

# The Evolution of Language Knowledge in China's Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (1986–2022): Changes, Insights, and Implications

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## Abstract

English as foreign language instruction (EFLI) in China has experienced an extended period of development and refinement, progressively advancing a higher level of sophistication. Due to the amplified global reach of English, China has instigated several educational policy reforms to enhance the quality of English instruction. This study identifies Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (CEECS) documents in China from 1986 to 2022 as research materials to comprehensively discern the holistic trajectory and essential impetus of the evolution in language knowledge (LK). Through qualitative textual analysis, it adopts NVivo software to code diachronic and structural changes in LK requisites across diverse levels and curricula, discern thematic elements, and visualise the evolution. The findings indicate that, in response to societal changes, the CEECS have evolved in both content and structure, with a gradual shift in the focus of LK from mere knowledge acquisition to the practical use of language. Drawing extensively from official documents, this study seeks to elucidate the changes of LK across successive iterations of the CEECS, explore underlying considerations, and furnish insights that can steer future directions in curriculum reform and support the upgrading of EFLI in China.

**Keywords:** Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (CEECS); language knowledge (LK); English as foreign language instruction (EFLI); qualitative text analysis; NVivo



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## Introduction and Background

English, as a global lingua franca, has held a pivotal position in China's education system since the 1980s, and since then it has been integrated as a compulsory subject in the national curriculum (Xu and Fan 2017). This reflects China's commitment to enhancing English language teaching (ELT) in response to the growing demands of international communication and economic development (Wang and Kirkpatrick 2015). Recognising the critical role of language policies in addressing developmental challenges and fostering social change (Tupas and Tabiola 2017), China has embarked on a series of educational reforms and continuous revisions, particularly in EFLI, to strengthen learners' English proficiency and facilitate effective global engagement (Lau 2020).

Curriculum syllabi and standards, issued by national education authorities, serve as essential blueprints for instructional practices across disciplines, prompting extensive global research. This burgeoning field of study encompasses both science and liberal arts. In science, researchers have examined mathematics curricula (Tyson and Roksa 2016; Vellenga 2004) and integrated approaches to biology and physics instruction (Johnson, Boon, and Thompson 2022). Parallel investigations in the humanities have explored curricula in history (Liu and Liu 2017), geography (Sun et al. 2019), physical education (Eather et al. 2024; Suesee, Pill, and Williams 2025), and music (Ho 2014; Yu and Leung 2019). Notably, within the humanities, foreign language education (FLE), particularly English language learning, has garnered significant and extensive scholarly attention (Bucur and Popa 2015; Ireland, O'Sullivan, and Duchesne 2017; Poza-Vilches et al. 2022; Tupas and Tabiola 2017; Xu and Fan 2017; Yu and Liu 2018), as seen in Table 1 below.

**Table 1:** Subjects involved in curriculum research

Science	Liberal Arts
Mathematics (Liu et al. 2022; Tyson and Roksa 2016)	History (Liu and Liu 2017)
Biology and physics (Johnson, Boon, and Thompson 2022)	Geography (Sun et al. 2019)
	Physical education (Eather et al. 2024; Suesee, Pill, and Williams 2025)
	Music (Ho 2014; Yu and Leung 2019)
	English (Bucur and Popa 2015; Ireland, O'Sullivan, and Duchesne 2017; Poza-Vilches et al. 2022; Tupas and Tabiola 2017; Xu and Fan 2017; Yu and Liu 2018)

Despite extensive research on curriculum standards across various disciplines and the particular focus on FLE in China, several research gaps persist. While studies have examined various aspects of curriculum development and implementation, there is a notable lack of longitudinal research tracking the evolution of language knowledge (LK)

in China's Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (CEECS) from 1986 to 2022. Additionally, although higher education has received considerable attention, research specifically focusing on CEECS remains limited. Furthermore, there is insufficient analysis of the factors driving changes in these standards and their alignment with China's socio-economic development over the past four decades.

This study employs qualitative textual analysis to examine LK evolution in China's CEECS from 1986–2022, focusing on structural and content changes and their influencing factors. It provides a historical perspective on CEECS adaptation over four decades, deepening understanding of LK dynamics in English education. By aligning trends with global ELT practices, the research offers practical insights for educators and policymakers, aims to bridge curriculum gaps, and promotes teacher development. In essence, it offers a diachronic view of CEECS, inspiring future reforms and global research.

## Literature Review

In recent decades, global English education policies have transformed due to globalisation and English's role as a lingua franca. Countries have tailored policies to meet societal and economic needs. For example, Singapore uses English as a primary medium of instruction to equip learners for a globalised economy (Choo 2014). India employs English as an associate official language and medium for higher education (Kumar 2015). Japan, recognising the need for English proficiency to foster global citizenship, has enhanced English education at all levels (Aizawa et al. 2023). Given this international context, it is instructive to examine how China has navigated its own path in English education policy development, adapting to global trends while also responding to its unique national context and educational priorities. Within this broader international context, the field of FLE, particularly EFLI, has garnered substantial attention from researchers. Studies in FLE have not only revealed latent issues and dilemmas (Kovacs and Ravachol 2019; Raselimo and Thamae 2018), but have also provided valuable implications for curriculum practices (Evans 2022; Tong et al. 2020; Tsiane and Motebang 2023) and informed future reforms (Bucur and Popa 2015; Svalina and Šimunović 2023). Notably, within the field of English language studies, research has predominantly focused on higher education (Foley 2022; Li 2021; Li and Edwards 2013; Tong et al. 2020). However, there is a growing recognition of the need to examine the evolution of English education policies at the compulsory education level in China, as this study does.

Chinese curriculum research has diversified substantially, encompassing various aspects of educational reform, including education reform policies (Jin 2013), textbook regionalisation (He and Wang 2013), classroom implementation (Yao and Guo 2018), curriculum standards utilisation (Yuan 2017), and textbook transformation (Liu et al. 2022). This multifaceted approach underscores the complexity of curriculum development in China and highlights the importance of curriculum standards research.

Research methods in EFLI include both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Qualitative research methods are discourse analysis (Law 2014), content analysis (Miao et al. 2022; Xin, Li, and Ruppap 2024; Yu, Li, and Li 2022), thematic analysis (Gao and Wang 2023; Wihlborg and Avery 2021), and document analysis (Tsiane and Motebang 2023). What is more, comparative methods are also widely utilised, including cross-sectional comparisons (Deng et al. 2023; Morris 2024), longitudinal approaches such as comparative historical analysis (Zhao and Lee 2024), and diachronic analysis (Hu 2024; Huang, Liu, and Rutten 2024). Additionally, dialectical analysis has been applied to examine syllabus and curriculum documents (Evans 2022; Liu 2016; Poza-Vilches et al. 2022). To be more specific, other supplementary investigating methods are also popular, such as interviews (Galloway and Numajiri 2020; Klenner et al. 2022; Li 2021; Song and Zhou 2022; Yip, Huang, and Teng 2022) and questionnaires (Galloway and Numajiri 2020; Gao and Wang 2023; Svalina and Šimunović 2023). On the other hand, quantitative methods employ various analytical techniques, such as ANOVA (Buckingham and Alpaslan 2017), latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) (Nowlin 2016), PMC-AE index modelling (policy modelling consistency [PMC] index with an auto-encoder [AE]) (Sheng et al. 2024), and word frequency analysis (Yang et al. 2020). Mixed-methods research (MMR) has also gained traction in recent studies (He 2025; Song and Zhou 2022). Structured information is presented in Table 2.

Previous studies often focused on isolated curriculum reforms or specific aspects, neglecting the holistic evolution of LK in CEECS. This gap calls for this research to comprehensively trace LK's diachronic development. Using NVivo for qualitative textual analysis, this study will examine LK's structural and content evolution in CEECS from 1949 to 2022, identifying changes, exploring motivations, and anticipating trends.

**Table 2:** Research methods used in curriculum or policy analysis

<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Methods</b>
Qualitative Methods	Discourse analysis (Law 2014)
	Content analysis (Miao et al. 2022; Xin, Li, and Ruppap 2024; Yu, Li, and Li 2022)
	Thematic analysis (Gao and Wang 2023; Wihlborg and Avery 2021)
	Document analysis (Tsiane and Motebang 2023)
	Comparative methods (Deng et al. 2023; He, Lai, and Wu 2016; Hu 2024; Huang et al. 2024; Morris 2024; Zhao and Lee 2024)
	Dialectical analysis (Evans 2022; Liu 2016; Poza-Vilches et al. 2022)
	Interviews (Galloway and Numajiri 2020; Klenner et al. 2022; Li 2021; Song and Zhou 2022; Yip, Huang, and Teng 2022)
	Questionnaires (Galloway and Numajiri 2020; Gao and Wang 2023; Svalina and Šimunović 2023)
	ANOVA (Buckingham and Alpaslan 2017)
	Latent Dirichlet allocation (Nowlin 2016)
Quantitative Methods	PMC-AE index modelling (Sheng et al. 2024)
	Word frequency analysis (Yang et al. 2020)
Mixed Research Methods	(He 2025; Song and Zhou 2022)

## Theoretical Framework

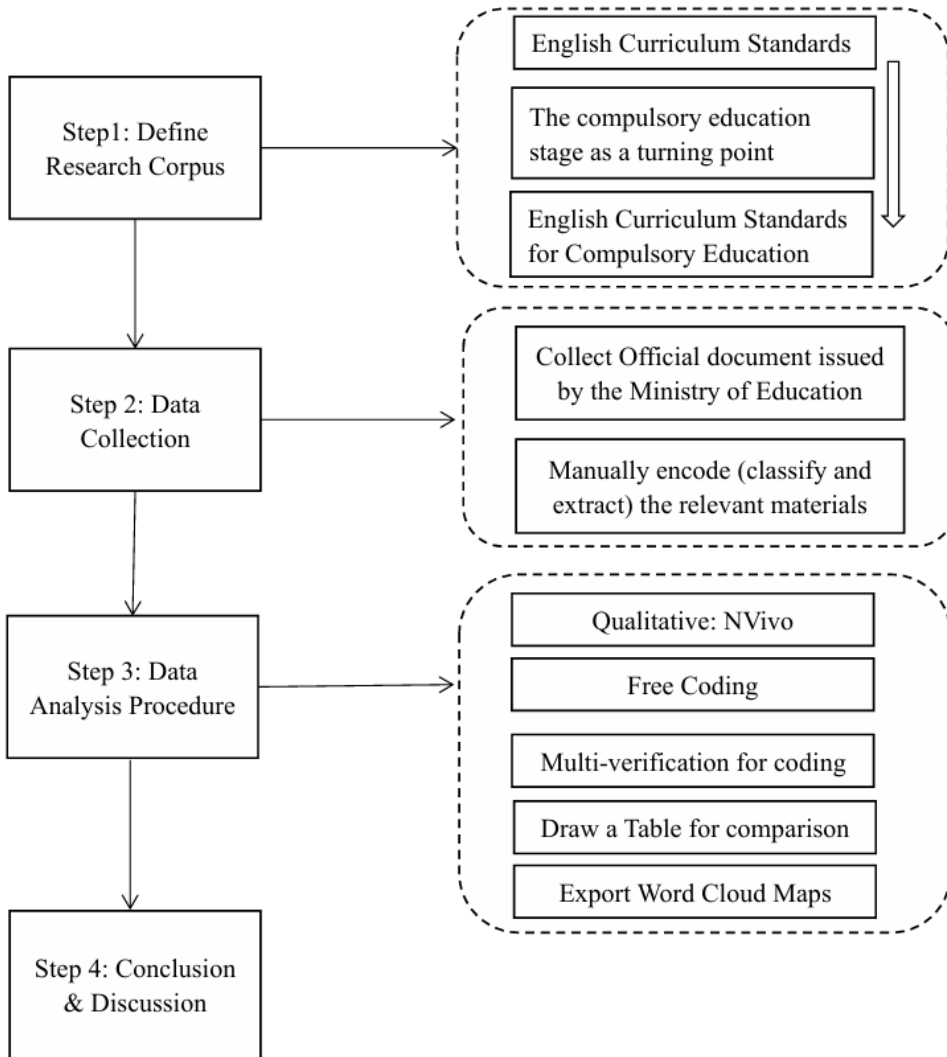
This study draws on established research to comprehensively understand the evolution of LK in China's CEECS, integrating language acquisition theories, educational policy analysis, and curriculum development frameworks.

Language acquisition theories, specifically communicative language teaching (CLT) and usage-based theories, underpin this study. CLT focuses on developing communicative competence, including linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic aspects (Canale and Swain 1980), aligning with the CEECS's emphasis on practical communication skills and prompting a shift towards a communicative language education view. Usage-based theories highlight the importance of language use in context and the role of frequency and distribution in learning (Ellis and Wulff 2014), supporting the CEECS's focus on contextualised learning and authentic texts. In terms of educational policy analysis, the concept of policy borrowing and adaptation is employed. It shows how the CEECS have evolved by borrowing international educational elements and adapting them to local needs (Steiner-Khamsi 2021), such as the introduction of CLT principles as a form of policy borrowing from others, tailored to China's educational context.

The integration of these theories offers a holistic framework to analyse how the CEECS have changed over time, reflecting shifts in language education theory, policy, and practice.

## Methodology

This study employs a curricula-based textual analysis, a systematic and objective research methodology within the social sciences, to conduct an in-depth examination of textual data (Bochkay et al. 2023). The process commenced with data collection, wherein official documents issued by the Ministry of Education were gathered. Subsequently, manual encoding was conducted, involving the classification and extraction of relevant materials from these documents. This was followed by a rigorous data analysis procedure, which included qualitative analysis using NVivo, free coding, and multi-verification to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the coding process. To facilitate comparison and deeper insight, tables were drawn, and word cloud maps were exported for visualisation. This methodical progression from data collection to encoding, analysis, and visualisation ensures a comprehensive and transparent examination of the research questions.



**Figure 1:** Research design

## Materials

The research corpus comprises English syllabi and curriculum standards for primary and junior secondary levels, spanning from compulsory education's introduction in April 1986 to the present. The evolution of China's English curriculum standards reflects the country's changing educational policies, economic development, and international relations since the establishment of the People's Republic. Initially relegated to a secondary role behind Russian in FLE, English education experienced periods of suspension, resumption, and partial implementation. The enactment of the Compulsory Education (CE) Law in 1986 marked a turning point, introducing nine years of mandatory education and stabilising English curriculum development. This study focuses on the English curriculum standards for the CE stage from 1986 to 2024,

a period characterised by multiple reforms and revisions. Table 3 presents the key documents analysed in this research. These curricula serve as a lens through which to examine the broader socio-economic and political context of English language education in China, reflecting national priorities, economic progress, and evolving international engagement.

**Table3:** Syllabi or curriculum standards for compulsory education in China

Year	Syllabus / Curriculum
1986	English Language Syllabus for Full-Time Secondary Schools
1988	Nine-Year Compulsory Education Full-Time Junior Secondary School English Syllabus
1992	Nine-Year Compulsory Education Full-Time Junior Secondary School English Syllabus (for Trial)
1994	Nine-Year Compulsory Education Full-Time Junior Secondary School English Syllabus (Adjustment)
2000	English Language Syllabus for Nine-Year Compulsory Education Full-Time Junior Secondary Schools (Revised Trial Version)
2001	English Language Curriculum Standards for Full-Time Compulsory Education and General Senior Secondary Schools (Experimental Draft)
2011	Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2011 Edition)
2022	Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition)

## Instrument and Procedures

NVivo, a qualitative analysis software, was utilised for its data management, coding, summarisation, and visualisation capabilities, enhancing research efficiency while maintaining objectivity and authenticity. Free coding in NVivo is also commonly referred to as open coding, which is the process of initial analysis of textual data such as interview records, policy documents, and document content. The open-coding process involved six steps: First, relevant “LK” content from the eight CEECS was extracted and organised into separate Word documents (8 in total). Second, these documents were imported into NVivo 12.2. Third, after careful screening, content was categorised based on LK using tags and free coding, forming initial natural nodes. Fourth, to ensure coding reliability, three additional researchers participated in the process, comparing coding results. Fifth, word clouds were generated using NVivo’s text analysis features to visually represent key concepts and themes in each policy text. Lastly, existing free nodes were refined, summarised, and classified, establishing connections between nodes and resulting in a hierarchical tree structure. This initial coding allowed for a deep understanding and organisation of the data. The coding results are shown in Figure 2.



## Language Knowledge

⊕	Name	▽ ↻	Files	References
+ ○	Vocabulary		8	18
+ ○	Topic		2	4
+ ○	Textual Knowledge		1	4
+ ○	Pronunciation		8	17
+ ○	Pragmatic Knowledge		1	3
+ ○	Grammar		8	17
+ ○	Function		2	4

**Figure 2:** The coding in NVivo

To systematically analyse changes in the “LK” section of China’s CEECS from 1986 to 2022 across different learning levels, a comprehensive matrix was constructed. The matrix’s horizontal axis listed curriculum standard years (1986, 1988, 1992, 1994, 2000, 2001, 2011, 2022) and LK elements (pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, function, topic, textual knowledge, pragmatic knowledge), while the vertical axis outlined various learning stages or grade levels.

Historical data and literature were reviewed to extract specific requirements for each LK element per year. A binary coding system (“√” for presence, “×” for absence) was applied to each level and element. To ensure data reliability, a collaborative verification process involving the primary researcher, a teacher lecturer, and a graduate student, all experts in CEECS evolution, was conducted. Multiple rounds of independent cross-checking against original documents were performed, with discrepancies resolved through consensus, enhancing the data’s credibility and subsequent analyses. The final matrix is illustrated in Figure 3.

	1986	1988	1992	1994	2000	2001	2011	2022							
Pronunciation	Primary level	×	No Grade	Level 1	✓	Level 1	✓	Level 1	✓	Level 1 (G.3, 4)	×	Level 1	×	Pre-Level	×
	Junior 1	✓		Level 2	✓	Level 2	✓	Level 2	✓	Level 2 (G.5, 6)	✓	Level 2 (Before G.6)	✓	Level 1 (G.3-4)	✓
	Junior 2	✓	Level 3	×	Level 3	×	Level 3	×	Level 3 (G.7)	×	Level 3	×	Level 2 (G.5-6)	✓	
			Level 4	×	Level 4	×	Level 4	×	Level 4 (G.8)	×	Level 4	×	Level 3 (G7-9)	✓	
			Level 5	×	Level 5	×	Level 5	×	Level 5 (G.9)	✓	Level 5 (Before G.9)	✓	Level 3+	×	
Vocabulary	Primary level	×	Three-year System	Level 1	✓	Level 1	✓	Level 1	✓	Level 1 (G.3, 4)	×	Level 1	×	Pre-Level	×
	Junior 1	✓		Level 2	✓	Level 2	✓	Level 2	✓	Level 2 (G.5, 6)	✓	Level 2 (Before G.6)	✓	Level 1 (G.3-4)	✓
	Junior 2	✓	Level 3	×	Level 3	×	Level 3	×	Level 3 (G.7)	×	Level 3	×	Level 2 (G.5-6)	✓	
			Level 4	×	Level 4	×	Level 4	×	Level 4 (G.8)	×	Level 4	×	Level 3 (G7-9)	✓	
			Level 5	×	Level 5	×	Level 5	×	Level 5 (G.9)	✓	Level 5 (Before G.9)	✓	Level 3+	×	
Grammar	Primary level	×	Three-year System	Level 1	✓	Level 1	✓	Level 1	✓	Level 1 (G.3, 4)	×	Level 1	×	Pre-Level	×
	Junior 1	✓		Level 2	✓	Level 2	✓	Level 2	✓	Level 2 (G.5, 6)	✓	Level 2 (Before G.6)	✓	Level 1 (G.3-4)	✓
	Junior 2	✓	Level 3	×	Level 3	×	Level 3	×	Level 3 (G.7)	×	Level 3	×	Level 2 (G.5-6)	✓	
			Level 4	×	Level 4	×	Level 4	×	Level 4 (G.8)	×	Level 4	×	Level 3 (G7-9)	✓	
			Level 5	×	Level 5	×	Level 5	×	Level 5 (G.9)	✓	Level 5 (Before G.9)	✓	Level 3+	×	
Function										Level 1 (G.3, 4)	×	Level 1	×		
										Level 2 (G.5, 6)	✓	Level 2 (Before G.6)	✓		
										Level 3 (G.7)	×	Level 3	×		
										Level 4 (G.8)	×	Level 4	×		
										Level 5 (G.9)	✓	Level 5 (Before G.9)	✓		
Topic										Level 1 (G.3, 4)	×	Level 1	×		
										Level 2 (G.5, 6)	✓	Level 2 (Before G.6)	✓		
										Level 3 (G.7)	×	Level 3	×		
										Level 4 (G.8)	×	Level 4	×		
										Level 5 (G.9)	✓	Level 5 (Before G.9)	✓		
Textual Knowledge														Level 1 (G.3-4)	✓
														Level 2 (G.5-6)	✓
														Level 3 (G7-9)	✓
														Level 3+	✓
Pragmatic Knowledge														Level 1 (G.3-4)	✓
														Level 2 (G.5-6)	✓
														Level 3 (G7-9)	✓

Note: G. stands for Grade

**Figure 3:** Evolution of LK in China’s CEECS (1986–2022)

## Results

The analysis based on Figure 3 elucidates the diachronic changes and frequency, and chronological distribution in structure delineates the terminology employed to articulate the requisite learning stages across primary and junior high school. The NVivo-derived results specifically illuminate the focal points and their longitudinal evolution within the LK domain, encompassing pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, functions, topics, textual knowledge, and pragmatic knowledge. This dual analysis in structure and content provides a comprehensive temporal mapping of the evolving emphasis on different aspects of LK, offering insights into the shifting priorities in CEECS over time.

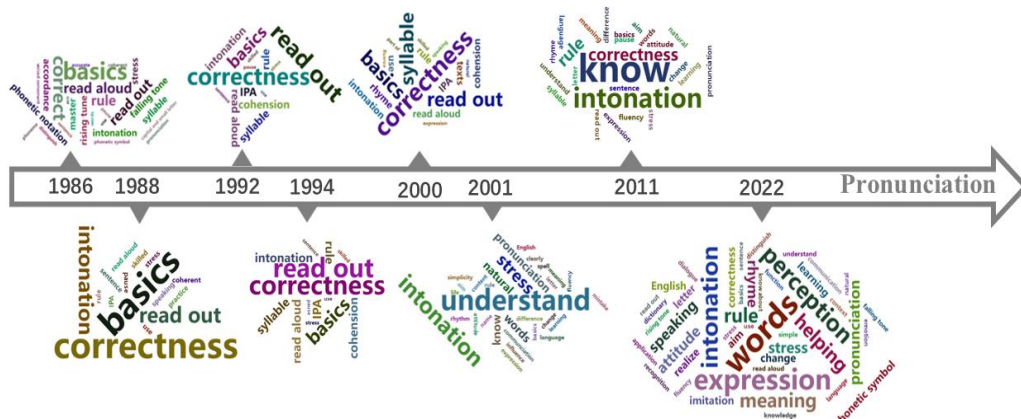
### General Changes in LK of CEECS

Figure 3 analysis shows pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar as consistent LK elements in CEECS (1986–2022), forming the language learning foundation. The 2001 standards added “function” and “topic” to emphasise practical communication. The 2022 standards further expanded to include “textual knowledge” and “pragmatic knowledge”, reflecting advanced language use. These newer elements replaced earlier ones, signalling a deeper understanding of LK. We now examine specific changes within each element using word clouds to identify key modifications, aiming to reveal the rationale behind these shifts and their alignment with global trends.

### Pronunciation

A diachronic analysis of word clouds representing the phonetic requirements in the Chinese CEECS from 1986 to 2022 reveals significant shifts in emphasis and expectations for English phonetic instruction shown in Figure 4. The result illustrated

in Figure 4 was obtained using NVivo coding and was visualised by the website (<https://www.lddgo.net/chart/word-cloud>). It highlights the following key trends.



**Figure 4:** The diachronic changes of the word clouds in pronunciation

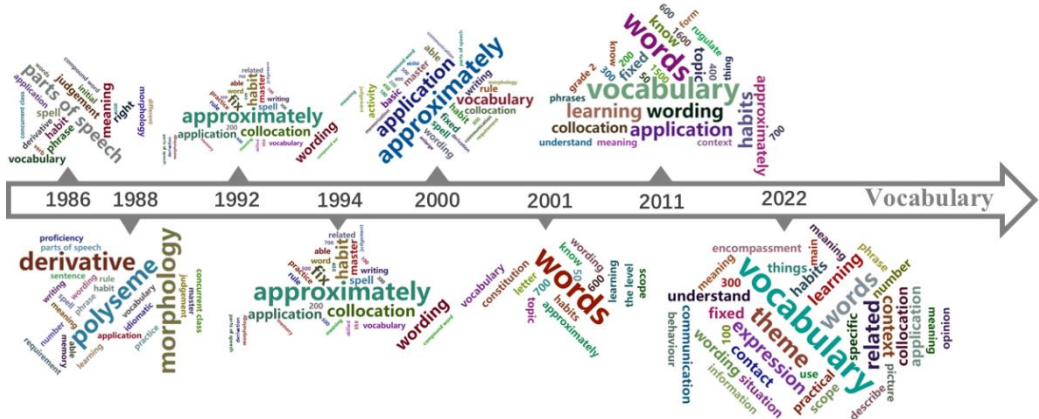
Early iterations (e.g., 1986 and 1988) primarily emphasised foundational aspects, such as “basics”, “correctness”, “read”, “rules”, and “intonation”, reflecting an initial focus on normative pronunciation learning. Subsequently, from 2000 onwards, the scope broadened to include more advanced skills and expressive requirements, incorporating terms such as “syllable”, “rhythm”, “fluency”, “naturalness”, and “expression”. While early emphases were on correct pronunciation and intonation, later periods frequently featured terms such as “application”, “communication”, and “expression”, indicating a growing focus on the ability to apply pronunciation skills in authentic language exchanges. Recent CEECS (e.g. 2022) introduced terms such as “attitude” and “emotion”, highlighting the importance of conveying appropriate emotions through pronunciation. Throughout these periods, terms such as “correctness” and “rules” maintained a consistent presence, underscoring the ongoing importance of pronunciation accuracy and adherence to norms. The introduction of phonetic systems (e.g., the International Phonetic Alphabet [IPA]) further contributed to more precise and detailed pronunciation descriptions and specifications.

These trends reflect a progressive evolution in English pronunciation requirements within the Chinese educational context. The changes indicate a shift towards a more comprehensive, application-oriented, and emotionally nuanced approach to phonetic instruction, while maintaining a foundation of accuracy and standardisation.

## Vocabulary

Analysis of Figure 5 reveals obvious trends in the evolution of vocabulary requirements for Chinese primary and secondary school students from 1986 to 2024. Initially focusing on basic aspects such as word meaning and spelling, vocabulary has shifted towards comprehensive application skills. This transition is evidenced by the increasing prominence of terms such as “application”, “communication”, and “context” in the

latest word clouds. Concurrently, a balanced emphasis on both quantity and quality of vocabulary mastery has emerged. Post-2000 word clouds feature quantity-related terms (e.g. “1500”, “1600”), while quality-related terms such as “fixed phrases” and “idioms” gained prominence, indicating a dual focus on vocabulary breadth and depth.

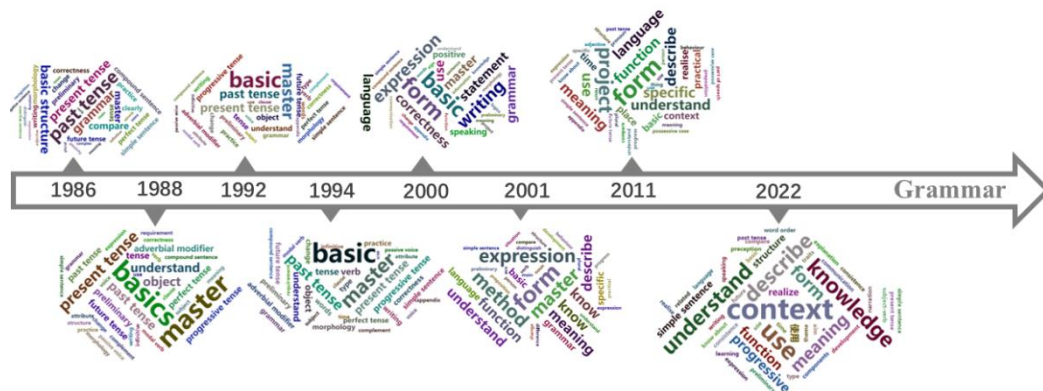


**Figure 5:** The diachronic changes of the word clouds in vocabulary

Alongside these content shifts, vocabulary learning methods have diversified significantly. Early approaches primarily focused on individual words, whereas later curricula integrated vocabulary into thematic and contextual learning. By 2022, the inclusion of terms such as “images”, “sounds”, and “auditory” signalled an increased emphasis on multimedia elements and multimodal learning experiences. This evolution reflects a more holistic approach to vocabulary acquisition, acknowledging the complex nature of language learning and the need for varied input. Overall, these changes demonstrate a continuous refinement of EFLI of vocabulary in China, adapting to meet the changing needs of learners in an increasingly interconnected global context.

## Grammar

Figure 6 illustrates the main shifts to grammar in China’s CEECS from 1986 to 2024. A comparison of the eight word clouds reveals two primary trends in grammatical focus and pedagogy.



**Figure 6:** The diachronic changes of the word clouds in grammar

First, there is a notable transition from emphasising discrete grammatical items to fostering comprehensive language skills. Early curricula prominently featured specific grammatical elements, such as tenses (“past tense”, “present tense”, “future tense”). However, in subsequent years, while these elements remained important, their frequency in the word clouds diminished greatly. This shift indicates a growing emphasis on contextual grammar application and the development of holistic language competencies. Concurrently, this trend reflects a move from micro-level grammatical points to macro-level grammatical concepts, suggesting a more integrated approach to language instruction. Second, the pedagogical focus has evolved from rote memorisation to comprehension and application. This transformation is evidenced by the shift in key terms from “mastery” (prevalent in 1986–2000) to “comprehension” (prominent in 2011 and 2022). Moreover, terms such as “expression”, “function”, “application”, and “description” in 2022 underscore an emphasis on applying grammatical rules in authentic contexts.

### “Function” and “Topic” in 2001 and 2011

Prior to 2001, the LK component primarily consisted of phonetics, vocabulary, and grammar. However, the 2001 curriculum reform marked a pivotal change with the introduction of two new categories: functional knowledge and topical knowledge.

The incorporation of functional knowledge in 2001 signalled a move towards a more communicative approach to language teaching. As illustrated in Figure 7, key elements of this category include “expression”, “communication”, “understand”, and “greetings”, introducing sociolinguistic competence through common social interactions. The word cloud also highlights other important aspects such as “introduction”, “farewell”, and

“gratitude”, indicating a focus on practical, everyday communicative functions. Besides, the addition of topical knowledge, as shown in Figure 7, reflects a content-based approach to language learning. Key themes include daily life, personal life, family, and school. The word cloud also reveals other significant areas such as “family”, “weather”, and “friends”, suggesting a comprehensive range of topics relevant to learners’ lives.



**Figure 7:** The word clouds of “function” and “topic” in 2011 and 2011

The introduction of “function” and “topic” in China’s CEECS in 2001 marked a pivotal shift towards communicative language teaching. This change expanded the traditional focus to include practical communication skills and relevant content areas. Further, the 2011 update refined these categories, reflecting an ongoing evolution in China’s approach to EFLI. This transformation aimed to enhance students’ real-world communication skills.

**“Textual Knowledge” and “Pragmatic Knowledge” in 2022**

The most recent revision in 2022 marks a significant shift in the conceptualisation of LK. This change is particularly evident in the replacement of the previously introduced “function” and “topic” categories with two new components: textual knowledge and pragmatic knowledge.



**Figure 8:** The word clouds of textual knowledge and pragmatic knowledge in 2022

Textual knowledge emerges as a focal point, highlighting the structural elements of language use, with “structure”, “cohesion”, and “coherence” emphasised to create unified and logically flowing texts. The inclusion of “paragraphs” and “genre” underscores attention to text organisation and diverse text types. Additionally, “context” acknowledges the influence of situational factors on text production and interpretation.

Pragmatic knowledge, on the other hand, emphasises the socio-cultural aspects of language, stressing terms such as “appropriateness”, “politeness”, “formal”, and “informal” to reflect socially and culturally suitable language use. It also incorporates affective dimensions, such as “attitude” and “emotion”, indicating a holistic approach to communication that values not only linguistic accuracy but also the expression and interpretation of feelings and attitudes.

The introduction of these two components marks a significant evolution in China’s EFLI approach, reflecting a broader understanding of language as a tool for communication that encompasses textual organisation and social interaction. This progression from pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar to function and topic, and finally to textual knowledge and pragmatic knowledge, illustrates a deepening understanding of language development and educational objectives in Chinese EFLE, moving from linguistic forms to communicative functions, and ultimately to broader textual construction and contextual application skills.

## Discussion

This discussion analyses the significant evolution of the CEECS from 1986 to 2022, focusing on key transformations in nomenclature, content structure, and pedagogical focus.

### **The Absence of Primary School English Education Prior to the 21st Century**

The analysis of historical curriculum documents shows China lacked specific English requirements for primary education from 1986 to 2000, focusing instead on junior high school proficiency stages (later designated as Level 1 and Level 2). For example, the 2000 curriculum plan outlined two English levels for junior high schools but excluded primary schools. A policy shift in 2001, with the *Guiding Opinions on Actively Promoting the Establishment of English Courses in Primary Schools* (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China 2001), officially integrated English into primary education, typically starting in the third grade. The “Nine-Year Compulsory Education” framework then refined LK requirements into five levels, including specific provisions for primary education, aligning with broader policies emphasising early English acquisition.

Prior to the 21st century, the absence of specific English language requirements for primary education in China can be partially explained by the dominance of the grammar-translation method in language education at that time. This method, which emphasises grammatical rules and vocabulary memorisation, was in line with the traditional educational policies and societal expectations of the time. However, with the implementation of a series of reforms, particularly the integration of English into primary education in 2001, the focus shifted towards more communicative and functional approaches, reflecting the influence of CLT and policy borrowing and adaptation theories.

### **The Components of LK from 1986–2022**

#### *Persistent Emphasis on Phonology, Vocabulary, and Grammar in CEECS*

CEECS have consistently underscored phonology, vocabulary, and grammar as core components of LK, reflecting both theoretical and practical imperatives in English language education. Theoretically, this emphasis is rooted in the pivotal role these elements play in language acquisition, aligning with usage-based theories that stress repeated exposure to authentic language use for developing linguistic competence. Recently, CEECS have increasingly emphasised the contextualised application of these elements, signalling a shift towards a more communicative and functional perspective on language learning, as advocated by CLT.

Phonological competence remains a cornerstone of CEECS due to its crucial role in communication. Research by Lin, Li, and Pollock (2024) highlights that accurate pronunciation significantly enhances comprehensibility and perceived proficiency in



EFL contexts. This enduring focus on phonology aligns with the intelligibility principle proposed by Levis (2018), which prioritises ensuring learners can be understood by a wide range of listeners. Vocabulary knowledge, another mainstay in CEECS, is essential for language proficiency development. Nation (2022) emphasises that vocabulary forms the foundation for all language skills, enabling learners to comprehend input and produce meaningful output. The continued emphasis on vocabulary in CEECS reflects its pivotal role in language acquisition. Grammar also remains a key component of CEECS, despite the shift towards more communicative language teaching approaches. Explicit grammar instruction can expedite the acquisition of complex structures, particularly in EFL environments where authentic language exposure may be limited.

These three elements in CEECS embody a balanced approach to EFLI, recognising the interdependence of language subsystems, a concept supported by usage-based theories (Ellis, Römer, and O'Donnell 2019). However, the treatment of these elements has evolved over time, with recent CEECS iterations emphasising their contextualised application, moving away from isolated skill development. This shift aligns with contemporary language teaching views that stress meaningful communication and authentic language use (Xu and Li 2022).

#### *The Introduction of “Function” and “Topic” in Early 21st Century*

The incorporation of “function” and “topic” into the LK section of the 2001 CEECS marked a significant shift in FLE in China. This shift reflected broader socio-political changes in the country, which had historically been dominated by the grammar-translation method. As the significant differences between different curricula are related to the countries' tradition of curriculum theories (Deng et al. 2023), this approach persisted through the early years of the People's Republic of China, aligning with the national focus on construction and development. However, as China's reform and opening-up policies deepened, Western educational concepts, particularly CLT, began to influence Chinese language education policy (Hu 2002). The integration of “function” and “topic” into the LK section of the 2001 CEECS primarily stemmed from the introduction and policy-driven development of CLT in China. Primarily, it aimed to enhance students' communicative competence by fostering their ability to use English effectively and appropriately across various contexts, aligning with the core principles proposed by Canale and Swain (1980). Furthermore, this reform brought Chinese English education into closer concordance with international language teaching practices, which emphasise functional language use and thematic learning as preparation for global communication (Nunan 1989). Concurrently, it represented a deliberate move away from traditional grammar-translation methods towards a more communicative approach, prioritising the practical application of language in authentic situations (Richards 2006). This multifaceted rationale underpinned a significant transformation in Chinese EFLI, reflecting a broader evolution towards more pragmatic and globally oriented language instruction, while also presenting new challenges for implementation and assessment in the Chinese educational context.

*From “Function” and “Topic” to “Textual Knowledge” and “Pragmatic Knowledge” in CEECS*

A change occurred in the 2022 CEECS, where “function” and “topic” were replaced by “textual knowledge” and “pragmatic knowledge”. This transformation represents a sophisticated development in China’s approach to EFLI, aligning more closely with contemporary theories of communicative competence and language use.

The inclusion of “function” and “topic” in the 2001 and 2011 CEECS versions marked an initial move towards a more communicative approach to language teaching. As noted by Richards and Rodgers (2014), this approach emphasises the importance of teaching language for real-world communication. “Function” focused on the purposes for which language is used, such as requesting or apologising, while “topic” provided contextual frameworks for language use. This approach aligned with the notional-functional syllabus design that gained prominence in language teaching methodology. The shift to “textual knowledge” and “pragmatic knowledge” in the 2022 CEECS represents a more refined understanding of language use. Textual knowledge encompasses the ability to understand and produce coherent and cohesive texts, both spoken and written, aligning with recent work on text linguistics and discourse analysis in language teaching (Hyland and Shaw 2016). Pragmatic knowledge, on the other hand, focuses on the ability to use language appropriately in social contexts, including understanding implicatures and performing speech acts effectively, as emphasised in contemporary pragmatics research (Taguchi 2019).

This transition reflects key developments in applied linguistics and language pedagogy. It highlights the importance of understanding language beyond sentence-level grammar and vocabulary, resonating with usage-based theories of language acquisition (Ellis, Römer, and O’Donnell 2019). By explicitly including textual and pragmatic knowledge, CEECS acknowledges that effective communication requires more than just linguistic accuracy, aligning with current models of communicative competence (Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, and Thurrell 1995). This change also brings CEECS closer to international frameworks such as the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), which emphasises textual competence and functional use of language (Council of Europe 2020), facilitating international comparability of language proficiency levels.

The shift from “function” and “topic” to “textual knowledge” and “pragmatic knowledge” is driven by several factors. Advancements in second language acquisition (SLA) research have emphasised the importance of learning language in context, supporting the focus on textual features and pragmatics (Ortega 2014). In an increasingly globalised world, the ability to navigate complex intercultural communication scenarios has become crucial, necessitating a more intricate understanding of text organisation and language use (Byram and Wagner 2018).

While “function” and “topic” provided a practical framework for organising language content, “textual knowledge” and “pragmatic knowledge” offer a more comprehensive

and theoretically grounded approach. The former focused on specific language acts and contexts, while the latter emphasises the broader skills needed for effective communication across various situations and text types. This evolution reflects a response to research in text linguistics and interlanguage pragmatics, with recent studies highlighting the importance of explicitly teaching textual features and pragmatic aspects of language (Taguchi and Roever 2017).

### **Interests Served by the Evolution of EFLI Policy in China**

The evolution of EFLI policy in China has not only been shaped by global trends and domestic needs, but also by the interests of various stakeholders. While the policy has been widely promoted as a means to enhance students' global competitiveness, it is important to consider who exactly is benefiting from this emphasis on English language education.

#### *Ruling Elites and Urban Students*

It is undeniable that the ruling elites and urban students have disproportionately benefited from the embrace of English as a compulsory subject in China. English language education in urban areas is often better resourced, with access to qualified teachers, modern teaching facilities, and a wider range of extracurricular activities that can support language learning (Ma, Xiao, and Liu 2024). This has contributed to a significant disparity in English proficiency levels between urban and rural students.

Furthermore, the ruling elites have also been able to leverage their social and economic capital to provide their children with additional language learning opportunities beyond the school curriculum, such as private tutoring, overseas study tours, and participation in international academic competitions. These advantages further exacerbate the inequality in English language education.

#### *Rural Schools and Less Privileged Classes*

Despite the widespread implementation of English as a compulsory subject, concerns have been raised about its permeation into rural schools and its impact on less privileged classes. Rural schools often face significant challenges in providing high-quality English language education, due to a lack of qualified teachers, inadequate teaching facilities, and limited access to extracurricular learning opportunities.

However, it is important to note that recent reforms in China's education system, including the introduction of new curriculum standards and the promotion of educational equity, have aimed to address some of these concerns. For example, the 2022 edition of the CEECS places greater emphasis on contextualised language learning and practical language use, which may be more relevant and accessible to rural students (Wang 2011). Additionally, the government has also invested in teacher training and the provision of educational resources to rural areas in an effort to narrow the gap in English language education between urban and rural schools.

## **Implications of CEECS Changes for EFLI in China**

Curriculum standards serve as guiding principles. The changes in CEECS are expected to have far-reaching implications across various aspects of EFLI in China.

### *Curriculum Implementation and Textbook Reform*

The relationship between curriculum standards and textbooks is crucial: The standards provide the guiding principles and requirements, while textbooks serve as the primary vehicle for implementing these standards in the classroom. This symbiotic relationship ensures that the theoretical framework established by the curriculum is translated into practical, daily teaching materials. To be more specific, the evolution of CEECS has begun to manifest in concrete changes to educational materials, marking a significant step in curriculum implementation. A pivotal development occurred in 2022 with the introduction of the new curriculum standards for CE, which set forth new requirements for educational objectives, content, and teaching methods. In response to the 2022 new curriculum standards, China introduced new English textbooks for third-grade elementary and seventh-grade junior high school students in the autumn of 2024. This timely implementation of new materials demonstrates China's commitment to aligning educational resources with the updated CEECS, and serves as a crucial first step in the broader reform of EFLI.

Pan and Zhu (2022) point out that future textbooks are likely to place greater emphasis on authentic texts demonstrating coherence and cohesion across various genres. This shift aligns with the new focus on textual knowledge in CEECS. Moreover, textbooks may incorporate more activities highlighting pragmatic aspects of language use, such as exercises on interpreting implicatures or practising appropriate language use in different social contexts. Liu et al. (2022) suggest this could lead to the inclusion of more dialogue-based activities simulating real-world communication scenarios, bridging the gap between classroom learning and practical language use.

In summary, the revision of CEECS necessitates corresponding changes in textbooks. This transformation is not only an inevitable consequence of educational evolution but also a crucial means of enhancing educational quality and fostering innovative minds. Consequently, it is imperative to maintain a vigilant focus on the updates to curriculum standards, promptly adjusting textbook content and teaching methodologies to align with these new educational mandates. Furthermore, teachers must continuously engage in the pursuit of novel educational concepts and teaching techniques, thereby elevating their instructional proficiency and quality.

### *Language in Use*

“Language in use” emphasises the dynamism, practicality, and contextuality of language, focusing on the state of language in practical applications, that is, the language used in real text or actual communication scenarios. The new focus on “language in use” in CEECS is perhaps the most significant emerging trend. This shift represents a move

away from the traditional emphasis on linguistic knowledge in isolation towards a more functional view of language learning. Canale and Swain (1980) note that this trend is likely to manifest in increased attention to sociolinguistic appropriateness and strategic competence in language education. Classroom activities may increasingly focus on how language is used in various real-world contexts, potentially leading to more project-based learning and authentic language tasks (Hussein and Elttayef 2018).

The trend towards emphasising language in use may also lead to increased integration of technology in language teaching. Digital tools and online platforms offer unique opportunities for exposing students to authentic language use in diverse contexts. This could result in more widespread adoption of blended learning approaches and the use of corpus-based teaching materials that showcase language in real-world use. In a practical classroom, it is likely to promote a more integrated approach to language teaching, where grammar, vocabulary, and communicative functions are not taught in isolation but are contextualised within broader textual frameworks. Li and Thomas (2023) argue that this change may accelerate the adoption of task-based and content-based instruction methods, as these approaches naturally lend themselves to the exploration of textual features and the pragmatic use of language.

#### *Implications for Future Policy Making*

The evolution of EFLI policy in China has underscored the necessity for a deeper comprehension of the interests it serves. While this policy has significantly bolstered students' communicative competence, there is a pressing need to ensure that its advantages are distributed more equitably among various regions and social groups (Robinson-Cimpian, Thompson, and Umansky 2016). To this end, future policy making in this domain ought to consider several key aspects.

First, increasing investment in rural education is crucial. The government should sustain its investment in rural education, with a particular focus on recruiting qualified teachers, enhancing teaching facilities, and providing extracurricular learning opportunities. Second, promoting educational equity is essential. Concerted efforts must be made to guarantee that the national curriculum is both suitable and accessible for students hailing from all socio-economic backgrounds, especially those residing in rural areas. Third, reforming the examination system is vital (Zhang, Liu, and Zang 2014). The current examination system should undergo reforms to diminish the excessive emphasis on English language proficiency, while according greater importance to other subjects and skills that are pertinent to the local context and the needs of students. Lastly, encouraging innovative teaching methods is imperative. Teachers should be motivated to embrace innovative teaching approaches that harness local resources and contexts, and that cater to the diverse needs and abilities of students. By addressing these facets, future policy making can foster a more equitable and effective EFLI policy in China.

## Conclusion

This study has traced the evolution of LK in CEECS from 1986 to 2022, revealing significant shifts in content, structure, and focus. These changes are in line with the conceptual framework, which integrates language acquisition theories, educational policy analysis, and curriculum development frameworks.

The persistent emphasis on phonology, vocabulary, and grammar, along with the increasing focus on contextualised application of these elements, reflects the influence of usage-based theories of language acquisition. The incorporation of “function” and “topic” in the 2001 CEECS and their subsequent replacement by “textual knowledge” and “pragmatic knowledge” in the 2022 CEECS demonstrate the evolving understanding of language use and communicative competence, as proposed by CLT and contemporary models of communicative competence.

These changes reflect China’s ongoing efforts to enhance the quality and relevance of its EFLI, aligning with international practices while responding to domestic needs. The newly published textbooks and the overarching trend towards emphasising “language in use” demonstrate a growing recognition of the complex, context-dependent nature of language learning. As China continues to refine its approach to English teaching, it is crucial to monitor the implementation of these changes and their long-term effects on learners’ communicative competence in an increasingly globalised world.

Despite the insights gained, this study has limitations that suggest directions for future research. It primarily focuses on document analysis without examining classroom implementation or learner outcomes. Future research could address this gap by investigating the practical application of CEECS and its impact on students’ language proficiency. Additionally, comparative studies with other countries’ English curricula could provide valuable global perspectives. Lastly, as the new curriculum standards and textbooks gradually gain wider adoption and more empirical data becomes available, subsequent research can build upon our findings to delve deeper into the long-term impact of these educational reforms on students’ English learning, explore regional variations in implementation, and investigate strategies to address any emerging educational disparities.

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## Appendix

The appendix attached at the end of this article is an integral part of the research presentation. It encompasses a collection of original charts of CEECS diachronic changes that are essential for a comprehensive understanding of the study.

