

An Exploratory Study of Preschool English Education in China

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Abstract : The English language occupies a crucial position in the Chinese educational system and is officially introduced in the school curriculum from the third year of primary school onward. However, it is worth noting that along with the movement to remove primary-oriented education from preschools, the teaching of English is banned in preschools. Considering the worldwide trend of learning English at a young age, whether this ban can be implemented successfully is doubtful. With an initial focus on the interaction of language-in-education planning and policy (LEPP) at the macro level and actual practice at the micro level, this research selected three private preschools and two public preschools to explore what is taking place in terms of English education. All data collected is qualitative and is gained from documentary analysis, school observation, interviews, and focus groups. The findings show that: (1) although the English ban in preschool education aims to regulate all types of preschools and all adult Chinese participants are aware of this ban, there are very different scenarios according to type of preschool, such that no English classes are found in public schools while private preschools commonly provide some kind of English education; (2) even public schools do not have an English-free environment and parents' demand for English education is high; (3) there is an obvious top-down hierarchy in both public and private schools, in which administrators make the decisions while others have little power to influence the school curriculum; (4) there is a clear gap in the perception of English teaching between children and adults, in which adults prefer foreign English teachers and think English teaching is just playing, while children do not have a clear preference regarding teachers and do not think English class is just for fun; (5) without macro support, there are many challenges involved in preschool English education, including the shortage of qualified teachers and teaching resources, ineffective personnel management and few opportunities for speaking English in daily life. Hopefully, this research will not only highlight the interaction of LEPP at different levels and the importance of individual agency but also raise the awareness of how to provide qualified and equal education for all children.

Keywords : individual agency, language-in-education planning and policy, micro context, preschool English education

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