



# 21st Century Language Teaching Conference 2024

## **Post Conference Proceedings**

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# ELT in Chinese General Senior High School

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## Abstract

Since the 1980s, English language proficiency has been considered as a crucial tool for China's modernization and economic development and has been actively promoted within its education system at all levels (Adamson 2004; Vickers & Zeng 2018). Foreign Languages, which means English in the vast majority of the cases, is one of the 'three core subjects' (san zhuke 三主课) of China's school education and of the gaokao 高考, the Chinese Nationwide Unified Examination for Admissions to General Universities and Colleges. Due to its crucial role in preparing students to sit the gaokao, this contribution focuses on Chinese general senior high school and English language teaching at its level. More specifically, the aim is to highlight the influence that this exam, and its English part more specifically, has on teaching and learning practices, ultimately defining them with its content and creating this way an effect of dissonance between what is declared in the guidelines issued by the Chinese Ministry of Education for English language teaching in senior high school and what is actually taught in the classrooms. In doing so, this paper attempts to contribute to the academic discussion about foreign language teaching and language policy.

**Keywords:** ELT in China, Chinese senior high school, gaokao, NMET, language policy

## Introduction

Foreign Languages is one of the three core subjects (san zhuke 三主课) of school education in China, together with Chinese Language and Mathematics. These three subjects constitute the compulsory part of the putong gaodeng xuexiao zhaosheng quanguo tongyi kaoshi 普通高等学校招生全国统一考试, usually abbreviated as gaokao 高考, that is the Nationwide Unified Examination for Admissions to General Universities and Colleges. This exam represents the culmination of Chinese primary and secondary education and candidates can choose one foreign language among English, French, German, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish, with the vast majority of students opting for English. As such, English language teaching (ELT) plays a key role in the Chinese educational system and this paper aims at presenting some preliminary and partial findings of the author's research project for his future PhD dissertation on ELT in Chinese general senior high school and the textbooks currently used in it.

## ELT in China: A Brief Overview

Official and systematic ELT in China has already a history of more than 150 years, dating back to the aftermath of the Qing Empire's dramatic defeats in the two Opium Wars (1839-1842; 1856-1860) by the hand of the foreign empires. After those losses, some forward-thinking high officials and scholars reluctantly acknowledged the necessity of beginning to study the 'Western' body of knowledge in order to strengthen the country and avoid further humiliations. This plan also involved the study of foreign languages, essential to access that knowledge, with English being the first language chosen to be integrated into the curriculum of the very first official Chinese foreign language school, the Imperial College of Combined Learning (Jingshi Tongwen Guan 京师同文馆), founded in 1862 (Bastid, 1987; Wu, 2015). From that moment on, a close link was established between foreign language teaching in China, particularly ELT, and the country's foreign relations with the rest of the world, with the former considered now to be a 'barometer' of the latter, keeping trace of China's shifting attitudes and goals (cfr. Adamson, 2004; Ross, 1992; Vickers & Zeng, 2018).

Moving forward, ever since the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and the beginning of the Opening-up and Reform era in 1978, ELT has received official prolonged support and promotion in China, being regarded as an essential tool to promote economic development and overall modernization, as well as a precious personal asset (Hu, 2005). Since 2003, the study of a foreign language, which often means English, has been compulsory starting from Primary Three (age eight), with some of the well-equipped schools in big cities and developed areas offering English lessons even at Primary One (cfr. MOE, 2001; Qi, 2016). Moreover, that year, a foreign language exam was also included in the national high school entrance examination, usually referred to as zhongkao 中考, to test their command of the subject (Tang, 2023). At the pre-school level, despite the two provisions issued in 2011 and 2018 by the Ministry of Education to ban 'schoolification', that is the teaching of school subjects in kindergartens, English education is still unofficially provided in them, in order to meet the demand of those parents who want to give their children some advantage in the highly competitive and exam-oriented Chinese educational system (cfr. MOE, 2011, 2018; Xuan, 2022).

Upon successfully completing their nine-year-long compulsory education, students can then access general senior secondary schools, secondary specialized schools, vocational senior secondary schools, or skilled-workers secondary schools. Focusing on general senior secondary schools, the syllabus indicates that pupils are required to earn 14 credits in a foreign language to qualify for the gaokao. These 14 credits are divided into 6 credits for the 'compulsory programme' (bixiu kecheng 必修课程), necessary to graduate from high school, and 8 ones for the so-called 'selective compulsory programme' (xuanzexing bixiu kecheng 选择性必修课程), aligned with the contents of the foreign language paper of the gaokao. Each credit equates to 18 45-minute-long lessons (MOE, 2017, 2020).

In terms of linguistic abilities, at the end of their studies in high school, students are expected to be able to use their integrated linguistic skills in common and real contexts, to fully understand the meaning of oral and written texts, to recognize the most appropriate ways to express their meaning in a given context and to use effectively both oral and written language to convey their ideas and interact with others (MOE, 2020).

Finally, passing an English language exam is also often a requirement for getting a bachelor's or a master's degree in non-English majors in China. Even if it has never been mandatory at the nationwide level, many universities use the College English Test (CET) as a prerequisite to graduation. More specifically, this exam is organized into 'bands', going from one to six. Each band normally takes one semester to be completed. This test builds on the language knowledge and skills acquired during secondary school and undergraduate students are usually expected to pass CET-4 to graduate, while postgraduate ones need to pass CET-6 (Hu, 2002b). Moreover, students' English proficiency is also tested with the Graduate School Entrance English Examination (GSEEE) and the English paper of the entrance examination for doctoral programmes, known as kaobo 考博 (Zhang & Bournot-Trites, 2021).

## ELT in Chinese General Senior High School

As previously mentioned, this research project mainly focuses on ELT in Chinese general senior high school, given its relevance in the Chinese educational system as the final steppingstone before the gaokao, with a specific focus on the textbooks currently used in it. One of the initial hypotheses of this research project posited that the Grammar-Translation Method is still widely applied in Chinese general senior high schools. The Grammar-Translation Method was the earliest and most widely adopted methodology in China and its alleged contemporary application was hypothesized on the basis of its consistency with the Chinese traditional teaching and learning method. According to Hu (2002a), the Chinese method can be summarized using four Rs and four Ms: reception, repetition, review, and reproduction; meticulousness, memorization, mental activeness, and mastery. All these characteristics align with the Grammar-Translation Method.

The initial hypotheses proved to be partially correct, particularly regarding to intensive reading and extensive focus on grammar, and the implementation of the Grammar-Translation Method in China today can be explained in the first place by looking at the design of the National Matriculation English Test (NMET), i.e. the English paper of the gaokao. According to its technical manual, the NMET is designed to test candidates' abilities in listening, reading, use of language, writing, and speaking (NEEA, 2014). However, only the reading, use of language, and writing parts are compulsory everywhere in the country, while the listening one and the speaking subtest are not, with the latter one

only delivered in the most advanced areas (Zhang & Bournot-Trites, 2021). More specifically, the three nationwide mandatory parts are tested by using multiple choice and gap-filling tasks in the case of the reading comprehension section, multiple choice cloze and word transformation in the ‘Use of language’ one, and written comprehension open questions and guided writing in the writing part. Despite the ultimate intended goal of the NMET being to guide and innovate ELT in senior secondary schools, especially with a shift from language competence to communicative competence (Li, 1990), its design reveals that the main focus still remains on testing the formal knowledge of English language.

The influence of the Grammar-Translation Method can then be noticed in the very structure of the ELT textbooks used in Chinese general senior high schools. There are currently eight sets approved by the MOE for usage in Chinese general senior high school (MOE, 2023). They all share the same title, that is Putong Gaozhong Jiaoke · Yingyu 普通高中教课 · 英语, “Teaching in General Senior High School: English”, and they are respectively published by People’s Education Press in partnership with Cengage Group, Foreign Language Teaching and Education Press in partnership with Macmillan Publishers (China), Yilin Press in partnership with Oxford University Press (China), Beijing Normal University Press in partnership with Pearson Education Asia, Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, Chongqing University Press, and Hebei Education Press. The specific set to adopt is decided at the province or city level by the relevant education commission, with the one published by People’s Education Press being the most common one.

As previously mentioned, the English curriculum for senior high school is divided into ‘compulsory’ and ‘selective compulsory’. Each set is made up of three volumes for the first part and four for the second one, for a total of seven volumes. The ‘compulsory’ part of the programme is usually covered before the end Grade 10, and the ‘selective compulsory’ one before the end of Grade 11, so as to devote Grade 12 to rehearsal and preparation for the NMET. Relying on an amended version of the analytical form devised by Cortés-Velasquez et al. (2020), I used 40 questions divided into 5 groups ((1) general data and structure of the manual, (2) organisation of the volume, (3) input characteristics, (4) graphic design, and (5) cultural and theoretical references) to analyze those textbooks. A preliminary analysis highlighted a shared structure for those textbooks, which seems the result of a compromise between the familiar Grammar-Translation Method and the Communicative Approach, formally promoted by the MOE, especially in the form of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) (MOE, 2020). The organisation of each unit of each volume of each set can be basically summarized as follows: (1) introduction to the specific theme of the unit (warm-up activities); (2) first text (around two-page long); (3) vocabulary expansion and grammar point with activities; (4) tasks to develop students’ listening and speaking skills; (5) second text (usually shorter than the first one); (6)

tasks to develop students' writing skills; (7) a project for the students to complete and/or a video to watch, sometimes followed by short texts; and (8) self-evaluation activities (sections (7) and (8) are inverted in some of the sets)..

Even at a preliminary analysis, it is apparent how the unit structure of these textbooks basically matches the contents of the NMET, highly prioritizing the development of student's reading and writing skills and their grammar competence, with many of the tasks being of the same type as the ones in the test. This very strong resonance was also confirmed during semi-structured oral and written interviews (Dörnyei, 2007) with general high school teachers of English of the city of Dalian, Liaoning province, and the consequent qualitative analysis of them. Several teachers pointed out the consistency that exists between syllabus, gaokao (NMET, more specifically), and textbooks, with the overall guiding effect that gaokao has on ELT in Chinese general senior high school. All the teachers declared to always use those textbooks in their entirety, as their content is consistent with the test, which is the ultimate goal for both them and the students. In the words of two of teachers, the exam is like a 'conductor's baton' (zhihuibang 指挥棒), and 'what the gaokao tests is what we actually teach.'

## Final Remarks

This article has presented some preliminary and partial findings of the author's research project for his future PhD dissertation. Despite the partial character of these findings, the strong influence exerted by the NMET on ELT in China is apparent, nonetheless. Often described as a 'fate-defining exam' (jueding mingyun de kaoshi 决定命运的考试), the gaokao itself represents a channel for vertical social mobility in China and, consequently, the hopes and dreams of countless students and their families are placed on a positive score in it. However, this also means that ELT in Chinese schools has turned into a means to cope with tests and it is not aimed at educating students as it should. Although a more communicative-oriented approach to ELT is formally endorsed in official documents, this situation is not likely to change unless the NMET is reformed to focus on students' communicative competence.

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