chinese Universities (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik, 2021).

Teachers were firstly accessed through university administrators who acted as gatekeepers in each university. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese which allowed participants to articulate nuanced views without language barriers (Adams, 2015). As the interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, transcription and initial coding were undertaken in the original language to preserve participants' meanings. Quotations selected for reporting were subsequently translated into English by the researcher. Recognising translation as an interpretive process, particular attention was paid to maintaining semantic and cultural equivalence between the original and translated texts (Temple and Young, 2004; van Nes et al., 2010).

Each interview lasted between 30 and 40 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 (Adams, 2015). Following the pilot, one key amendment was made: questions specifically targeting Curriculum Ideological and Political Education (CIPE) were added to ensure comprehensive data collection on teachers' responses to this core policy mandate. The interview protocol is attached in appendix A of this research.

3.3.3 Data analysis

A thematic data analysis process was used in this research. In the first stage, the researcher familiarised themselves with the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts, taking notes and highlighting major and relevant concepts from the interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2021). In the second stage, the researcher manually generated the initial codes to remain close to the meanings from the participants'

responses. In practice, this involved repeatedly reading the transcripts, identifying meaningful words, phrases, and segments of text, and assigning descriptive labels (codes) that reflected the experiences and views of the participants while staying close to the original meanings. The codes were then collated into potential themes that reflected the patterns of adaptation, constraint, and agency (Braun and Clarke, 2021). To ensure distinctiveness and coherence, each of the emerging themes was reviewed against the dataset (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). In practice, this involved comparing each theme against the coded extracts and full dataset to ensure that data within the themes were meaningfully related, while there were distinctions between the different themes. As Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested, the researcher then defined and named the themes in relation to the research aims and objectives, and analytically reported the themes and their relationship to the existing literature. Coding tables for each of the research objectives are presented in the next chapter to demonstrate an overview of the data analysis procedure.

3.3.4 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was secured prior to data collection. Participants received detailed information sheets and signed consent forms (consent form attached in appendix B). Given the political sensitivity of CIPE and the need to protect research participants from victimisation as a result of their participation in this research, anonymity was carefully protected by assigning pseudonyms (for instance X1 to X6) to the participants and removing identifiable details (for instance, institutional names, personal names, phone contacts, and emails) (Cohen et al., 2017; Hammersley, 2017). The data collected in the study that included transcripts and recorded audios was saved in my student drive that is maintained by the university. The drive was password protected to ensure that the data was not accessed by any unauthorised personnel (Ramrathan et al., 2017). Finally, all the participants were given the explicit rights to withdraw from the study (Head, 2020).

Chapter Four: Research Findings

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present and discuss the findings of the research from in-depth interviews of six teachers from elite and regional universities in China regarding the implementation efficacy of public English policies in universities in China. The findings are structured around the integrated Ball (1994) and Priestley et al. (2015) frameworks.

4.2 Research Findings

4.2.1 Professional identities and policy interpretation

The findings suggest that teachers' professional identities influence implementation efficacy of public English curriculum reforms specifically CIPE reforms) in universities in China. The emerging themes (academic identity, pragmatic identity, and identity tensions and ambivalence) are summarised in table 4-1.

Table 4-1: Thematic table for teachers' professional identities and policy interpretation

Major Theme	Commonly Agreed Responses (cited interviews)	Contrasting Responses (cited interviews)
Academic Identity	Many teachers (X1, X2 X3) embraced CIPE as an intellectual challenge, seeing it as an extension of scholarly work. Respondents with research-focused backgrounds reported integrating ideological content naturally into lessons (X1 and X3).	A few academic-oriented teachers still viewed CIPE as external: one (X4) described it as a bureaucratic add-on that distracted from core content.
Pragmatic Identity	Teachers (X4, X5) emphasized functional English skills and compliance, focusing on workload management. They described CIPE as a requirement to fit around existing courses without sacrificing learning outcomes.	Some pragmatically-oriented teachers nonetheless integrated content (e.g. X1's approach shows blending strategies, opposing a purely separate model).
Identity Tensions & Ambivalence	Several interviewees (X6, X4, X5, and X2) reported ambivalence: valuing CIPE's goals but feeling burdened by extra work. Teachers described fluctuating attitudes, indicating a mix of appreciation and frustration within the same person (X2 and X4).	In contrast, some teachers (e.g X3) maintained a consistent stance (either fully embracing or resisting CIPE) rather than vacillating

The findings in this research suggest that teachers' professional identities shape public English policy implementation in public universities in China. However, the research further shows that the influence is more complex than has been reported in past studies and revealed by institutional categories. While institutions influenced teachers' professional identities through performance evaluation systems, administrative expectations, curriculum requirements, and allocation of resources, the findings also indicate that irrespective of institutional tiers, some teachers also form distinct identities that do not align to institutional contexts. For instance, teachers with deep self-awareness and confidence in their teaching roles perceived CIPE as a professional challenge and not an external imposition irrespective of their institutional categories. This is evident from teachers from elite universities (X1, X2, and X3).

In universities in China, CIPE is a public English curriculum design challenge. From my training, I was inducted to find intellectual links between unrelated content areas, and therefore, my concern with CIPE is not in the implementation but rather how to make it pedagogically sound (Participant X1, translated from Mandarin).

The challenge of implementing CIPE was echoed by X2 and X3. Yet, the academic framing of CIPE was not unique to teachers from elite universities. While X3 reported a similar professional engagement, X5 (a regional university teacher) reported an unexpected academic interest. As one respondent noted,

CIPE is intellectually stimulating. The integration of CIPE has forced to gain research interest on the relationship between cultural transmission and language pedagogy, and this has been my research area in the past five years. Equally, my learners positively respond to the substantive content (Participant X5, translated from Mandarin).

Therefore, for both elite and regional university teachers, integration of CIPE into the public English education curriculum extends their research interests.

Further, the complexity of teachers' professional identity was evident from the emergent theme of pragmatic identity (how teachers adapt their professional practices and self-perceptions to accommodate CIPE policy requirements, practical workplace realities, and institutional pressures) and teachers' survival strategies.

Pragmatic teachers were preoccupied with managing competing demands while also protecting instructional objectives. Teachers' pragmatic orientation was evident across elite and regional universities, yet this manifested differently based on the teachers' institutional contexts. For instance, a respondent noted;

I primarily focus on learners' functional English competence. While I need to integrate CIPE, I do not compromise the basic learning outcomes. I face the challenge to find an integration strategy that enables me to integrate ideological concepts of CIPE while also meeting the basic communicative goals of the English curriculum (Participant X4, translated from Mandarin).

Similarly, while X2 noted that their elite institutions offered the needed support, time was finite, and this creates the challenge to integrate CIPE with other traditional curriculum demands. Accordingly, a respondent stated;

I face the challenge of balancing traditional curriculum and CIPE's ideological concept demands within the finite time. Therefore, the challenge is a strategic management of the curriculum and not a philosophical alignment (Participant X2, translated from Mandarin).

Therefore, for both elite and regional university teachers, CIPE is a manageable add-on rather than a primary focus. The research participants reported that CIPE elements may be integrated into the existing English language teaching activities without significantly changing the objectives of the curriculum, assessment requirements, or pedagogical practices. As a result, language proficiency development remained a dominant priority, while CIPE is integrated as a supplementary component of instruction. The research further shows an existing tension in the teachers' professional identity, and therefore, the integration of CIPE into the public English curriculum in China occurs through negotiation rather than clear identity-based responses. X2, X4, and X6 expressed contradictory feelings towards CIPE that defied simple categorisation. One respondent noted;

I appreciate that CIPE integrates language proficiency and cultural elements. Yet, this creates the challenge of the demand to meet and additional workload and larger classes amidst resource strain (Participant X6, translated from Mandarin).

Evidently, this research finds that in integrating CIPE into the public English curriculum in China, university teachers constantly negotiate between the practical constraints and their professional identities.

4.2.2 Institutional contexts and structural constraints

The data from the in-depth interviews reveal that institutional contexts influence the efficacy of the implementation of English policy in public universities in China, though in more complex ways as will be discussed in this section. Table 4-2 summarises themes for institutional contexts and structural constraints.

Table 4-2: Thematic table for institutional contexts and structural constraints

Major Theme	Commonly Agreed Responses (cited interviews)	Contrasting Responses (cited interviews)
Elite Support and Expectations	Elite-university teachers (X2, X1) reported formal CIPE support: working groups, funding, and training. They described institutional messages framing CIPE as scholarly work (X2).	Even within elite institutions, some teachers (X5) felt constrained by high expectations (need to publish), suggesting support also implied pressure (X5).
Regional Resource Constraints	Regional teachers (X4, X6) highlighted lack of guidance, large classes, and heavy workload. They often described implementation as a personal burden rather than shared, citing minimal PD support.	Despite constraints, some regional respondents (X2) noted that the lack of resources meant more autonomy, allowing experimentation, contrasting the view of helplessness.
CET-4 Testing Pressure	- Many regional teachers (X6, X4) pointed out CET-4 pass rates as the primary accountability measure. They felt obligated to focus on test prep over non-tested CIPE content.	A few respondents suggested CET-4's influence was overstated: one teacher (X3) felt motivated to integrate CIPE to improve students' critical thinking, showing a different view.
Diverse Assessment Expectations	Elite teachers (X1, X2) reported that with different student goals (e.g. academic English, graduate study), they had more curricular flexibility.	Even in elite settings, some noted students still cared about test scores (X3), meaning CIPE integration was sometimes constrained by lingering exam concerns.

From table 4-2 above, four themes (elite support and expectations, regional resource constraints, CET-4 testing pressure, and diverse assessment expectations) emerged from the thematic data analysis.

The research shows that institutional support differs significantly between elite and regional universities in China, yet the influence of this resource variance on the implementation efficacy of CIPE in the country is more complex. Availability of resources in elite universities enables CIPE implementation in these universities, yet the research shows certain limitations, creating a need for teachers to express agency in CIPE implementation.

X1, X2, and X3 widely reported elite university support in CIPE implementation in these universities, yet the use of the support resources varied between teachers based on their personal and curriculum priorities. This shows agency and discretion in CIPE implementation in elite universities. A respondent argued;

Seed funding and CIPE working groups were established in our institution to support the implementation and make it more efficient. We were also allowed time to attend training and workshops. The heads of departments emphasised the scholarly significance of CIPE and the training sessions (Participant X3, translated from Mandarin).

Both X1 and X2 confirmed institutional support to facilitate CIPE implementation. Yet, teachers from elite universities also reported increased work pressures that constrained their agency in CIPE implementation. Accordingly, a respondent said;

We are expected to produce innovative and national competitive CIPE models. The pressure to publish materials on CIPE and implementation strategies is immense. The success of the strategy does not end with a university-level compliance rather, its academic impacts (Participant X2, translated from Mandarin).

Therefore, while elite universities offered substantial resource facilitation, this also led to demanding performance outcomes.

On the other hand, resource constraints in regional universities were widely reported by X4, X5, and X6. However, the research shows that resource limitation only

shaped but did not limit CIPE implementation since teachers in these institutions developed creative strategies amidst the limited resources. One respondent said;

The institution only offered minimal CIPE guidance and did not offer significant material (collaboration, training, or workshop) support. There are limited professional development opportunities, we deal with large classes, and workload is high as compared to our elite counterparts (Participant X4, translated from Mandarin).

This view was supported by X5 who added that teachers from regional universities have limited capacity to innovate due to long working hours. According to the respondent;

The integration of CIPE made me question where I will get additional time to prepare learning materials. The institution did not offer any support to this respect. We were challenged to figure this out (Participant X5, translated from Mandarin).

Despite the resource limitations, the teachers in the regional universities developed creative strategies such as joining informal networks or leveraging peer support to compensate for the resource limitations.

In addition to this, the respondents also expressed the influence of assessment pressures (CET-4 dominance in the regional institutions) and other competing priorities as core factors that influenced efficacy of the implementation of English policy (CIPE) in public universities in China. This finding aligns with Wang's (2022) observation that CET-4 and CET-6 pressures may limit teachers' attention to the ideological and political aspects of the curriculum. 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 as stated by one respondent.

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 (Participant X6, translated from Mandarin).

Therefore, teachers felt caught up between policy compliance and professional effectiveness.

Finally, diverse assessment was cited by X1 and X2 while X3 had a divergent view. Elite institution teachers reported more diverse assessment expectations that created space for CIPE integration, although this did not eliminate tension between competing priorities. A respondent argued;

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
(Participant X1, translated from Mandarin).

This view was shared by X2, yet X3 noted that some learners in elite universities also care about test scores. This finding implies that the efficacy of the implementation of CIPE in both elite and regional universities in China is sometimes affected by learners' concern about test scores.

4.2.3 Implementation strategies and teacher agency

In regards to the implementation strategies and teacher agency, four major themes emerged from the table as summarised in table 4-3.

Table 4-3: Thematic table for implementation strategies and teacher agency

Major Theme	Commonly Agreed Responses (cited interviews)	Contrasting Responses (cited interviews)
Embedded Integration	Teachers like X1 and X3 redesigned content units to weave in ideological themes (their quotes describe units on social and business issues). These respondents found that integrating CIPE with language tasks enhanced coherence and student interest.	In contrast, some educators preferred not to fully integrate (e.g. X6), keeping CIPE topics distinct, highlighting that not all pursued deep embedding.
Compartmentalized Strategies	Many teachers (X6, X5) reported isolating CIPE content into short activities (e.g. cultural talks) at set times. This allowed them to comply with policy while retaining focus on language skills.	However, others disagreed with separation: for example X1 argued that compartmentalization feels artificial and less effective, advocating full integration.
Collaborative Adaptation	-Teachers like X2 and X4 formed informal CIPE groups or networks to share materials and strategies. They credited these collaborations with making implementation more manageable and higher quality.	In contrast, some teachers (e.g. X3) tackled CIPE development largely on their own, noting an absence of such collaboration in their context.
Iterative (Gradual) Approach	Respondents (X3 and X2) reported an iterative approach: experimenting with integration each term and refining based on outcome. They described this as turning compliance into ongoing professional development.	Conversely, some felt pressure for immediate change (X5) and tried to apply comprehensive CIPE strategies from the start, indicating less gradual adaptation.

Teachers across elite and regional universities developed strategies to integrate CIPE into their public English learning goals, a strategy that demanded adequate preparation to produce pedagogically sound outcomes. A respondent reported,

To implement CIPE into my English teaching, my argumentative writing texts integrated Chinese social issues like poverty alleviation, technological innovation, and environmental protection. This allows my learners to meet the twin goals of the traditional English curriculum and CIPE demands (Participant X1, translated from Mandarin).

X5 developed a similar strategy and reported that,

My own developed thematic units combined cultural and skill concepts. For example, our business English unit explores Chinese

entrepreneurship models and innovation strategies. Students develop professional communication skills while learning about Chinese economic achievements (Participant X5, translated from Mandarin).

While the strategy demands extra preparation, teachers who adopted the strategies reported a higher coherence.

Moreover, the theme of compartmentalised compliance strategy was evident from the interviews. For instance, other teachers (for instance X6 and X2) facing time pressures or philosophical concerns, developed strategies that separated CIPE content from language instruction while maintaining administrative compliance. These strategies helped to meet CIPE mandate with limited disruptions.

In addition, adaptive responses and constraints were evident in both the elite and non-elite university teachers. In regards to collaborative adaptation, several teachers (for instance X3 and X4) developed informal collaboration networks to share resources and strategies, demonstrating agency through collective action. For instance, X2 reported that,

Three of us formed an informal CIPE working group. We share materials, discuss integration challenges, and divide curriculum development responsibilities. The peer review helped to improve quality while collaboration enhanced implementation efficiency (Participant X2, translated from Mandarin).

Similarly, X4 reported that their social media-based collaboration facilitated CIPE implementation and helped to reduce the negative impact of lack of institutional support. However, evidence from X5 also indicate gradual CIPE implementation.

Each semester, I test different CIPE integration approaches and implement them gradually. While some approaches work better, I try to identify what work best for the learners, and this makes CIPE implementation feel like my own professional development (Participant X5, translated from Mandarin).

This was also supported by X2, X3, and X6 showing that CIPE implementation should be gradual rather than instantaneous.

4.3 Student Responses and Implementation Feedback

Table 4-4: Thematic table for participants' responses and implementation feedback

Major theme	Commonly agreed responses (cited interviews)	Contrasting responses (cited interviews)
Student Engagement (meaningful)	When content was embedded, students were enthusiastic (X1, X4). Teachers noted improved participation and interest when CIPE topics aligned with student interests or career goals	Some students initially doubted CIPE relevance (X6), but adjusted when integration became coherent
Student Resistance (superficial)	Respondents (X6) observed clear resistance to CIPE when lessons felt forced; students explicitly challenged trivial activities.	Others reported that after initial resistance, students adapted or even enjoyed CIPE once it was meaningfully connected (e.g. X3).
Integrated Assessment	Teachers like X2 introduced projects evaluating both language and cultural learning (project presentations with multi-faceted rubrics).	A few teachers still relied on standard language tests, largely ignoring ideological content in evaluation (X4 noted continued focus on English scores).
Persistent Time Constraints	X3 cited lack of preparation time as limiting CIPE quality. Teachers reported that workload and immediate compliance expectations hindered long-term improvement.	X1 described creative time-saving methods. For instance, the respondent used student presentations as CIPE content, saving prep time), suggesting not all struggled equally.

Themes of engagement with meaningful integration, resistance to superficial implementation, integrated assessment approaches, and ongoing implementation challenges were developed from the collected data. Teachers (X1 and X4) reported positive student responses when CIPE content was meaningfully integrated with language learning objectives, regardless of institutional context.

When CIPE content connects to their academic or professional interests, students respond enthusiastically. The learners are enthusiastic to learn and develop vocabulary that resonate with the Chinese culture (Participant X1, translated from Mandarin).

However, it has been reported that learners reject superficial patterns as another respondent noted during the interview.

My learners questioned the objectives of their English learning when I tried to add brief Chinese cultural elements. The learners felt that the content was not integrated but obligatory. In retrospection, I developed more coherent approaches (Participant X6, translated from Mandarin).

Additionally, X2 and X3 evaluated the implementation of CIPE through a wide range of measures that encompassed learners' cultural competence, learner engagement, and language outcomes. For instance, X3 stated that CIPE should be evaluated based on learners' language and cultural competence. The teacher noted that,

The final assessment on the new curriculum includes testing cross-cultural communication, language content, and cultural competence. An efficient integration means competence in all the areas (Participant X3, translated from Mandarin).

However, while teachers across elite and regional universities have been creative, the research has established that they face challenges in CIPE implementation. A respondent argued that;

Preparing CIPE materials demand time that is limited for me. The administration expects instant compliance and this conflicts with both thoughtful integration and pedagogical needs (Participant X5, translated from Mandarin).

The same sentiments were shared by X2 and X3 suggesting an existing tension between policy demand and classroom limits in CIPE integration in universities in China.

4.4 Future Orientations and Professional Development

From table 4-5, it is evident that teachers' future orientation and professional development influences CIPE integration. The themes (need for targeted PD/support, need for collaboration, gradual and realistic outlook, and emphasis on teacher agency) emerged from the data.

Table 4-5: Thematic table for future orientations and professional development

Major Theme	Commonly Agreed Responses (cited interviews)	Contrasting Responses (cited interviews)
Need for Targeted PD/Support	Teachers (X4, X5) asked for CIPE-specific training and resources, not just generic ideology seminars. They emphasized strategies for teaching culture through language, indicating a demand for pedagogy over indoctrination.	A few felt existing training was adequate or were uncertain how more PD could be implemented (X6 remained skeptical about institution's capacity to provide quality CIPE training).
Desire for Collaboration	Several (X5) envisioned sharing materials and assessment tools across universities (X5). Informal support networks (X4) were valued, and teachers hoped to formalize these into resource exchanges.	Conversely, some educators believed CIPE was too context-specific for broad collaboration, preferring to adapt personally (X1 noted unique contexts may limit transferability).
Gradual, Realistic Outlook	- Many (X3, X1, and X2) endorsed a long-term, incremental approach to CIPE, learning over multiple semester. They viewed CIPE as an ongoing process integrated with professional growth.	Others (X5) felt pressured to make rapid progress due to top-down mandates, showing some expected faster implementation.
Emphasis on Teacher Agency	Teachers (X1, X3) stressed preserving professional judgment: compliance should not override pedagogical choices. They asserted that effective CIPE depends on teacher expertise in course design.	In contrast, a minority position (X6) accepted strict policy directives as given, indicating less demand for autonomy.

Teachers across contexts (across elite and regional universities) expressed desires for enhanced institutional support that would facilitate more effective implementation. According to X4,

I hope our institution will provide specific training for CIPE integration rather than general political education (Participant X4, translated from Mandarin).

Similarly, X5 supported the view by suggesting that,

We need pedagogical strategies, not ideological instruction. Professional development should address how to teach culture through

language, not why culture matters (Participant X5, translated from Mandarin).

Additionally, X2, X4, and X5 envisioned expanded collaboration opportunities that would improve implementation quality while reducing the individual burden. X2 suggested the need for formal cross-institutional networks for CIPE curriculum development while X3 noted that universities should organise benchmarking sessions where teachers may learn the most effective models. The implication for this finding is that while teachers already have ad hoc collaboration frameworks, they prefer the establishment of institutionalised collaboration frameworks (for instance resources banks and conference) to lower individual burden.

Teachers widely agreed that an efficient CIPE integration demands balancing professional well-being, pedagogical needs, and policy requirements (X3, X4, and X5). Teachers also reported the need for gradual CIPE integration. Accordingly, one respondent reported that,

Integration of CIPE should be treated as a multi-year professional development and not a change to achieve within a semester. I develop competence gradually, build on my successes and failure, and ensure the strategy is sustainable (Participant X5, translated from Mandarin).

The significance of professional autonomy was reported by teachers across elite and regional universities. For instance, a respondent said,

For effective CIPE integration, teachers need to be proficient in both Chinese culture and language pedagogy. Compliance with the policy should not be prioritised over effectiveness of the pedagogy, curriculum coherence, and learner needs. Sustainable implementation preserves teacher agency while addressing policy requirements (Participant X1, translated from Mandarin).

In sum, sustainable CIPE implementation balances teachers' well-being and autonomy with ideological aims of the curriculum.

Chapter Five: Discussions

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a discussion of the research findings. The chapter has three major sections: a discussion section that compares the research findings to the findings of other existing studies, research contributions section that outline the major conclusions of the research, and methodological limitations.

5.2 Discussion of the Research Findings

Consistent with the study by Tao and Gao (2021), this research suggests that teachers with strong professional identity (defined as teachers who perceived themselves as competent and knowledgeable in the subject area) only embraced policy reforms if the reforms align to their personal values. However, teachers with pragmatic identities viewed CIPE as an unnecessary addition to the English curriculum that supports the findings of Vähäsantanen (2015) who argued that teachers who work in high pressure areas usually prefer functional outcomes to ideological content. Uniquely, this study also finds that what can be termed ‘high pressure’ workplaces for the teachers is synonymous to the less-funded regional universities in China (based on the interview data presented in the previous topic). However, teachers from higher tier universities in China also experienced different kinds of workplace pressures such as demand for better academic performances from the learners. Beyond poor funding, limited resources, and a lack of teacher support to enhance efficiency of curriculum change implementation, high pressure workplaces are also characterised with a prioritisation of test scores over a mastery ideological and cultural concepts. This makes such environments challenging to work in for teachers who perceived themselves as competent and knowledgeable in the subject area and demand agency and autonomy in decision making.

However, unlike the previous studies (for instance Tao and Gao, 2017; Vähäsantanen, 2015), the current study explicitly reports that the findings on workplace pressures and different demands for teachers in higher tier versus lower tier universities in China depend on the study contexts with many teachers who took part in the study expressing ambivalence towards CIPE, which suggests a tension between institutional pressures and professional aspirations. This is clearly evident

in the differences in the responses of teachers from regional and elite universities in China.

This finding aligns with Ball's (1994) view that policy is not simply implemented as written, but is interpreted and enacted within specific institutional contexts. This research therefore reinforces Ball's (1994) Policy Cycle Theory, specifically the iterative and dynamic nature of English policy implementation where teachers' classroom realities, institutional roles, and professional histories influence their policy interpretation. The nature of contextual realities is more important to this study. This is because the level of university funding, institutional tier and assessment pressures influence teachers' autonomy and curriculum decisions. Therefore, teacher agency and its influence in the outcomes of CIPE implementation efficacy must be analysed within these institutional conditions. A multi-country comparison in future studies may help give deeper insights into the influence of institutional environment on the efficacy of CIPE integration into public English education by comparing experiences and practices of similar or related practices in different countries.

Moreover, the findings of this study also align to the findings of most studies (for instance Lei and Medwell, 2022, Larivière et al., 2021) on the effects of institutional constraints on English policy implementation in China. As per the current study, elite institutions offer teachers the needed support for policy implementation, a finding that affirms the suggestions of Larivière et al. (2021) who reported that resource-rich institutions are well-placed to implement new policies. However, institutional support in this study, did not necessarily remove pressure. Participants from elite universities also described expectations to produce innovative CIPE models and publish related materials. The findings confirm Ball's (1994) assertion that the context of an institution may influence policy implementation. However, it is important to note that influence of institutional environment for well-resourced institutions does not include resource limitation but rather performance expectations from the management. This clearly varies from the less funded regional universities in China.

In contrast, the study revealed that even teachers in regional universities that are resource strained showed significant agency by developing innovative measures for

CIPE implementation amidst the constraints. This aligns to the findings of Priestley et al. (2015) who argued that teacher agency does not imply a teachers' response to institutional support but also how teachers adapt to their working environment. The ability of the regional teachers to collaborate and form networks supports the suggestion that teachers' agency is a socially embedded process. Therefore, this research suggests that while institutional support may shape policy implementation, the support does not deterministically define policy implementation across both the elite and regional universities in China. Teacher agency allows teachers to adapt and innovate even when resources are limited, and this influences the implementation efficacy of public English policies.

The tension between ideological goals and prioritisation of language proficiency testing in standard tests like the CET-4 is widely explored (Gao, 2018; Lei and Medwell, 2022). This study confirmed that regional teachers face the challenge of the need to focus on ideological integration or learners' scores in the standard tests, a challenge that is consistent with the findings of Yan (2015) who noted that adverse effect of the test-driven culture in China. Teachers reported that they prioritise test scores over ideological education to minimise conflict between learner and institutional expectations but compromise the broader targets of the CIPE framework. The phenomenon as established in this research can be explained by Ball's (1994) Policy Cycle Theory precisely the context of policy practice where the conflict between institutional pressures (learner's test scores) and policy aims (ideological education) lead to the emergence of what Ball (1994) called the policy recontextualisation. This refers to a situation where policies are adapted to fit institutional constraints.

However, CIPE concepts were integrated more effectively by elite teachers who faced little pressure on learners' test-score demands. This aligns to Yan and He's (2012b) suggestion that resource availability and institutional autonomy can shape curriculum implementation. Rather than extending Ball's (1994) Policy Cycle Theory, this study uses the theory to examine how CIPE policy is interpreted and enacted within different institutional contexts, especially where assessment pressures continue to shape teachers' classroom priorities.

The study has important theoretical implications. This study applies Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological model of teacher agency to the context of CIPE implementation in Chinese university English education. The findings illustrate how teachers' agency is shaped by the interaction between their prior professional experiences, present institutional conditions and future-oriented understandings of their roles. CIPE's ideological expectations are therefore understood as part of the policy and institutional conditions within which teachers exercise agency, rather than as an element that Priestley et al.'s original model was designed to address directly.

5.3 Contributions to the field

The first conclusion of this research is that institutional factors such as funding, resource availability, and teacher support during CIPE implementation interact with teachers' academic and professional identities to influence the implementation efficacy of CIPE implementation in China. Teachers with strong academic identities perceived the integration of CIPE as a learning opportunity and integrated ideological content in meaningful ways. However, teachers with pragmatic identities, especially those in resource-limited universities prioritised test scores over ideological content, and viewed CIPE as a burden. The conclusion is consistent with the conclusions of Priestley et al. (2015) who reported that teachers' professional identity influenced educational policy implementation.

An important conclusion of this study is the complex understanding of teacher agency in ideological education in China. While previous research like Ball (1994) explored how policy is interpreted and enacted/implemented, this study applies Ball's (1994) Policy Cycle Theory to illustrate how institutional constraints shape CIPE policy implementation in different university contexts. The study concludes that even in resource-strained institutions, teachers expressed agency by innovatively developing mechanisms like gradual implementation and informal collaboration when integrating CIPE in their practice. This finding contributes to the application of teacher agency theory by showing how teachers negotiate ideological education and public English policy implementation within different institutional conditions in Chinese universities.

Finally, institutional support and resource availability directly influence the implementation efficacy of public English education reforms in both elite and

regional universities in China. Teachers' accounts demonstrate that while teachers in lowly funded and poorly resourced regional universities suffer heavy workloads, resource strain, and large class sizes, teachers in elite universities enjoy vast resources, which support implementation of English curriculum reforms. Similar conclusions have been drawn by Larivière et al. (2021) and Yu et al. (2022) who emphasised the role and importance of resources and influence of resource disparity in the implementation of curriculum reforms. The research therefore adds to the extant literature on the role of teacher agency and resources on curriculum reform implementation.

5.4 Reflection on Limitations and Reflections on Data Collection

This qualitative research is limited by the sample size as only six teachers from two institutional types (elite and regional) were interviewed that limited research generalisability (Bryman, 2016).

Secondly, self-reporting introduces potential social desirability and limits direct verification of enacted practices (Creswell, 2014). A direct contact with research participants who are known to a researcher limits the type of information that the participants may share for fear of judgement and face-saving.

Finally, the current study relies on data from elite and regional universities in China that limits generalisability (Yin, 2009). In the process of data collection, I noted that while this categorisation covered the nuances of differences in financing and the effects on implementation efficacy of CIPE in China, I also noted that varied contexts for instance rural vs urban universities, local vs international universities or cross-country comparison could have been considered to get an in-depth data and enhance the quality of the findings.

Chapter Six: Recommendations and Implications for Future Research

6.1 Recommendations

To the frontline educators/teachers, the research recommends the need to develop collaborative networks across elite and regional schools to address the challenges of resource constraints in CIPE implementation. It is also suggested that teachers should incrementally integrate CIPE and adjust teaching strategies over time while also putting emphasis on learners' language proficiency.

For the university administrators, it is recommended that there is need to offer targeted professional development and provide the tools and skills that will enable the teachers in universities in China to effectively integrate CIPE in public English education. Education administrators across elite and regional universities should organise workshops and training to create awareness on how teachers may integrate language proficiency, preparation for exams, and ideological concepts. University administrators should also allocate time and teaching resources to facilitate the development of curriculum and ensure that teachers have innovative support without adversely impacting their core teaching goals.

Finally, national policymakers should provide clear guidance to the teachers on how to balance exam-oriented curricula and CIPE framework. A dynamic approach that allows teachers to adapt CIPE content without the burden of an increased workload and an overwhelming external pressure will enhance policy pragmatism and long-term effectiveness.

Table 6-1: Stakeholder Recommendations and Rationale

Stakeholder	Focus	Actionable Recommendations	Rationale (from findings)
University Administrators	Institutional Support	Allocate dedicated time and funding for CIPE training and curriculum development.	Teachers reported minimal institutional support. Even at elite universities, formal support often came with heavy publishing/innovation expectations. Structured PD and resources would make implementation more manageable.
	Professional Development	Provide interdisciplinary teaching materials integrating ideological content.	
		Reduce individual workload (e.g., adjust class sizes or hire teaching assistants).	
Teachers	Professional Collaboration & Development	Form or join communities of practice (online or face-to-face) to exchange CIPE resources (lesson plans, materials, activities). Actively participate in relevant PD (workshops, webinars) and share outcomes with colleagues. Advocate internally for collaborative PD opportunities.	Collaborative networks eased CIPE workload. Teachers without peer support struggled more. Peer-sharing and joint training improve capacity and spread effective practices.
	Iterative Implementation & Well-being	Adopt a gradual, iterative approach: pilot CIPE strategies each term and refine based on feedback.	
		Balance workload by pacing changes, viewing integration as ongoing professional growth (learning from successes and failures) rather than one-time compliance.	
Polymakers	Clear Policy Guidelines & Autonomy	Issue explicit CIPE implementation guidelines (e.g., curriculum frameworks, exemplar lesson plans) that still allow teacher flexibility. Involve teachers in policy feedback to refine directives. Emphasize teacher discretion in adapting CIPE to student needs.	Teachers expressed confusion over expectations and a need for clarity. They also stressed that policies should therefore guide (not micromanage) and respect teacher expertise and local context.

6.2 Implications for Future Research

In view of the above research limitations, it is recommended that future researchers should expand the sample (for instance by interviewing 50 research participants separated in focus groups) to enhance data variability and generalisation (Creswell, 2014). Secondly, due to the limitations of self-reported data, future researchers should build rapport and trust by establishing comfortable and non-judgemental interview environment for participants to feel safe and share honest experiences, use neutral and non-leading questions, and ask direct and reflective questions (Bryman, 2016). Finally, in view of the limitations of single case studies, future comparative studies across university levers, countries, and different cultural contexts will help to test the global applicability of the research findings (Yin, 2009).

6.3 Final Reflections

Before undertaking this research study, I assumed that teachers were active agents in implementation of education policies, and had the capacity to interpret, negotiate, and shape policy based on their professional judgement. However, this study challenged this assumption by revealing that teachers' agency is shaped by broader cultural, institutional, and ideological conditions that influence understanding and enactment of policy. Therefore, this research has helped me uncover and appreciate the role of context in policy formulation and implementation. Irrespective of context, teacher agency is needed for an efficient educational policy implementation. Institutions also need to provide teachers with the necessary support to enhance efficient policy implementation.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Title of Study

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

Purpose

This interview aims to explore university English teachers' perspectives on the implementation of national public English policies, particularly the Curriculum Ideological and Political Education (CIPE) mandate. Questions are designed to investigate teachers' professional histories, institutional contexts, teaching practices, and future orientations.

Section 1: Background Information

- Could you briefly introduce your teaching background (years of experience, courses taught, institutional type)?
- How would you describe your professional identity as a university English teacher?

Section 2: Understanding of Policy

- How do you understand the objectives of China's recent public English policies, including CIPE?
- In your view, what are the main expectations these policies place on university English teachers?

Section 3: Iterational Dimension (Professional History & Identity)

- How have your past training and professional experiences shaped the way you approach CIPE?
- Do you feel your professional background prepared you for integrating ideological elements into English teaching? Why or why not?

Section 4: Context of Practice (Institutional Environment)

- What kind of institutional support (for instance., workload allocation, training, materials) have you received for implementing CIPE?

- How does your institution's assessment system (for instance., CET pass rates, diversified evaluation) influence your teaching priorities?

Section 5: Practical-Evaluative Judgements (Teaching Practices)

- How do you decide when and how to integrate CIPE content into your English teaching?
- Can you describe a specific example of how you have integrated CIPE into your classroom activities?
- What challenges or dilemmas have you encountered (for instance., balancing language objectives and ideological requirements)?

Section 6: Projective Dimension (Future Orientation)

- Looking ahead, what are your goals for improving or adapting CIPE implementation in your teaching?
- What kind of support or changes would make CIPE integration more effective in your context?

Section 7: Closing Questions

- Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience of implementing public English policies or CIPE?

Note:

- The guide was piloted with two teachers to ensure clarity. Minor amendments were made following feedback, such as rephrasing technical terms into plain language and reorganising questions to move from general to specific themes.
- This final version reflects those revisions.

Appendix B: Consent Form

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

Researcher: Wenrui Yin

Statement	Please Tick (✓)
I have read and understood the information sheet for this study.	☐
I have had the opportunity to ask questions and received satisfactory answers.	☐
I understand that participation is voluntary and I may withdraw at any time without consequences.	☐
I consent to the interview being audio-recorded.	☐
I understand that my responses will be anonymised and treated confidentially.	☐
I agree that anonymised data may be used for research and publication purposes.	☐

Participant's Name (printed): _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix C: Participant Information Sheet

Study Title

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

Invitation

You are being invited to take part in a research study as part of an EdD programme at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David. Before deciding whether to take part, it is important that you understand why the research is being carried out and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information, and feel free to ask the researcher any questions you may have.

Purpose of the Study

This study explores how university English teachers in China interpret, adapt and implement public English policies, with particular attention to Curriculum Ideological and Political Education (CIPE).

Why Have You Been Chosen?

You have been invited to take part because you are a university English teacher in China with at least five years of teaching experience, working at either an elite or a regional institution. Six teachers in total are being invited to take part in this study.

What Will Taking Part Involve?

If you agree to take part, you will be asked to take part in one semi-structured interview lasting approximately 30-40 minutes, conducted online or face-to-face depending on your availability. The interview will be conducted in Mandarin Chinese and will cover your professional background, your understanding of CIPE, and your experiences of implementing it in your teaching. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

Do You Have to Take Part?

Taking part in this study is entirely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any point before, during, or after the interview, without giving a reason and without any negative consequences. If you withdraw before data analysis has begun, your data will be removed from the study. After anonymisation and data analysis have begun, it may not be possible to remove your data, as it can no longer be identified.

What Are the Possible Risks of Taking Part?

There are no foreseeable physical or legal risks associated with taking part in this study. As CIPE is a politically sensitive topic, some questions may touch on views about ideological education that you may feel cautious discussing. You are free to skip any question you are not comfortable answering, and no identifying information will be linked to your responses at any stage of the research.

Will Your Participation Be Kept Confidential?

Yes. Your responses will be anonymised using a pseudonym (for instance, X1) rather than your name. Identifying information such as your name, institutional affiliation, email address, phone number and other identifying details will be removed from the transcripts. Audio

recordings and transcripts will be stored on a password-protected university OneDrive/student drive, accessible only to the researcher.

What Will Happen to the Data Collected?

The anonymised data will be used to write up the findings of this research. Findings may be presented in the dissertation and in future academic publications. Data will be kept securely for the period required by university policy, after which it will be securely destroyed.

What Happens If Something Goes Wrong?

If you have any concerns about how the research is being conducted, you can contact the researcher or the research supervisor using the details below.

Contact for Further Information

Researcher: Wenrui Yin, 2319170@student.uwtsd.ac.uk

Supervisor: Dr Julia Holloway, University of Wales Trinity Saint David

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.