



## Research Article

# Attitudinal changes among high school students toward the English language following educational reforms in China

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In 2021, China implemented a series of unprecedented educational policies that sent devastating shockwaves across the industry. Following the changes, some foreign teachers felt that the general atmosphere and attitude towards English learning had noticeably deteriorated compared to previous years. The capricious political climate exacerbated by the COVID pandemic only added to the insecurities experienced by foreigners in China. To address if there was indeed a downward shift in attitudes, this study compared perceptions towards the English language before and after the reforms for a single cohort of students in a Chinese public high school. The participants completed a questionnaire that captured their perceptions towards English when they were in their first year, and again in their final year. Paired sample t-Tests results revealed that while there were no changes to how the students viewed the language learning process, they now viewed the language itself less favourably, and find it less useful and relevant as compared to two years ago. Though these findings provide some rudimentary evidence that suggest that the reforms could have contributed to the erosion of the attitudes toward English among Chinese students, more studies would have to be conducted to substantiate this hypothesis, and if the phenomenon extend to other foreign languages as well.

**Keywords:** China, educational policy, attitudes, perceptions

## 1. Introduction

Since the emergence of COVID-19 in January 2020, the world has seen major disruptions and upheavals in its education systems. In China, aside from the urgent and slightly disordered implementation of distance learning alternatives during the harsh lockdowns in the early days of the pandemic, the authorities had also gradually, albeit methodically carried out a series of unprecedented measures that shook the education field. Up until late December 2021, the country had tightened restrictions on foreign curricula (Lin, 2021), barred foreign ownership of private educational organisations (Reuters, 2021), banned private after-school education and tutoring businesses (Bloomberg, 2021), and even contemplated dropping English as a core subject (China Youth Daily, 2021).

These measures, even as they were officially intended to lightened the academic load of students and lessen the financial stress of parents trying to outcompete each other, would give the impression that they were meant to reduce the significance of anything 'foreign'. For some others, it might even look like a concerted effort aimed at reducing foreign (primarily western) influence (J. Li, 2021). Regrettably, these also look to foreign language teachers as 'unfriendly' policies, which not only erode the status of foreign languages, negatively affect how their students view foreign languages, but also jeopardise their jobs and careers. For frontline teachers, there is this nagging feeling that their students are becoming more and more uninterested, and sometimes even disrespectful.

On the other hand, the insecurities felt by the teachers could also be due to the declining social standing of foreigners in China over the years (Lan, 2021b), and need not be directly caused by the said measures.

Therefore, have these changes really affected students' attitudes toward foreign language learning in China? Amid gossips and hearsays of how teachers are facing an increasingly unmotivated population of learners, it seems imperative that educators should address this issue systematically in an objective manner, and not emotionally.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Attitudes toward Foreign Language Learning**

Complaints of a negative shift in student perceptions were what prompted the launch of this study. Frontline language teachers know intuitively that students' perceptions towards a foreign language play an essential role in the process of learning that language (Talidong & Liu, 2019), and if students like the foreign language, they would be more inclined to participate and cooperate during lessons. Sahin et al. (2006) similarly reported that high school students with positive perceptions toward English tend to have higher participation and motivation than those with negative perceptions.

These perceptions are claimed to be significantly influenced by the learning environment (Choy & Troudi, 2006; Hazari, 2014), with Hafrizal et al. (2021) suggesting that students would learn more effectively when they have a positive perception of what is going on in their environment. Furthermore, Ahmed (2015) explained that the desire of students to learn English depends on how they perceive the significance of learning in their daily lives. Hence, if there were drastic changes to classroom attitudes, participation rates and motivation levels, classroom teachers would be the first to take notice. While there could be several causes for the loss of interest and motivation, some foreign teachers associated the present negativity with the implementation of the undermentioned policies.

### **2.2. Policies Affecting Attitudes**

Governments often utilise policy instruments with the intention to alter the attitudes and behaviours of their citizens to effect certain societal changes. According to Tummers (2019), these could come in the forms of various incentives (e.g., rewarding measures like dispensing subsidies), disincentives (e.g., mandates, prohibitions and bans), information campaigns (e.g., health promotion campaigns), and nudges (e.g., manipulating social norms).

Some examples of employing such instruments to shape attitudes and behaviours include: implementing state-wide financial training programmes to help reduce young peoples' heavy reliance on debts (Brown et al, 2016); improving health awareness by encouraging citizens to exercise more and eating healthier foods (Warburton et al., 2006); encouraging citizens to communicate using more standardised forms of English instead of a colloquial variety through a linguistic policy campaign (Speak Good English Movement, 2000); or something as subtle as repeating a social norm message (i.e., "nine out of ten people pay their tax on time"), which effectively accelerated tax compliance behaviours (Hallsworth et al., 2017). Regardless of the objectives of such policies and campaigns, the one thing they have in common is to shape the perceptions and behaviours of the targeted population.

#### **Measures Taken by China in 2021**

A proposal made during the high profile 'Two Sessions' (i.e., the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference) in March 2021 floated around the idea of dropping English as a core and compulsory subject from primary up to high school levels (Cawthorpe, 2021; China Youth Daily, 2021). The basic argument was that English takes up around 10% of class hours, yet less than 10% of university graduates would eventually use it in their careers. The proposal instantly triggered heated discussions on the local social media platforms, with some netizens agreeing that learning English was indeed a waste of time, and irrelevant to

their daily lives. An online poll by China Youth Daily showed that 100,000 out of 110,000 respondents supported the proposal (Zou, 2021) – an astonishingly high proportion.

The Chinese Ministry of Education later announced in April 2021 that it would stop organising the Cambridge Main Suite Exams [MSE], one of the most popular off-campus examinations for primary and middle school students in China (Chen & Huang, 2021). This came as a rude shock to parents who saw the attainment of this globally-recognised qualification as an added competitive advantage for their children.

In May 2021, the authorities enacted policies that prohibited foreign curricula from being taught in schools, as well as foreign people (or entities) from owning or controlling any private K-9 schools (Reuters, 2021; The Standard, 2021). At this point, there was a fear of a crackdown on foreign education in China, amidst what was presented as tightening controls on the private education industry (Quinn, 2021).

In a bid to ease academic pressure on young people (Xinhua News, 2021) and financial pressures on families (Channel News Asia, 2021), the authorities announced new rules to bar for-profit private education businesses in July 2021. Under the new regulations, all private entities (e.g., centres, schools) providing classes on academic subjects based on the school curriculum would have to choose to re-register as non-profit organisations, or risk losing their licenses. Of these subjects, it is widely understood that the English subject holds the majority of the market share, and hence many English teachers, local and foreign alike, faced imminent unemployment (Cheng, 2021; J. Li, 2021). Such organisations are not allowed to take in foreign capital, nor allow foreign parties to acquire or hold their shares (Bloomberg, 2021). Furthermore, they are prohibited from teaching any foreign curricula or hiring foreigners who are physically outside of China to engage in any form of online or distance teaching (Bloomberg, 2021; Xu, 2021). Education stocks plunged immediately in response to the announcements (Business Times, 2021), and many language centres were expected to close down (Baker-Brian, 2021; He, 2021).

Following the “double reduction” initiatives, the Shanghai Municipal Education Commission (2021b) cancelled the final English examinations in the local primary schools (The Paper, 2021). Again, the rationale given for this move was to reduce the exam burden and stress on students.

Beijing next banned the use of foreign textbooks from the primary to the middle school levels, while imposing strict regulatory controls on the use of foreign teaching materials at the high school level. Any textbooks used must be written based on the national curriculum, reviewed and pre-approved by the authorities (Lin, 2021).

### **2.3. Speculations of a Concerted Effort to Reduce the Influence of English in China**

In an opinion piece published in the New York Times, Li (2021b) alludes to the aforementioned policies as a “movement against Western influence” which threatens to cut off the country and turn it back to a hermetic nation. This “reversing of gears”, claimed Li, is ideological in nature and an antithesis of what the country had achieved thus far through opening up and learning foreign languages.

At around the same time (of the English exams cancellation in Shanghai), the Ministry of Education introduced “Xi’s Thought”, an ideological programme based on Communist and Marxist values and ideals, into the national curriculum at various educational stages (Al Jazeera, 2021; BBC, 2021; Global Times, 2021; Shanghai Municipal Education Commission, 2021a; The Straits Times, 2021). This is in spite of the authorities claiming that the recent measures were aimed at lessening academic workload. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this move only served to spark off a media frenzy, and fuel the rampant conspiracy theories and insecurities.

The Chinese authorities fervently rejected these accusations, and dismissed these speculations as mere “overthinking” and kicking up a fuss by the Western media (China ORG, 2021; PR Newswire, 2021). Nevertheless, these reassurances were only as convincing as the subjective presumptions and lived experiences of the foreigners within China.

## 2.4. Declining “Foreign Privilege” and Rising Insecurities

In contrary to what was discussed in the previous section, there might be another side of the story. As China’s economy has risen incredibly over the past 20 years, the nationalistic, ethnic and cultural pride of the average Chinese people have also grown, in contrast to the little diffidence that they might have felt not that long ago (Meissner, 2006). As they become more assertive (Buckley, 2021), their confident behaviours might come to be interpreted differently for foreigners who expect to be treated otherwise.

Yet from another angle, Lehmann (2014) and Lan (2021b) described a growing number of non-managerial, non-elite group of middle-stratum foreign migrants moving to China in search of employment opportunities. According to the researchers, these foreigners, of which teachers (Leonard, 2018), entrepreneurs and creative workers make up the majority, is different from transnational elites in that they have to compete in the job arena and engage more with the Chinese people and culture in order to secure their livelihoods in the country. As they are rather easily replaceable, this group is hence caught in an awkward and precarious position – they are now seen more as employees of a lower social status, and not “invited elites” belonging to the upper echelons. Furthermore, if the white-skinned migrants in this group feel this way, it might be worse off for non-white foreigners vying for the same employment opportunities in the highly racialised language teaching industry (Lan, 2021a). As mentioned earlier, the expected job losses brought about by the culling of the private education industry will invariably add to the uncertainties. The tightening up of immigrations policies over the years (Lan 2021b), which were heightened since the start of the pandemic did not help, as there are now more foreigners exiting the country than entering it, which adds to the insecurities of those still in it.

Gone are the days when foreign teachers enjoy a celebrity status in China (Leonard, 2018), and COVID has sped up the decline of their social standing. Perhaps it is due to this, and not the policies, that were causing the unhappiness.

## 3. The Present Study

As discussed, the Chinese authorities implemented a series of policies, and foreign teachers in China reportedly feel the heat outside, and more pertinently, inside the classroom. There are speculations that something deep-seated and innate has indeed changed within China that is affecting the students, while it is also possible that this could be a figment of imagination on the part of the foreigners, fuelled by various feelings of insecurities especially during this uncertain pandemic times. This study hence seeks to find out if the perceptions toward learning English as a foreign language had really changed after the implementation of the said government policies, through these three research questions:

RQ 1) Have general preferences toward the English language changed for Chinese high school students from 2020 to 2022?

RQ 2) Have attitudes toward English language learning changed for Chinese high school students from 2020 to 2022?

RQ 3) Have subjective perceptions of the relevance of the English language changed for Chinese high school students from 2020 to 2022?

Based on subjective and preliminary understanding of the situation, it is hypothesised that there would be a decline in the students’ attitudes towards English with regard to these three perspectives.

## 4. Method

### 4.1. Research Design and Objectives

This is a quasi-experimental exploratory study where Chinese high school students’ perceptions towards the English language in their first year are compared against their perceptions in their third (final) year. The time period in between coincided with the period when the government rolled out the various policies that were deemed unfriendly. So, did the unforeseen educational

reforms influence any attitudinal changes in students? A systematic study should provide some substantiation as to whether there were any significant attitudinal changes.

#### **4.2. Background and Participants**

The study was conducted in a public high school in Anhui Province (China) where both researchers are academic staff in the international department. The participants (2019 cohort) were third (final) year students ( $n = 80$ ), consisting of 40 males and 40 females, who were either 17 or 18 years of age at the time of the study. They belonged to a special programme which required them to take an additional communicative English course taught by foreign teachers, in addition to the grammar-focused local curriculum taught by local teachers. They had been learning English formally for at least 8 years prior to the study.

The participants were selected because they had participated in an earlier unrelated study two years ago, which necessitated a cursory assessment of attitudes towards English and English learning (Afidchao & Wang, 2021). This therefore provided the basis necessary for comparison of any within-group attitudinal changes.

#### **4.3. Data Collection**

The questionnaire developed by Alkaff (2013) was administered to capture and measure the students' perceptions towards English from the three aforementioned perspectives. There are a total of 16 question items, each requiring a response on a five-point Likert scale. Of these 16 items, five are negatively worded and require reverse-scoring (i.e., items 4, 5, 13, 14, 16). Only 11 items were selected for the purposes of this study: questions 2, 4 and 7 for perspective I; questions 1, 3, 5 and 6 for perspective II; and questions 8, 9, 10 and 11 for perspective III. The scores for these questions were then added up to create a composite score for each perspective.

Question 12 (i.e., using English to search the internet) and questions 13 to 16 (i.e., perceived difficulty in learning English) were not included as they were deemed irrelevant for the present study.

To ensure that the participants thoroughly understood the questions, the questions were translated into Chinese by an external translator, and back into English by another, to ensure no losses in meanings. Both translators were independent and unrelated to the study. There was no available Chinese version of the questionnaire to the authors' knowledge.

It should be stressed that the instrument was not previously assessed for validity and reliability, and was selected primarily to ensure consistency with the first testing.

#### **4.4. Procedure**

The first time the participants completed the questionnaire was in June 2020 for another unrelated study (Afidchao & Wang, 2021). This was towards the end of their first year, and roughly nine months before the reforms. The second administration, which was specifically arranged for the purpose of this study, was conducted in March 2022, when they were in their third and final year, roughly eight months after the reforms. This particular time period was chosen to be as far away as possible from the implementation dates of the barrage of reforms in 2021, yet not too close to the high school final exams in early June 2022, to avoid disturbing or distracting the participants from their exam revisions.

In both instances, the participants were given 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire during school hours, were informed that there are no right or wrong responses, and that the responses would have no bearing on their school performance.

#### **4.5. Data Analysis**

The Jeffrey's Amazing Statistics Program (JASP Version 0.15.0.0) (JASP Team, 2022) was used to analyse the data collected. Firstly, the descriptive statistics were computed to gain an overview of the responses from both time points. Secondly, assumption checks (which include outliers and normality) were performed for the intended dependent samples t-tests. The boxplot function

showed no outliers, and hence the assumption is not violated. A Shapiro-Wilk test was conducted and did not show any evidence of non-normality (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Test of Normality (Shapiro-Wilk) on the Six Sets of Data*

Measure 1 (1st Year)	Measure 2 (3rd Year)	W	p
Like English (1st Year)	Like English (3rd Year)	.978	.179
Like to learn English (1st Year)	Like to learn English (3rd Year)	.982	.317
Think English is useful (1st Year)	Think English is useful (3rd year)	.953	.005

Note. Significant results suggest a deviation from normality

Finally, based on this outcome, it was decided that parametric tests (i.e., paired samples t-tests) be used to conduct the following statistical comparisons on the six sets of data, specifically, (i) how much the participants liked the English language in their first year versus their final year, (ii) how much the participants liked learning the English language in their first year versus their final year, and (iii) how useful the participants thought the English language was in their first year versus their final year.

#### 4.6. Ethical Considerations

The participants were briefed on the voluntary nature of the study, its non-relation to their school records, as well as their freedom to withdraw from the study at any point. Permission to conduct the study was also obtained from the school administration prior to the study.

### 5. Results

As stated earlier, the three research questions pertain to the three attitudinal aspects towards English (i.e., how much the participants liked English, how much they liked learning English, and how useful they thought English was) of the participants.

Table 2

*Mean Scores and Standard Deviations of the Attitudes in the First year and Third year*

Measure	N	M	SD
Like English (1st Year)	80	12.488	2.239
Like English (3rd Year)	80	11.300	2.616
Like to learn English (1st Year)	80	14.338	3.420
Like to learn English (3rd Year)	80	13.650	3.540
Think English is useful (1st Year)	80	17.525	2.439
Think English is useful (3rd Year)	80	15.200	3.928

As presented in Table 2, the computed descriptives for the six sets of data all show varying levels of decrease in their final year as compared to their first year, possibly indicating a drop in interest in all three aspects.

To investigate if there were any statistical differences in each pair of datasets, paired sample *t*-tests were then performed, with the first investigating the general preferences towards the language.

Table 3

*Paired Samples t-Test for General Preferences towards English*

Measure 1 (1st Year)	Measure 2 (3rd Year)	t	df	p	Cohen's d
Like English (1st Year)	Like English (3rd Year)	3.755	79	<.001*	0.420

As shown in Table 3, a closer investigation of the general preferences (i.e., how much the participants like the language) showed that there was a significant difference between the first year responses ( $M = 12.49$ ,  $SD = 2.24$ ) and third year responses ( $M = 11.30$ ,  $SD = 2.62$ );  $t(79) = 3.76$ ,  $p < .001$ , with a small to medium effect size ( $d = 0.42$ ).

The next comparison pertains to how much the participants like learning the language in their first and final years.

Table 4

*Paired Samples t-Test for Attitudes towards Learning English*

Measure 1 (1st Year)	Measure 2 (3rd Year)	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Like to learn English (1st Year)	Like to learn English (3rd Year)	1.750	79	.084	0.196

Nevertheless, there were no significant differences in how much they liked the learning process over the years ( $p = .196$ ) (see Table 4).

The last pair of datasets were then compared to find out if the perceptions of the relevance of English language (i.e., usefulness) had changed.

Table 5

*Paired Samples T-Test for Perceptions Towards the Relevance of English*

Measure 1 (1st Year)	Measure 2 (3rd Year)	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Think English is useful (1st Year)	Think English is useful (3rd year)	5.852	79	<.001*	0.654

There was a significant deterioration in perceptions of the usefulness of the English language in the first year ( $M = 17.53$ ,  $SD = 2.44$ ) as compared to the third year responses ( $M = 15.20$ ,  $SD = 3.93$ );  $t(79) = 5.85$ ,  $p < .001$ , with a medium to large effect size ( $d = 0.65$ ) (see Table 5).

## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

As can be surmised from the results, there was a significant drop in how much the participants liked the English language in between June 2020 and March 2022. This provides some evidential support for the foreign teachers' suspicions about the apparent loss of interest. Though they are based on subjective observations, the suspicions were not unfounded. The evaluations hence concurred with what Sahin et al. (2006) proposed, that students with positive perceptions toward learning the foreign language in general tend to be more participative and motivated.

The question of whether these attitude changes were shaped through the utilisation of policy instruments, is however, more difficult to answer. Even if these were really a series of whips, carrots and nudges as defined by Tummers (2019), it would still be impossible to ascertain if the core intention was to reduce the influence of English, as speculated by Li (2021b).

A cursory look at these findings might also offer alternative explanations, that the decline in the perceptions towards English could be due to a myriad of other reasons, like fatigue or boredom; or one might even hazard a guess that it was due to their dislike for their English teachers over time. While these might be possible rationalisations, it is worth noting that there were no significant differences in how the students viewed the language learning process - which leads us to the next research question.

The results also showed no significant changes in the attitudes towards the learning process, meaning how the students felt about learning the language when they were in their first year, was similar to how they felt two years later, after the implementation of the said policies. If it was indeed due to waning teacher-student relationships, or a general aversion to the learning process caused by common reasons like final-year exam stress (or even COVID-related stress), it would probably have been reflected here.

Though this did not concur with the hypothesis that there would be a deterioration of attitudes towards the learning process, the findings nevertheless lend more affirmation that the downward shift in attitudes towards the language itself (i.e., RQ 1) had little to do with what was happening in the classroom (i.e., RQ 2). As such, it could be reasoned that the change was directed at the language, and not the instructor(s), which would lead us back to the assumption that the growing disinterest might somehow be linked to the concerted effort aimed at reducing the language's influence (Y. Li, 2021).

Like general preferences (i.e., RQ 1), the students felt that English had become less useful and relevant in 2022 as compared to 2020.

English was and still is a compulsory and important examinable subject for high schools in China at the time of the study, and hence should remain as one of the top priorities like before. It bears emphasising that the final exams would take place barely three months (i.e., in June 2022) after the participants' second attempt at the questionnaire in March 2022. At the very least, the English exam scores would count towards a large percentage of the high school final exams aggregate, and is hence instrumental in determining if they could get into a university or a vocational college, or make a difference between gaining entry into a first, second, or third-tier university. So why and how has it become less relevant now? For such a change to happen to a sizeable number of people, it seems that a more plausible explanation would be interventions on a larger scale, like the utilisation of policy instruments (Tummers, 2019). Another contributory factor could be that the exams are now only useful for them in achieving their short-term goals (i.e., passing the bare requirements), but is losing its relevance in the long term.

Under any circumstances, if there was indeed an intention to reduce the dependence on English like what Li (2021b) implied, it might seem like the plan is gaining traction.

## 7. Limitations

Unfortunately, the questionnaire used in the study was not previously assessed for validity and reliability, and thus could present consistency issues. While the questions do appear to have some face validity, they also lack construct and concurrent validity. Nevertheless, the data obtained in the study could prove to be useful for future meta-analyses, should the instrument be assessed to be concurrently valid and reliable.

## 8. Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings do show significant attitudinal changes toward the English language among high school students in China - this part is clear, at least in the context of this particular school. This therefore provide some affirmation to the subjective experiences of some foreigners, that their students have somehow become less interested in English, and not that they are unhappy due to the declining social status (Leonard, 2018). Nevertheless, it is difficult to ascertain if the 2021 educational reforms had contributed directly to the erosion of the attitudes. Whether or not the governmental policies had influenced this change is thus inconclusive at this point.

In any case, this study was conducted as it was an opportunity not to be missed - that there was an available group of students who had participated in a prior study that assessed attitudes, and that there were complaints from the ground (and from reported sources) that certain reforms are hurting the status of English in China. This study hence provides a glimpse (as well as some rudimentary evidential support) as to how Chinese students are perceiving the English language after the educational reforms.

## 9. Further Recommendations

Before any conclusions can be convincingly drawn, it would be advisable for more studies to be conducted on other demographic groups, for example, parents of younger learners (who have a larger stake in determining what is best for their children); working adults (who would have a clearer idea on how relevant English is in their career); and university students (who would probably be cognitively more mature than the high school participants in this study). This is to determine if the policies have had a more far-reaching effect, or if the phenomenon is only limited to students.

Studies on other foreign languages (e.g., French, Spanish) might also be necessary, in order to determine if the same phenomenon extends to other languages of "Western" origin.



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