

TEACHER IDENTITY AND AGENCY IN INTEGRATING MORAL EDUCATION INTO COLLEGE-LEVEL ENGLISH INSTRUCTION IN CHINA

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(Received 25th May 2026; revised 10th August 2026; accepted 19th August 2026)

Abstract. This review explores the evolving theoretical and empirical landscape of teacher agency and professional identity within the context of Language Policy and Planning (LPP). As scholarship in LPP undergoes a significant human turn, the focus has shifted from state-led structuralism toward a critical, ecological perspective that recognises teachers as primary policy arbiters. In the specific context of China's Integrating Moral Education into College-level English Instruction (IMECEI) mandate, this transition necessitates a fundamental role reconstruction for educators from linguistic facilitators to moral guides. By synthesising contemporary research, this review identifies a persistent bifurcation between macro-policy deconstruction and micro-pedagogical description, which often overlooks the complex, lived experiences of practitioners. The findings highlight the profound discursive tensions, emotional shocks, and the curatorial burden teachers face while navigating Chinese cultural aphasia and the broader Global South struggle for cultural sovereignty. Ultimately, this review points to significant theoretical and methodological lacunae, calling for future scholarship to adopt more integrated, multidimensional perspectives to understand how identity and agency are achieved in high-stakes ideological landscapes.

Keywords: *teacher agency, professional identity, moral education, college-level English instruction, Language Policy and Planning (LPP)*

Introduction

The field of Language Policy and Planning (LPP) is undergoing a significant transition from state-led structuralism toward a more critical, human-centred, and ecological perspective, often referred to as the human turn. Within this paradigm, policy is reconceptualised not as a finished textual product or a linear top-down mandate, but as a dynamic social practice that is continuously negotiated, interpreted, and reshaped by those operating within the educational system (Ball et al., 2012). Policy is not a linear top-down mandate but a dynamic social practice negotiated by educators (Ball et al., 2012; Menken and García, 2010). In the specific context of Chinese higher education, the implementation of Kecheng Sizheng (Integrating Moral Education into College-level English Instruction, hereafter IMECEI) reflects a strategic pivot from linguistic instrumentalism toward a national rejuvenation paradigm. This shift requires university English teachers to transcend their traditional roles as language skill facilitators and cross-cultural bridges to become moral educators and ideological guides. However, the actual realisation of these state-mandated objectives resides within the agentic negotiation of practitioners, who must navigate the inherent frictions between macro-level textual fantasies and the authentic complexities of classroom realities. This

review systematically explores the evolving landscape of teacher agency and professional identity reconstruction, examining how educators author their roles within this shifting ideological landscape.

Results and Discussion

Theoretical framework: Teacher agency and professional identity

The integration of moral education into language policy is not merely a localised pedagogical adjustment but represents a complex, reactive response to the global tensions between neoliberal internationalisation and national cultural sovereignty (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010). While macro-level policies provide the essential discursive scaffolding for educational reform, the actual realisation of these state-mandated objectives resides within the agentic negotiation of frontline practitioners. This article explores the evolving theoretical and empirical landscape of teacher agency, systematically shifting the analytical focus from the static policy text to the dynamic policy actor (Johnson, 2013; Ball et al., 2012). By reconceptualising policy as a lived process rather than a finished product, recent scholarship highlights the critical role of teacher subjectivity. Teachers are not neutral conduits for the state's will. Instead, they function as primary mediators who actively interpret, modify, or even resist macro-level directives within the unique constraints of their micro-pedagogical environments (Menken and García, 2010). This perspective acknowledges that professional identity and agency are inextricably linked, as teachers must continuously reconcile their established professional beliefs with newly introduced ideological requirements (Varghese et al., 2005). Consequently, understanding the success or failure of the IMECEI mandate requires a profound investigation into how teachers author their roles within this shifting ideological landscape.

The human turn in LPP: Teachers as policy arbiters

The evolution of scholarship in Language Policy and Planning (LPP) reflects a significant transition from state-led structuralism to a more critical, human-centred, and ecological perspective. Historically, the study of LPP was dominated by a structural-functionalist or top-down orientation, which viewed policy as a linear, unidirectional mandate from state authorities to passive implementers (Tollefson, 1991). In this traditional paradigm, success was measured by the degree of technical fidelity to the original legislative text, assuming that practitioners would serve as neutral conduits for the state's will. During the 1960s, LPP was primarily viewed as a rational, government-driven endeavour focused on nation-building and decolonisation through status and corpus planning. In this era, research centred on agencies or state institutions, such as Indonesia's Pusat Pembinaan dan Pengembangan Bahasa (Rubin, 1977) or various Indian ministries (Das Gupta, 1977b), rather than individual agencies. While some non-governmental bodies like congresses (Fishman, 1993), academies (Fellman and Fishman, 1977), and language associations (Das Gupta, 1977a) were acknowledged, individual actors were typically studied for their identities or actions (Jernudd, 1977; Fellman, 1974) rather than their capacity for influence. Policy recipients were largely characterised as passive subjects who merely accepted or rejected top-down mandates (Cooper, 1984).

A critical shift occurred in the 1980s and 1990s as researchers began questioning the ability of institutional LPP to provide equitable social results. This period challenged the supposed neutrality of language planning, highlighting the subjective influence of political, economic, and ideological interests (Phillipson, 1992; Tollefson, 1991). Scholarship turned its attention to the detrimental effects of policies on marginalised groups (Pennycook, 1994). Within this critical framework, agency was reimagined as a tool for resistance, where oppressed groups utilised language to oppose dominant structures, such as anti-apartheid movements in South Africa (Alexander, 1989) or Welsh language activism (Merriman and Jones, 2009). Language planning is now conceptualised as inherently discursive and ideological (Liddicoat, 2020a, 2013, 2007; Lo Bianco, 2005). Influenced by the conceptualisation of dispersed and horizontal power, LPP is recognised as a distributed practice across all levels of society. This understanding led to the categorisation of planning into macro, meso, and micro levels (Baldauf, 2006; Kaplan and Baldauf, 1997), which are increasingly viewed as context-dependent rather than fixed institutional tiers (Liddicoat, 2020b). Furthermore, influence is seen as multidirectional, allowing for language policy from below (Alexander, 1992). Recent research has also expanded the definition of policy beyond official texts (Shohamy, 2006) to include covert forms of planning. LPP is now investigated as discourse, encompassing the attitudes and ideologies surrounding language use (Lo Bianco, 2005), and as practice, consisting of the tacit communicative patterns and unexpressed beliefs that govern social interaction (Bonacina-Pugh, 2020, 2012). This holistic approach acknowledges that language decisions are frequently shaped by unarticulated but deeply understood social norms.

Liddicoat and Taylor-Leech (2020) articulate a human turn that has re-centred the human actor as the primary locus of policy analysis. This perspective moves away from viewing language planning as a neutral, technocratic activity (Johnson, 2013; Menken and García, 2010), acknowledging instead that policy is not merely a finished textual product but a dynamic social practice that is continuously negotiated, interpreted, and reshaped by those who operate within the educational system. Johnson (2013) critically distinguishes between policy implementation and policy enactment. While implementation implies a mechanical and often uncritical carrying out of directives, enactment emphasises that policies are interpreted and translated through the unique sociocultural and professional lenses of practitioners. This shift introduces the concept of a policy space between macro-level management and micro-level practice, where teachers exert their decisive influence. Liddicoat and Taylor-Leech (2020) argue that these spaces are never empty; rather, they are filled by the agency of middle-level actors who navigate the tensions between official mandates and classroom realities. Within these spaces, teachers do not merely receive policy as a finalised directive. They act as arbiters (Menken and García, 2010), narrators, and translators (Liddicoat and Taylor-Leech, 2020), filtering macro-mandates through their own belief systems and the immediate pedagogical needs of their students. Consequently, the actual policy lived in the classroom is often a recontextualised version of the original state document, shaped by the teacher's appropriation of the policy text.

Contemporary LPP scholarship further recognises that this agency is not simply an exercise of unconstrained free will or an inherent trait possessed by an individual. Instead, it is a socio-culturally mediated capacity to act that is fundamentally embedded in time and context. Cong-Lem (2021) emphasises that teacher agency is an influential factor for sustainable educational change, yet its achievement depends on the complex

interplay between teacher capacities, implementation strategies, and specific contextual factors. Drawing on Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) widely adopted framework (Liddicoat and Taylor-Leech, 2020), teacher agency is conceptualised as a temporally embedded process comprising a chordal triad of iteration, projectivity, and practical evaluation. Cong-Lem (2021) highlights that these three dimensions interact to determine how teachers respond to reform. In the high-stakes context of IMECEI, the iterational component is particularly vital as teachers selectively mobilise past schemas of action and accumulated professional capital to negotiate newly introduced ideological mandates. Projectivity allows teachers to envision future pedagogical identities that reconcile language proficiency with moral-ideological cultivation, while practical evaluation governs the moment-to-moment decisions made within the material and discursive constraints of their micro-pedagogical environments. Spolsky's (2009, 2004) tripartite model of language policy further reinforces this perspective by decentralising the role of the state. He argues that formal Language Management is only one facet of policy; Language Beliefs and Language Practices are equally, if not more, decisive in shaping the actual linguistic ecology. In the high-stakes context of IMECEI, the teacher's ideological alignment and professional identity become the hidden policy that truly dictates classroom events. Ball et al. (2012) contend that teachers are creative interpretative actors who navigate discursive frictions between state-mandated textual fantasies and the authentic complexities of student needs. This navigation involves a process of bricolage where teachers utilise available resources and discursive fragments to construct a version of the policy that is contextually relevant and pedagogically workable. Liddicoat and Taylor-Leech (2020) support this by noting that agency is relational and social, emerging from the interaction between the individual's history and the structural affordances of the environment.

Conceptualising agency as an ecological achievement

In contrast to individualistic perspectives, agency is here conceptualised not as a static property of the teacher, but as an ecological achievement (Priestley et al., 2015). This perspective posits that agency is achieved through the dynamic interplay of individual capacities and the structural and cultural conditions of the educational environment. The achievement of agency is therefore not a static outcome but a continuous process of negotiation. Cong-Lem (2021) notes that teacher cognition and beliefs serve as powerful filters that determine which aspects of a policy are adopted and which are marginalised. When teachers encounter macro-directives that conflict with their established professional identities, they may exercise agency through resistance, subversion, or creative adaptation. In this sense, agency is an achievement resulting from the synergy of individual efforts and environmental supports. Liddicoat and Taylor-Leech (2020) point out that agency in LPP is often exercised in the gaps of policy where top-down management fails to provide specific instructions. By filling these gaps with their own professional judgements, teachers effectively become micro-policy makers who define the linguistic and ideological boundaries of their classrooms.

Recent scholarship in China reflects a strategic pivot from linguistic instrumentalism toward a national rejuvenation paradigm in foreign language education. This strategic shift is necessitated by what Hao (2012) identifies as the tool versus quality tension in college English education policy, where the pragmatic utility of English often clashes with the state's requirement for ideological cultivation. These macro-level debates underscore the need for a monitoring-feedback-adjustment mechanism to prevent policy

absence or deviation during the top-down transmission process (Hao, 2012; Wang, 2002). Within the micro-ecology of the classroom, teachers must exercise significant agency to resolve these tensions, ensuring that national ideological objectives are met without sacrificing the linguistic rigour of the course. As Liddicoat and Taylor-Leech (2020) suggest, the agency of these frontline actors is the primary force that determines the trajectory of language education reform, acknowledging that the ultimate fate of any macro-reform rests upon the agentic negotiation, practical evaluation, and identity work of the educator.

The empirical landscape: Structural constraints and emotional entanglements

A systematic review of the international literature reveals that teacher agency has become a focal point in understanding how language education policies are enacted. This represents a transition from viewing teachers as passive implementers to active negotiators (Cong-Lem, 2021). Within the Chinese higher education context, empirical studies have primarily investigated teacher agency along three interconnected trajectories, which include reacting to macro-guidelines, navigating meso-level institutional constraints, and negotiating identity and emotions. Contemporary scholarship increasingly adopts sociocultural and ecological paradigms to understand this phenomenon, confirming that agency is not an inherent psychological trait. Instead, it is an emergent capacity achieved through the complex interaction between individual cognitive efforts and environmental affordances.

Agency as reaction and discursive negotiation

Initial empirical inquiries largely utilised agency as teachers' individual reactions to shifting national syllabi. For instance, Cheng and Wei (2019) investigated how college English teachers agentially responded to the Guidelines on College English Teaching. Their research demonstrated that policy enactment is highly dependent on teachers' individual beliefs and their perceived value of the English discipline. These studies established the foundational premise that macro-policies do not translate linearly into classroom practice. Rather, they are heavily mediated by individual teacher cognition. Expanding upon this foundation, Tang (2022) utilised sociocultural theory to explore how university English teachers exercise agency in the specific context of integrating moral education. Tang (2022) found that teachers proactively enhance their professional awareness and strategically plan pedagogical goals to discover new developmental pathways within the mandated reform. Few scholars have explored teacher agency on the strategic level of language policy and planning in the context of ideological integration. Chen (2021) studied the factors influencing English as a foreign language teacher agency, identifying that it involves activity subjects, community rules, mediating tools, and defined roles. Similarly, Xu (2018) employed activity theory to examine how teachers negotiate their division of labour and utilise specific pedagogical tools when faced with curricular change. These investigations help improve the effectiveness of reform in practice and serve as solid models for theoretical research. However, their research perspectives remain excessively micro-focused. By concentrating almost exclusively on immediate classroom tools and isolated individual reactions, these studies overlook broader environmental constraints. Consequently, they are prone to the analytical pitfall of seeing a tree but not the forest, as they fail to capture the macro-ideological pressures shaping these micro-reactions.

The meso-level barrier and implementational spaces

As research deepened, scholars began to examine the structural environments surrounding teachers, consistently identifying the meso-level institutional administration as a highly problematic tier. Liu et al. (2020) highlighted that institutional delays and administrative ignorance of teachers' innovative efforts severely restrict the implementational spaces for teacher agency, frequently triggering resistance against reform mandates. The complex and comprehensive nature of university English education demands a high degree of structural coordination, yet this essential support is often absent during policy execution at the university level (Ai, 2023). More recently, adopting an explicit ecological perspective within the IMEC reform, Zhang et al. (2025) found a striking systemic dysfunction. Their empirical data suggests that while the macro-system provides clear ideological direction and the micro-system exhibits active teacher engagement, the meso-system acts primarily to limit or even suppress teacher agency. Furthermore, Zhang et al. (2025) mapped the temporal dimension of this agency, revealing that teachers rely most heavily on immediate practical evaluation, followed by iterational past experiences, while their projective capacity for future planning remains severely restricted by the lack of institutional scaffolding. These empirical findings expose the inherent limitations of traditional hierarchical analyses. They strongly justify bypassing the restrictive institutional layer to observe the direct friction between macro-policy texts and micro-classroom ecology, as the intermediate administrative level often acts as a barrier rather than a conduit for policy translation.

The entanglement of agency, identity, and emotion

Contemporary research increasingly underscores that agency in IMECEI policy enactment is never a purely cognitive or rational calculation; rather, it is profoundly intertwined with emotional turbulence and continuous identity reconstruction (Han et al., 2026; Yip et al., 2022). Yip et al. (2022) revealed that the mandate to integrate ideological elements into English courses triggers significant emotional vulnerabilities, such as shock and anxiety, as teachers struggle to reconcile their established professional roles with new political expectations. Han et al. (2026) further explored this psychological terrain by demonstrating that emotions function as a powerful endogenous force throughout the process of professional transformation. Their dynamic system analysis reveals that emotional friction can actually stimulate active learning and enhance pedagogical wisdom, ultimately propelling teachers to achieve non-linear identity integration. Recent studies highlight the dynamic nature of this developmental journey. Xu (2025) observed that language teachers' identities fluctuate along a continuum of authority, agency, and vulnerability when navigating critical teaching contexts. Liu (2025) utilised narrative inquiry from an ecological perspective to show that experienced university English teachers constantly draw upon their professional histories to evaluate current pedagogical affordances and reshape their ideological commitments. Similarly, Weng (2025) demonstrated through autoethnographic research that the development of professional agency and identity is a continuous trajectory, shifting from uncritical compliance to a critical, context-sensitive enactment. Collectively, these studies confirm that exercising agency requires practitioners to navigate a volatile emotional landscape while simultaneously reconstructing their professional self-worth.

Collectively, these empirical studies illuminate the complex reality of language policy enactment in China, suggesting that teacher agency is ecologically situated, structurally constrained by meso-level administration, and emotionally charged. However, a significant gap remains. While extant research thoroughly acknowledges the suppressive nature of the institutional meso-level, there is a notable scarcity of scholarship that analytically isolates this intermediary to theorise the direct, unmediated intersection between macro-discursive ideological mandates and the micro-ecological space of teacher practice. The literature currently lacks a focused examination of how teachers agentially translate state ideology into pedagogical reality when the administrative buffer is analytically removed. Addressing this specific theoretical lacuna represents a critical frontier for the field, as it would provide a more refined understanding of the authentic boundaries of teacher agency at the ultimate point of policy enactment.

Contextualising agency and identity under the IMECEI mandate

The implementation of the IMECEI mandate in Chinese higher education has necessitated a fundamental re-evaluation of what it means to be a university English teacher. Within the broader field of Language Policy and Planning (LPP), professional identity is no longer conceptualised as a static or inherent essence but is instead understood as a dynamic, fluid, and socially negotiated construct (Xu, 2025). This article explores the complex landscape of teacher identity reconstruction, shifting the focus from the technical enactment of policy to the internalised role negotiations and discursive struggles of the practitioners themselves. As the macro-policy shifts from a purely linguistic orientation toward a national rejuvenation paradigm, teachers find themselves at a critical crossroads where their established professional identities must be systematically dismantled and rebuilt to accommodate new ideological requirements (Jiang, 2023).

Identity reconstruction: Navigating emotional shock and cognitive dissonance

Historically, university English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in China have constructed their professional identities around the pillars of linguistic expertise and cross-cultural mediation. Liu (2019) observes that for decades, the primary self-perception of these educators was that of a language skill facilitator or a bridge between East and West. This identity was deeply rooted in the instrumental value of English acquisition, where success was measured by students' proficiency and their ability to navigate global academic and professional environments. However, the introduction of the IMECEI mandate has disrupted this established equilibrium. The state now demands that language teachers transcend their traditional roles to become moral educators and ideological guides. This shift represents more than a change in curriculum content; it is a fundamental transformation of the discursive field in which teacher identity is situated (Jiang, 2023). The initial stage of identity reconstruction is often marked by profound discursive tension and a sense of identity crisis. Yip et al. (2022) revealed that the pressure to integrate ideological and political elements into the English classroom often triggers significant emotional shock and anxiety. Many teachers experience a form of cognitive dissonance, struggling to reconcile their professional training in Western-centric linguistic theories with the new requirement to promote nationalistic values and traditional Chinese culture. This tension is particularly acute for those who perceive the

IMECEI reform as a form of professional de-skilling (Jiang, 2023). Educators may fear that the emphasis on moral guidance will marginalise the linguistic rigour of the discipline, thereby undermining their authority as subject-matter experts. Consequently, the process of identity reconstruction often begins with a period of resistance or superficial compliance, as teachers attempt to protect their established professional selves from the perceived encroachment of ideological mandates.

However, contemporary research emphasises that this reconstruction is rarely a linear progression from resistance to acceptance. Instead, it is a volatile and non-linear journey where emotion serves as a powerful endogenous force (Han et al., 2026). Han et al. (2026) argue that the emotional friction generated by the IMECEI reform can act as a catalyst for professional growth. Through a process of identity learning, teachers utilise their emotional vulnerabilities to critically reflect on their roles and seek new ways to integrate their dual identities as language experts and moral educators. This transformation is not merely about adding new tasks to an existing repertoire but involves a deep-seated ontological shift. Xu (2025) observed that teachers navigate a continuum of authority, agency, and vulnerability, where their professional identities flow and fluctuate in response to the immediate successes or failures of their critical-oriented teaching. The relationship between identity and agency is central to this reconstructive process. Zhu (2023) identifies a reciprocal link where the exercise of professional agency is both a product of and a prerequisite for identity development. The process of identity reconstruction within the IMECEI reform occurs within what Holland et al. (1998) term *figured worlds*, socially and culturally constructed realms where teachers interpret their professional roles. In these spaces, teachers exercise their space of authoring to reconcile personal pedagogical beliefs with the newfound ideological mandates of the state. Teachers who possess a strong sense of agency are more likely to proactively author new identities that align with the shifting policy landscape. For instance, Weng (2025) demonstrated that through targeted professional training, teachers can transition from an uncritical compliance identity to a critical, context-sensitive identity. This transition involves a move away from the mechanical implementation of state directives toward a more autonomous and reflective enactment of the policy. In this sense, identity reconstruction is an agentic achievement where teachers selectively utilise their past experiences and future professional goals to construct a version of the IMECEI mandate that is personally and pedagogically meaningful (Liu, 2025).

The social and ecological context also plays a decisive role in shaping the trajectory of identity reconstruction. Tang (2022) highlights that teachers are not isolated actors; their identities are reconstructed within communities of practice where shared beliefs and social rules either facilitate or constrain development. In environments where there is a lack of institutional scaffolding, teachers may retreat into a defensive identity, viewing the policy as an external imposition. Conversely, when the micro-pedagogical environment offers implementational spaces for creative integration, teachers are more likely to achieve identity integration (Liu et al., 2020). Jiang (2023) further notes that the process of reconstruction is heavily influenced by the micro-decisions teachers make during daily instruction. Each time a teacher chooses to adapt a textbook article or engage in a critical discussion about Chinese values, they are incrementally reshaping their professional self-image. Despite the growing body of literature on this topic, a significant gap remains in understanding the procedural *how* of identity reconstruction at the ultimate point of policy enactment. While existing studies, such as those by Han

et al. (2026) and Yip et al. (2022), have illuminated the emotional and cognitive dimensions of this process, there is a persistent lack of research focusing exclusively on the direct interplay between macro-discursive mandates and the micro-ecological space of authoring. Current scholarship often conflates the teacher's professional identity with their institutional role, thereby overlooking the more nuanced, idiosyncratic ways in which individuals reconstruct their professional selves when the administrative buffer of the meso-level is analytically removed. Shifting the analytical lens to the authentic, unmediated friction between state ideology and the teacher's lived reality remains a critical prerequisite for understanding how identity is truly achieved in the modern Chinese English classroom.

In summary, professional identity reconstruction in the context of the IMECEI reform is a complex, emotionally charged, and ecologically situated process. It necessitates a fundamental shift from a purely linguistic self-perception toward an integrated, dual-identity model encompassing both linguistic proficiency and moral guidance. The success of this reconstruction depends on the teacher's capacity to navigate emotional shock, exercise agency against structural constraints, and negotiate the discursive gaps within policy. As scholars like Han et al. (2026) and Xu (2025) suggest, this non-linear trajectory requires a profound re-imagining of the professional self. Consequently, future research must continue to disentangle the micro-ecological factors that determine whether this reconstruction leads to professional flourishing or to identity fragmentation. Addressing these current theoretical lacunae is essential for a more granular understanding of how educators navigate high-stakes ideological landscapes to construct identities that are both professionally viable and politically aligned.

Negotiating cultural aphasia and national identity

The enactment of IMECEI in Chinese higher education is not a frictionless process; rather, it is a site of intense discursive negotiation. Empirical research in this area has primarily focused on the tensions between macro-strategic goals and micro-classroom realities, with a particular emphasis on identity preservation.

Macro-strategic friction and policy deviation

This strategic recalibration aims to address the long-standing issue of Chinese Cultural Aphasia (Cong, 2000), wherein English learners and educators find themselves linguistically equipped but culturally silenced when attempting to articulate their indigenous heritage in a foreign tongue. From the perspective of national language planning, scholars argue that the current reform is a necessary recalibration of China's foreign language education trajectory. Cai (2021) and Zhang (2021) contend that decades of overemphasising English proficiency have led to a neglect of mother-tongue planning and national strategic needs, necessitating a shift toward an indigenous-oriented paradigm. However, the transmission of these macro-mandates often encounters significant friction at the micro-pedagogical level. Hao (2012) identifies a fundamental tension between instrumentalism and quality-oriented education in college English. His empirical investigation reveals that top-down policies frequently result in policy deviation or form over substance. This deviation primarily stems from a profound disconnect between abstract policy ideals and the authentic, material realities of the classroom. In the face of this perceived aphasia, teachers' agency manifests as an

effort to reclaim their cultural voices, navigating the friction between their habituated Western-centric pedagogy and the new mandate for cultural expression. This suggests that the textual fantasies of policy documents often mask a deep implementation gap at the grassroots level.

The discursive crisis: Chinese cultural aphasia

A recurring theme in the literature is the impact of Western-centric curricula on the cultural identity of Chinese students. This has been popularised as the phenomenon of Chinese cultural aphasia. Within this state, English learners possess high linguistic proficiency in English but lack the discursive capacity to articulate their own cultural heritage. Chen (2013) and Li (2016) critically analyse English textbooks, arguing that they often suffer from cultural deficiency by prioritising British and American norms while marginalising local Chinese values. This cultural imbalance is viewed by Fu and Li (2013) as a hidden danger to national ideological security. To counter this, Wang (2014) advocates for a self-culture-oriented approach. They propose re-imagining the English classroom as a vital site for local cultural defence and authentic two-way cross-cultural exchange.

Teacher perception and the curatorial burden

The successful enactment of IMECEI hinges not on the textual precision of policy documents, but on the subjective agency and internalised beliefs of the teachers who inhabit the classroom. Empirical evidence suggests that this ideological turn has imposed a significant curatorial burden on frontline practitioners. These educators must continuously navigate the tension between their traditional professional identities and their newly mandated roles as ideological guides. As Yin (2020) emphasises, the teacher's personal quality and intercultural literacy function as the ultimate filter for policy enactment. To effectively integrate moral education, teachers are required to possess a robust native ideological foundation and sophisticated discursive guiding strategies. However, Yin (2020) observes that many teachers perceive a vast gap between their existing pedagogical training and the complex ideological demands of IMECEI, leading to a profound sense of professional insecurity when navigating this ideological contact zone. A critical finding in domestic literature is that teacher agency does not exist in a cognitive vacuum. Liang and Li (2014) argue that the cognition-practice gap is structurally anchored in the immediate environmental affordances of the micro-enactment ecology. Even when teachers possess a strong willingness to implement moral education, they frequently struggle against the material constraints of the classroom, such as the instrumental motivation of students and the limitations of existing pedagogical resources. This indicates that the friction lies directly between the macro-ideological demands of the state and the micro-pedagogical realities of daily instruction. The identity transition demanded by IMECEI represents a fundamental disruption of the teacher's professional subjectivity. Scholars note that teachers are increasingly being positioned as ideological mediators tasked with constructing discursive firewalls against Western ideological influx (Fan, 2012; Yin, 2020). This curatorial burden requires teachers to move beyond the role of a neutral language instructor to become critical arbiters of values. As Fan (2012) contends, the mechanism of this identity reconstruction remains a black box in current LPP scholarship, necessitating a deeper theoretical exploration of how teachers navigate these newly

constructed figured worlds, where their identity and agency are continuously re-authored through social interaction (Holland et al., 1998).

Global south parallels and the teacher's voice

The tensions inherent in IMECEI enactment are not unique to the Chinese context. They reflect a broader structural struggle within the Global South to reconcile English linguistic proficiency with the preservation of cultural sovereignty. Empirical studies in other non-Western contexts reveal striking parallels to China's cultural aphasia and ideological defence. Park (2009) documents the phenomenon of English fever in South Korea, highlighting how the hyper-investment in English education has triggered national anxieties regarding the erosion of the Korean language and the thinning of students' cultural roots. Similarly, Imam (2005) critiques the recolonisation of education in Bangladesh, where the dominance of Western-centric English curricula has created a sociocultural disconnect between students and their indigenous heritage. These studies provide a comparative empirical base, indicating that the move toward values-based language policy is a strategic survival mechanism for nations navigating the immense pressures of linguistic globalisation. Despite varying top-down mandates across nations, the micro-level arbiter remains the teacher. A seminal cross-national study by Silver and Skuja-Steele (2005) across five countries utilises the Policy Enactment in English Education framework to reveal a consistent global pattern. Their research demonstrates that teachers' subjective goals, personal beliefs, and classroom-first priorities almost always override rigid government directives. This confirms that while macro-policies seek to manage ideology, actual policy enactment is a highly individualised process shaped exclusively by the teacher's agency. By situating the Chinese experience within this broader Global South narrative, critical language policy scholars like Ricento (2015) argue that the struggle of frontline teachers is a universal negotiation between the hegemonic status of English and the peripheralised voices of indigenous cultures. Consequently, investigating the agentic negotiation of English teachers offers far more than a localised case study. It provides a profound theoretical lens into how language education policies serve as active instruments of societal transformation and cultural preservation in an increasingly polarised global landscape.

Conclusion

This review has demonstrated that the implementation of the IMECEI mandate in Chinese higher education is not merely a curricular adjustment but a profound site of identity negotiation and agentic struggle (Han et al., 2026; Xu, 2025; Jiang, 2023; Yip et al., 2022). While existing literature provides a foundational understanding of these ideological shifts, several critical gaps in the current scholarship remain. First, a significant methodological and analytical bifurcation persists. Current research tends to either focus on the macro-discursive analysis of policy texts or the micro-level description of classroom techniques. There is a conspicuous lack of research that bridges these layers to examine how macro-mandates are filtered through the specific professional contexts of individual teachers (Zhang et al., 2025; Ai, 2023; Liddicoat and Taylor-Leech, 2020). Future scholarship should, therefore, prioritise integrated designs that can capture the cognition-practice gap more holistically, moving beyond treating teacher perception as a static variable (Zhang et al., 2025; Liang and Li, 2014). Second, the theoretical exploration of identity reconstruction remains in its early stages. While

concepts like emotional shock and cultural aphasia are frequently cited, the internal mechanism of how teachers move from resistance to a dual-identity model remains a black box (Han et al., 2026; Jiang, 2023; Yip et al., 2022; Cong, 2000). Future research could benefit from adopting a more robust interdisciplinary lens to theorise agency as a continuous process of negotiation rather than a static psychological trait (Zhu, 2023; Cong-Lem, 2021; Liddicoat and Taylor-Leech, 2020; Priestley et al., 2015). Finally, there is an urgent need to further situate the Chinese experience within the broader Global South narrative. The tensions between English linguistic proficiency and national cultural sovereignty are not unique to China; they reflect a global struggle against linguistic hegemony (Ricento, 2015; Rizvi and Lingard, 2010; Park, 2009; Imam, 2005). By framing the English classroom as a contested ideological contact zone, future studies can provide a more nuanced understanding of how language policies serve as instruments of both societal transformation and cultural preservation (Ricento, 2015; Johnson, 2013; Menken and García, 2010). In summary, the ultimate success of language education reform hinges not on the textual precision of policy documents, but on the subjective agency of the teachers who inhabit the classroom (Zhu, 2023; Cong-Lem, 2021; Liddicoat and Taylor-Leech, 2020; Ball et al., 2012). Addressing the identified theoretical and empirical gaps will be essential for understanding how professional self-worth is reconstructed and how a culturally sustaining pedagogy can be achieved in an increasingly complex global landscape (Han et al., 2026; Xu, 2025; Weng, 2025; Jiang, 2023; Yip et al., 2022).

Acknowledgement

This research is self-funded.

Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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